

Living Strange

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Living Strange

by [Lucinda](#)

Summary

What exactly did happen to Kate after the Talking Stick?

She decided to leave LA to escape the strangeness that her life had become. Too bad it wasn't that simple.

Chapter 1

Living Strange by Lucinda

She could still remember every word. The things that she'd said, words spilling out in front of everybody, telling all about her old memories, her frustrations, her hopes. Things that nobody in that room had cared about - not her fellow officers, not her father. Things that she'd held silent about for years.

Damn that magic talking stick.

What was worse, everybody else apparently remembered as well. They kept giving her these strange looks, all sad and confused, as if they were no longer sure how to view her. As if she wasn't a police detective anymore. Looks that told her that everything she'd worked so hard for had just been ruined.

"Captain, I'd like to ask for a transfer," Kate managed not to stammer, or cringe as she admitted her defeat to her commanding officer.

"Lockley," he frowned, searching through some papers on his desk. "Does this relate to the fall-out of that sensitivity course?"

"Yes, sir," she tried to keep herself standing straight. "I feel that the effects have hampered my ability to work effectively as a part of this force."

"I hate this super-natural shit," the captain grumbled. "I don't know everything that's going on out there, and I don't want to, but I've seen it ruin more good careers than I want to think about. Tell me something; do you think you can keep doing the same job, if it's in a completely different place? Where the aftermath of this latest weird mess won't be laying around?"

Kate felt slightly better, and some of her dread melted away. "Yes, sir. I still think this is a job that needs done, and that I can do, but... not here."

"Good. Bad enough that I'm not going to have you here, but at least you're not quitting." For a moment, he was quiet. "I've been glad to see someone who wasn't backing away from the strange cases, it'll be a shame to lose you."

"It wasn't the monsters, sir. It was... personal." Kate immediately regretted the words, and glanced at the floor. Part of her was stunned that the captain knew anything, that someone believed her about the things that had been happening.

"Personal that never would have happened without the strange shit," he sighed, and looked at something on his desk. "I'll see what I can do to arrange you a transfer somewhere. You might end up back in the middle of weird things again, but it won't be in LA. It just might take a little while."

"Thank you, sir." Kate saluted, and left the office. This was better, she had the assurance that she would go elsewhere, that she wouldn't be trapped here with the strange looks forever.

end part 1.

Chapter 2

Kate dropped the last bag of groceries on the table, looking at the little apartment. It wasn't as large as the place that she'd had in LA, but she was still quite grateful that the department here had arranged it for her before she'd moved. Her chief - the one from LA, that is - had arranged a moving company to send her furniture. All she'd had to do was book her flight, come to New York, and fill out paperwork, lots of paperwork.

She was grateful, and a bit suspicious. Nobody went to this much trouble without a cause, and while she knew that she was a good detective, she wasn't phenomenal. She was an ordinary detective, not a legend like, oh, Batman in the comics or something. There had to be something beyond the desire to get another detective, and she kept waiting to figure out what it was. What they wanted in return.

She still hadn't figured it out by the time she reported for her first orientation shift. Maybe there would be clues in what they told her tonight, the things beyond who her partner would be, where the reports should go and what the procedures were for time off and on-duty injuries. There were always little things, and she'd be watching and listening for them.

The station was busy, not that she'd doubted it would be. Calm stations didn't bring in new personnel from across the country. She nodded and returned hellos to the people that she'd be working with, not really expecting to remember all of the names just yet.

"... you'll be working with Tashir and O'Rourke. You get the left drawers of this desk, and O'Rourke will help you fill out some of the paperwork." Her guide pointed her towards a pair of cops, and retreated.

Kate frowned, unsure as to just why he'd retreated, but certain that he had. Tashir was tall and dark, with a narrow, beak-like nose and piercing eyes that looked at the world and tried to give nothing back. Definitely a different set of ancestors than her own English and Danish. O'Rourke was slightly taller than she was, with red-brown hair and brown eyes that seemed unsettlingly familiar. So did his charming grin.

"He doesn't want me to be here anymore," Tashir hissed, glaring at the door that had slammed.

"Why not?" Kate asked, deciding that if he'd been that blunt, she might as well be just as direct back.

"Before, it was because my parents were from other places, and he disliked that. Now? Now it's a small matter of a gunman at the bank on Waterleigh," Tashir scowled, and looked back up, his eyes capturing her. "I am a detective, and I am not done with my duties."

"You don't have to stay," O'Rourke commented, pouring himself a cup of coffee and offering one to Kate. "You could go at any time."

"I took an oath, and have a duty here. I do not quit," Tashir snarled, glaring at his partner.

Things felt awkward as they explained procedures and who the best person would be to talk to about various things - changing shifts, time off, old records - and sometimes those names weren't the same as the official policy stated. There should have been a tense silence, but the station was too noisy for such melodrama.

Tashir took some of the paperwork, murmuring that he'd turn them in to Jerry, and left the

room.

"You're here for when he figures it out," O'Rourke explained, gesturing towards the door. "The Captain said you'd had some experience with weird stuff, though he didn't give me any details."

"What does he need to figure out?" Kate didn't know if she wanted an answer. Suspicion flared, and she whispered, "Does he go places during the day?"

"Yes," O'Rourke was giving her this oddly thoughtful look, like he wanted to protect her from some uncomfortable truth.

In that moment, he reminded her painfully of Angel. But she'd never seen the vampire drinking coffee, or flushed with emotion. But even vampires had to come from somewhere, and maybe Angel'd had some family left behind. Relatives, descendants... something. But now wasn't the time to think about that.

"Look, you're going to find out sooner or later, and it might as well be sooner. Brahim Tashir was my partner for six years, and he was a good cop. I couldn't ask for a better guy to watch my back," O'Rourke began, one hand shaking.

Kate could feel her stomach clenching. There was something strange and weird and possibly ugly here. "You keep saying 'was'. Why not is?"

"He said there was a small matter of a gunman at a bank. It wasn't a small matter. There was a robbery attempt, with hostages. Four officers and seven civilians were shot, and there were three fatalities. One of them was Brahim Tashir."

"But I just saw him here," Kate whispered. "You were talking to him."

"He came in a week later. He's the only one at the station who doesn't seem to know that he died. It was on the scene, he was shot, went down, and the coroner said that he might not have even really felt it. He said something stung his back, and everything went dark. But he's a cop, and he insisted on coming back to work," O'Rourke shook his head, and looked up. "He's a ghost. And sooner or later, he's probably going to go on to wherever ghosts go. Until then, he's a cop, one of our better detectives."

"And if that time is soon, then I'm here?" Kate asked, feeling a bit cold. A ghost cop... was that any stranger than a vampire private investigator?

"Maybe," O'Rourke admitted with a shrug. "But if not, we can still help you adjust to here, and the strangeness that goes on. As the detective with the least seniority, you'll also probably get the message runs."

"Message runs to where?" Kate sipped at her own coffee.

"The old firehouse, where the Ghostbusters headquarters are."

Kate's mouthful of coffee didn't look very good over O'Rourke's uniform.

end part 2.

Chapter 3

"Ghostbusters?" Kate repeated, suddenly glad that she was already sitting down. "As in, people who hunt ghosts? Professionally? People actually... I mean..."

"Yeah, people who hunt ghosts. Someone calls and says they've got a ghost, something leaving slime and vapor in the hallway, they call those guys. They go out, zap the ghosts with their fancy equipment, trap them and take them away. And they get paid for it," O'Rourke shook his head. "I don't know how much they get paid, if it's per ghost or by the hour, but they seem to be doing quite well."

"And nobody's called them about Tashir," Kate mumbled, rubbing at her temples. "Nobody's called because he's still a cop, ghost or not, or nobody's called because of budget issues?"

"Lockley, we don't even get to put in requests for budgeting things unless it's a problem we can't work around. One of our own who happens to be a ghost doesn't rate, though there are some people that hope he gets the hint and moves on. I thought everybody'd heard about them by now, they're on all the talk shows. They've even been on Letterman twice," O'Rourke wiped at the coffee.

"I worked nights, and didn't get to watch Letterman. Too many of the other talk shows are all about people getting sex changes after sleeping with their cousins, or marriages breaking up on television because the guy's gay or crap like that," her headache was definitely getting worse. "I've dealt with some weird shit, but not ghosts."

"No? What have you dealt with then?" O'Rourke was looking smug, arms folded across his chest. "How weird could it have been?"

"There was the horde of zombies," Kate raised a finger as she counted each incident. "The serial killer who turned out to be a Puritan vampire. The demented stalker who could send his body parts elsewhere on missions. The demons that broke into a store and ate all the potato chips. A crazy guy with a trunk with a hundred little feet on the bottom that may have eaten a mugger. That horrible touchy-feely councilor."

"You had a crazy guy that might have eaten a mugger? A vampire? Zombies? What was going on where you were?" O'Rourke was staring.

"No, if the mugger was eaten, it was the trunk, not the guy in the pointy hat who called himself a wizard," Kate shook her head, remembering the mess of paperwork that one had caused. At least he hadn't gotten tangled up with Angel. Not that she had any idea where he'd gone after they'd let him go.

"The trunk?" O'Rourke sighed, taking a long swallow of his coffee. "On second thought, I don't want to know."

"There are days that I don't want to know," Kate shook her head. "I've seen a lot of strange things. Just most of them were pretty solid."

"There was a time when I would have started asking if you'd been drinking when you mentioned zombie and a vampire. Now, I'm not going to be too hasty about that," O'Rourke sighed. "I miss the good old days when everyone knew there was no such thing as ghosts."

Kate remembered her own certainty that there were no such things as zombies, vampires

or magic talking sticks and sighed, “Yeah, things were simpler then. But what has been learned can’t be forgotten, especially not after some of the nightmares it left behind, so...”

“Sometimes the learning is too painful to forget,” O’Rourke finished trying to mop away the droplets of coffee, dropping the fraying napkin into the trash. “And sometimes you just about got killed learning, so it cost too much to let it go.”

Kate could only nod. Hoping to keep things from getting any deeper into uncomfortably emotional territory, she tried to change the subject, “So, what can you tell me about those Ghostbusters?”

It turned out that O’Rourke could tell her quite a few things. Stories about university studies and student scandals. About clashes between scientists and politicians. And about a giant marshmallow man walking down the street before exploding.

End part 3.

Chapter 4

Kate reported to the station for work the next evening, still trying to shake away the last wisps of strange dreams. Brahim Tashir had been translucent. O'Rourke, who reminded her so very much of Angel, had kept flashing to a vampire's face when she turned her back. They'd been investigating a robbery at a liquor store, with bottles of layered drinks and cups with paper umbrellas and spears of fruit lining the shelves, and the perpetrator had been a zombie. They'd simply followed the trail of bits of rotting flesh to find him, where he'd ducked into an alley. The hand that held the bag of money from the cash register had fallen away from his wrist, landing on the pavement beside his feet. And for reasons that she couldn't figure out, there had been a large beetle with a microphone following and narrating the whole thing. Strange, strange dreams.

Sipping at a cup of coffee Kate sighed. From what she'd already heard, New York had a generous helping of the weird stuff. She suspected that she'd see more than she really wanted, just like before. Hopefully more ghosts and less vampires, but she wasn't about to hold her breath on that one. O'Rourke was also sipping at a cup of the coffee, which was... well, it was hot and available, even if it was rather bitter. Tashir was scowling and muttering over a stack of papers, and Kate was certain that he was swearing in three maybe four languages, none of them English.

Time to stop delaying. Swallowing another bitter mouthful, Kate asked, "What's on tonight's agenda?"

"The messy one's a warehouse. There's been suspicion of smuggling, but the owner's been giving us the run around for a few months. Captain suspects that he was waiting to get everything cleared out before the permissions and paperwork got through. We also have to do a follow-up on some domestic violence. Ross and Mercer also stuck us with interviewing a guy at a store who said there were strange noises at the back room, and if it just turns out to be the register clerk and a girlfriend getting up to things on break then so help me, but Mercer's going to get the next Firehouse run," O'Rourke snarled.

"The coffee's not that bad," Kate grumbled, wondering just what was really behind the anger in O'Rourke's voice.

"No, sorry. It's not you, not... mostly not this. Most of it's personal," he shook his head, suggesting that he matter be dropped and that he didn't want to talk about it.

"As long as your 'personal' isn't likely to get us shot, okay." Kate tugged at the pages, looking at the top report. God knew she didn't want to go sharing all of her personal details with people, so why should she expect her brand new partner to spill everything that was upsetting him? "This one's the store with the noises, right? I'm new to the city, what sort of store is it? Does it have a history of disturbances?"

"Not like this. It's mostly alcohol and tobacco, with a bit of soda, chips, and mixers. The sort of place people go to pick up their weekend booze for college parties. Mostly they get a couple attempted robberies, maybe a successful one, and plenty of people trying to buy underage. The guy who called – Jack – is normally level headed and keeps his calm."

"If it were likely to be a couple in the backroom, Mercer would be more willing to go," Tashir shook his head. "There must be some reason why this got passed to us."

"Whatever the reason, waiting here and drinking coffee won't change it. We might as well

get started,” Kate stood up, looking at the pages again. “So do we start with the domestic or the weird noises at the liquor store?”

“Domestic. The husband got two months after he landed her in the hospital, I find it a bit hard to believe that he’s come out all reformed and law abiding. The noises can wait,” O’Rourke wasn’t laughing, but at least he wasn’t growling at her anymore.

“Fair enough,” Kate just hoped that it wouldn’t get too bad. Domestic violence was never pretty, but... would it be too much to hope that it was just moderate human anger and poor control, with bruises and scrapes, not broken bones, torture, homicide, or the weird supernatural? Or at least that there were no kids... It was always worse if there were kids. “Will they be expecting us?”

“Not exactly. They were told that they might get a couple pass by checks once he was released, but not when or who. That reduces the chance of someone scheduling their abuse to avoid discovery,” Tashir’s words were quiet.

Kate shuddered, not bothering to argue that people wouldn’t do that – she’d seen that in her time. She’d seen far worse, though not often. As she followed them to the car, she thought yet again that she hated domestic violence cases.

O’Rourke drove the cruiser to an apartment building. There were several people milling about, with stunned faces and making the helpless and frustrated gestures that said something was wrong. She didn’t know yet if it was related to their case, or if someone’s daughter had turned up pregnant, or if someone had uncovered an affair, but her instincts were certain that there was something bad going on here.

A woman with a faded robe wrapped around herself and bare feet with chipped pink nail polish on her toes spoke, gesturing towards the building with one hand while the other hovered near her throat. “The police! You have to do something... apartment...”

“Apartment 209,” O’Rourke finished, his expression grim.

As the gathered people nodded, O’Rourke motioned for Kate and Tashir to follow him. They moved towards the stairwell, lit by a flickering bulb. Tashir leaned towards Kate, and offered a single chilling comment – “That’s the apartment we were headed for already.”

They emerged from the stairs and Kate tensed. The scent of blood hung in the air – blood, stale cigarette smoke and aging, wet carpet. She didn’t know the details yet, but she knew that somehow, “things got messy.”

There were bloody footprints further down the hall, emerging from one of the apartments, with a door left ajar, and heading towards the large window at the end of the hall, which had been opened. Kate suspected that there might be a fire escape outside the window.

The footprints were slightly smaller than Kate’s feet, suggesting that they had been left by a woman. The fact that they were from someone walking through blood suggested that they really wouldn’t like what was inside the apartment.

“We have to see how bad it is,” she was almost pleased that her voice didn’t shake.

There was a dead man pinned to the wall with what looked like a set of steak knives. Kate suspected that the wall had started out the same off white that most of the other walls remained, though it was almost all red, as was the carpet. His clothing had been

slashed, the cuts going deep enough in some places that bone showed. Whoever he was, his eyelids had been torn, leaving his eyes wide and forever open. There was another dead man on the sofa, his body crumpled in a way that suggested multiple breaks to his arms and legs. The carpet had that over saturated look that convinced them that near the wall, their footsteps would cause a squelching noise as the blood welled up.

Most disturbing to Kate was the way that's he could see from the doorway that the man on the sofa had his throat torn open.

Kate wondered if someone had offered the battered wife a way to get revenge, a way not to need to worry about her husband being stronger... and neglected to mention the part where it would turn her into a bloodsucking monster. "Is either of these guys the husband?"

"On the sofa," Tashir's voice was muffled.

O'Rourke looked pale, and shook his head, "This... oh God... This is..."

"This looks like a vampire's work," Kate let the words out slowly, trying not to get the scent of blood stuck in the back of her throat. "I ran into a few of those cases back in LA."

Tashir called for the crime scene experts while O'Rourke went to start questioning the people below. Kate just hoped things wouldn't keep getting worse from here.

End part 4.

Chapter 5

By the time they finally finished questioning everybody at the apartment, the forensics people had taken over number 209 to tag, search for prints and evidence, and to take away the bodies. Kate was almost certain that it had been a vampire, but she supposed it would be safer to get confirmation about her theory, not that she'd shared it with O'Rourke or Tashir. Maybe she'd best hope that neither of the victims had been turned, it wouldn't do at all for their CSI people to get torn apart or even worse, turned into vampires themselves. She was also quite certain that this night was going to be miserable.

"Time to head over for that back room disturbance at the shop," O'Rourke murmured, his face still much paler than healthy.

"Maybe it's just a clerk with a very friendly girlfriend. Or a raccoon, you have those here in New York, don't you?" Kate shook her head and gave a flickering glance upwards, "Can't it turn out to be something relatively harmless? Or at least not inclined to try to cause us bodily harm?"

"We can hope so," Tashir agreed with the sound of feeble hope and considerable doubt.

It didn't take too long to get to the store with the noises. O'Rourke was asking a few questions of the manager, for details about when the noises tended to occur, and how often. Kate also caught him asking if there had been things taken or damaged in the back room.

The clerk was talking to Tashir, looking sullen and unhappy. Maybe part of it was the long hair that hung over his eye, and drooped to his shoulders, looking in desperate need of a good shampoo. Maybe part of it was the baggy dark clothing. The eyebrow ring certainly didn't help.

Something rattled in the back.

"There, that's the noises! It sounds like something's rummaging about in my back room, and I know that I locked the damned door!" the manager growled.

Following O'Rourke and the manager, Kate reminded herself not to let her nerves make her shoot unless there was a clear danger that a gun would help fight. Not at a raccoon, not at funny noises, not at unfamiliar shadows.

The rattling and shuffling noises continued, with the added noise of someone giggling.

"I am not allowed to shoot teens out on a prank, I am not allowed to shoot teens for giggling and being dumb..." Kate started to remind herself.

There was a man moving crates. Well... half of a man, and he was rather see through. The darkish shirt looked to be a faded blue, with the long sleeves rolled up to just above the elbow and an unevenly folded collar. The man faded into a blurred mist around his hips, wisping to nothing somewhere near where his knees should have been.

"A ghost?" Kate blinked, half expecting the image to change. It didn't.

"I guess I know who to call about this now," the manager sighed. "I just hope they don't shatter half my inventory."

"You have it insured, don't you?" O'Rourke asked. "I'll take a statement about what gets

damaged if they get here soon.”

With an unhappy nod, the manager left the back room, picking up a half page torn from a magazine and heading into his office. “I may need you for that later.”

“Shattered inventory?” she asked O’Rourke.

“You’ll probably see soon enough.”

“Are we staying for... what is going to happen next anyhow?” Kate glanced at O’Rourke, still watching the ghost rearranging stacks of crates.

“Unless something happens that we need to go handle, we’ll stay here. You need to know what these guys are like, and how to deal with them, and I’m not going to just throw you into the firehouse with a stack of reports and a cup of coffee. They’re memorable, and it’s hard to explain what they do and give a real understanding of it,” O’Rourke shook his head, “I just hope they don’t scare you out of the city.”

Kate managed a half smile, “I don’t scare that easy.”

“I hope not,” O’Rourke mumbled.

End part 5.

Chapter 6

Kate tried not to fidget as she waited for them to show up. Waited for the Ghostbusters... and that was something that she'd never expected to think, let alone be doing. Part of her wanted to demand to know what sort of lunatics make a career out of chasing ghosts and what sort of city full of equally crazy people lets them, but... that ghost was still moving boxes in the back. She'd seen zombies and vampires and things that Angel had called demons, and magic talking sticks. Just because the whole situation was crazy didn't make all of it wrong. Nor did it explain just what sort of lunatics chase ghosts for a living.

Two men in tan jumpsuits festooned with pockets, some bulging with strangely angular shapes while others might have been empty, each with bulky backpacks set with wires and blinking lights arrived. One of them had blond hair, wire rimmed glasses, a device that reminded her of a Geiger counter in one hand and a nametag over his heart reading Spengler. The other had the sort of smarmy smile that made her want to shoot him before he could start talking about photo ops, publicity and how to manipulate the system for your own advantage, and a nametag proclaiming him as Venkman.

As they got closer, Kate realized that there was a lingering collection of odors, clinging to their working clothes, or perhaps their skin. That scorched wires and electrical scent that normally meant some expensive electronics would need replaced mingled with something that reminded her of old dusty cobwebs. Perhaps that was the scent of ghosts... or some ghosts. She wondered if there was a variety of ghosts the way there was a variety of the demons that Angel and his people fought. If the scents came from the ghosts or from the places that the ghosts had been.

She found herself wondering what it would take to make Venkman stop smiling at her like that. He reminded her of the obnoxious football jerks from when she was in high school, certain that if they made nice with the cop's daughter, he wouldn't ticket them for driving too fast.

"Officers, what seems to be the problem?" Venkman's smile didn't falter.

"In the back room! Do something about it. The racket is scaring away customers." The manager's angry words were accompanied by a finger stabbing towards the back room. "There's a ghost moving my inventory about and I want it to stop!"

"Not a problem," Venkman's smarmy grin didn't falter. Reaching out, he tugged the now frowning Spengler towards the back room, continuing with "We'll just get that ghost right out of there!"

"What exactly are those large packs?" Kate found herself remarkably uneasy about the bulky packs, with their blinking lights and twisting wires.

"Well, they call them...."

Whatever O'Rourke had been about to say was cut off as what she could only describe as an orange-pink lightning bolt blasted through the door to the inventory room, sending smoking splinters and pieces of drywall to the floor even as bottles shattered, their contents evaporating into scorched sugar and burnt alcohol scented steam. Kate and O'Rourke both dropped to the floor, Kate's hands flying up to cover her head. She could hear the tinkly crash of broken glass and a fluid dripping sound from the back room, as

well as something that was best described as a faded roar. The ghost came flying out through the door, wisps of not quite steam or smoke flowing behind him. Another of the pink-orange bolts caught him, and that awful faded roar rang out again, causing bottles to shake, and a whole row of cigarettes to fall to the floor.

With a clattering crash that reminded Kate of throwing a pair of old roller skates across a concrete floor, something the size of a small shoebox slid across the tiles, stopping almost beneath the writhing ghost. The box opened, sending up a flood of pale yellow light that seemed to suck the ghost inwards. Shrinking and roaring, the ghost was pulled into the box, which snapped shut with an almost comical ping. Meanwhile, the smoke detectors were shrilling as the splinters burned, a few of them sizzling in the fluids spilled from shattered bottles.

“Whaaa??” Kate couldn’t quite manage words to express the many questions that filled her mind.

“Words often fail to describe them,” O’Rourke admitted. “That was what they call busting a ghost.”

“And the door, the walls, the bottles, the... no wonder you were talking about forms for the insurance agency. The packs make that lightning they were throwing about? It’s a small miracle they didn’t set the place on fire.”

That was when the sprinkler system finally reacted. With a squeal, droplets of water began to fall over the whole room, causing Kate to flinch. She felt better when she realized that it was only water, not blood or slime or something even less pleasant.

The clerk was there, blasting foam at the few places that the drywall still smoldered, his hair clinging even more now that it was wet, the baggy clothing wrapped around him and attempting to slump down his body. A few more sprays at the wall, and he shook his head, muttering about lunatics and firebugs and not getting paid enough for this shit. The scorched door to the back was kicked open, and Venkman strode out, beaming like he’d just accomplished something wonderful, a still frowning Spengler behind him. The clerk just glared and ducked behind them to the store room, where Kate could hear the fire extinguisher being sprayed a few more times.

Suddenly it made a great deal more sense why being sent to deliver messages or even just talk with these people was considered the short straw. She understood about getting police verification for insurance paperwork. She understood the apparent profitability of selling this much booze. This was not something that she needed, especially not on top of what they’d found in the apartment building.

Kate could feel the headache growing to monstrous proportions.

End part 6

Chapter 7

From the perspective of Kate's watch, it was only twenty minutes before all the necessary papers had been filled out and signed and the Ghostbusters left the much worse-for-wear store. Kate thought it had taken a much longer time, subjectively speaking. Incident reports, damage estimates, listings of destroyed inventory and property damage... At long last, the pair of Ghostbusters left, with Venkman tucking a copy of their bill into the pocket just below his name patch.

"They go all over the city, don't they?" Kate spoke towards the shop, which still had water dripping down the shelves.

"Yes. We can be thankful that they only have the one location, and there are only four of them that go forth for their calls, and the receptionist, who remains at their building, is much more sensible and less inclined to blow things up or set them on fire," O'Rourke answered.

"Do they actually help, or are they an example of the cure being worse than the disease?" Kate murmured, looking around at the mess.

"That depends on the ghost," O'Rourke admitted.

"Lovely. Is there anything else here, or do we keep going, with the hope that the rest of the shift is quieter?"

"We're done here," he assured.

There were very few times that Kate had felt so glad to be on a street patrol. All of the ones that didn't connect to recovering from injuries could be traced to some bizarre situation involving Angel. Considering that Angel was currently on the other side of the country, the only thing that Kate could work out to explain tonight was that O'Rourke had to be related to that vampire somehow.

"Back at the apartment. You looked at the body and said it looked like the work of a vampire. Was that the result of too many horror movies, or something that we need to worry about?" O'Rourke asked, changing the subject.

"They're as real as ghosts. The normal vampire is a petty, vicious, predatory bastard that thinks people are tasty and can be amusing playthings. They're stronger and faster than a human, convinced that they're immortal and indestructible, and have the impulse control of a toddler," Kate explained.

"If that's the ordinary vampire..." Tashir spoke, back from wherever he'd gone before the Ghostbusters had arrived.

"That's the ordinary vampire in the same way that you can describe the ordinary petty criminal," Kate offered the comparison. "And, like with criminals, there are a few that can think big, plan for it, and try to stick with the plan. The ones who don't just want to take the sports car in the lot, but want to steal the whole shipment and the dealer's fourteen-year-old daughter at the same time."

"How accurate are their self-assessments?"

“They are stronger and faster. I’ve seen vampires do a standing vertical jump to the roof of a single car garage. They don’t have to worry about getting old or diseases, bullet wounds will heal, though shooting them in the joints will drop them to the ground. Sunlight is every bit as lethal as anything Hollywood’s shown, fire, holy water, beheading, and a wooden stake to the heart will kill them. I don’t know about anything else, but I know someone who wanted to test out a chipper-shredder to see what that did to a vampire,” Kate offered, remembering how distraught Ian Masters had been when a vampire had killed his girlfriend.

“Accurate enough to be dangerous, but still overconfident then,” O’Rourke interpreted. “What about the whole invitation thing?”

“They need one for places that people live, not for stores, offices, stations and hospitals... or hotels. Which means that if it was a vampire instead of a vicious psycho that killed that woman, then someone had to invite the bastard in first,” Kate explained. She could still remember Angel leaning against the invisible barrier of a doorway, the lack of an invitation barring him from entry. It had been a bit creepy and a bit amusing... especially when the barrier had dissolved and Angel had almost fallen on his face into the room.

“So far, you sound like our expert on vampires,” O’Rourke commented.

“What else do we need to know and watch out for regarding vampires?” Tashir asked.

“As far as I know, the stuff in the movies about super special scary powers is bull. No shape-changing, no mind control, no walking up the walls. They don’t reflect. Biggest thing to worry about is the fact that they can turn their victims into vampires, and no matter how nice someone was alive, they make nasty, hungry vampires that just has to figure out if they’d rather torture you, kill you, or eat you,” Kate sighed, and then cautioned, “I can’t be certain that there aren’t rare, old, powerful vampires that can pull some of those scary tricks in the movies. But most of them can’t do it.”

“So tonight’s victim?” O’Rourke prompted.

“Could possibly wake up as early as tomorrow night with sharp teeth and a thirst for blood,” Kate finished.

“We’ll need you talk to the CSI staff and the coroners as soon as we get back. They need to know this stuff,” Tashir declared.

“That’s going to be an awkward conversation,” Kate sighed. Then she let herself consider the possible consequences if she didn’t talk to them. “...but necessary.”

“How will we handle this?” O’Rourke asked. “You need to make certain that information is passed on fast, but there’s also the involvement of the Ghostbusters at the liquor store. And that mess at the apartment.”

“You explain about the Ghostbusters and give the official reports about the apartment while I talk to the CSI and coroner. There’s a chance that they’ve seen vampire victims before, so this could be less complicated than I expect,” Kate suggested.

“That should work,” agreed her partners.

To their mutual relief, the rest of the shift was quiet. No more ghosts, no monsters, no gruesome bodies. Just some parking violations, solicitation charges, people loitering being told to go somewhere else, and clues about a possible illegal party coming up in a

few days.

Kate's talk with the coroners went far simpler and more disturbing than she'd expected. The body from the apartment was far from the first vampire victim that they'd had brought in to their office. In fact, they'd had several wake up and try to eat them, resulting in various injuries, the need to replace several pieces of equipment, and a semi-secret policy – bodies suspected of being vampire-victims were immediately drained, opened up and the hearts removed as soon as possible. With no heart in the body, they couldn't turn into a vampire.

Since she knew about vampires, they just asked that she let them know about any bodies that were suspected vampire victims, and it would be suitably handled. No additional fuss, and no disturbing reports that might cause the higher ups to send them to the psychiatrists. It was as close to a win-win situation that they figured they could manage.

End part 7.

Chapter 8

Kate was thankful that the next night was unremarkable. The bodies from apartment 209 had been 'suitably handled', and the one with the torn throat had been identified as Mike Walters, the man listed on the rental agreement. The other body had been identified as John Hatcher, a man with several arrests for driving under the influence and drug possession, and suspected but not proven to have connections with a local prostitution ring. The footprints had been identified as ladies size seven, which matched the size of the missing wife, Ada Walters. The knives stuck into Hatcher's body had been determined to have a smudged up mass of fingerprints, many of them belonging to Mike Walters, and smaller prints guessed but not confirmed as belonging to Ada Walters.

Speculation as to what Hatcher had been doing there was ugly. Especially since they had found a cell phone on Hatcher's body that indicated a call from M Walters received about an hour before the estimated time of death.

Most of the speculation about where Ada might be was ugly, running along lines of dead from injuries from a big fight, beaten and hiding, or beaten to the point of snapping, killing them both and now in hiding. Kate was fairly certain Ada had been the vampire, and was wondering how many other vampires might be involved. Obviously, there had been one to turn Ada, but had that vampire kept her, or just turned her and left her on her own? How long had Ada been a vampire? What did Ada intend to do now that her husband was very dead?

Other than colorful speculation, the next few nights passed without anything particularly noteworthy. There was a minor matter of a stolen car turning out to be the exact same model and color as the car belonging to the person who had taken it. A matter of a woman giving her kitties marijuana mixed with catnip 'to settle them.' Various thefts, drunks, traffic violations, brawls, and theft reports.

Thursday, Kate arrived at the station to be handed a thick envelope. "You're new, so you get to make the station run. Take those to the Ghostbusters, in the old firehouse..."

Kate nodded, scribbling down the directions to the building that housed the Ghostbusters. O'Rourke had told her to expect something like this, and she had been trying to learn a bit more about them, in hopes of being able to prepare herself. She didn't feel prepared, but at least the directions should be enough to get her there.

She felt nervous walking into the large open area of the building. There was a red haired woman at a desk across the floor, and one heavily modified van sitting inside, behind one of the doors designed to allow the fire-trucks to go in and out of the building. The fireman's pole was still there, gleaming under the fluorescent lights. As she walked towards the receptionist, Kate wondered why nobody at the police station had explained the proper procedure for the 'station runs' delivering papers to the Ghostbusters.

The receptionist looked up, red rimmed glasses having slipped down her nose, and asked, "May I help you, officer?"

Holding up the large manila envelope, Kate explained, "I've been sent to deliver this packet of reports from the police station. They didn't mention if there was a particular procedure."

"A lot of them just toss the envelopes my way and run," the woman snickered. "It's a bit funny."

Kate pictured seasoned police officers, men like her father, hurling the envelopes at this woman and running out the door. She could feel her lips twitching as she fought the smile, "How undignified."

The other truck door opened, with a heavily modified station wagon pulling in and parking at an angle. The doors opened and two men in tan uniforms spilled out. One of them looked a bit familiar, though he was holding a rag at his neck. The other was a black man, who looked their way and shouted, "Janine! We need the first aid kit right away!"

As he helped the other man towards the desk, the brown haired Ghostbuster was mumbling, "Not a ghost. Great legs. Not a ghost... she bit me."

Kate had a suspicion forming. "Did you have someone calling you about a woman named Ada Walters?"

"Yeah, one of her friends. Said Ada's ghost had been showing up and asking to let her in. Romeo over here tried to talk to Ada and..." he shook his head. "Not like any ghost I've seen on this job."

"Here, I've got the kit," Janine the receptionist had a red bag in one hand and a damp cloth in the other. "Let me see what you've got under there... and tell me it wasn't one of those dirty rags you leave in the car."

"Sure, Janine, it wasn't one of those rags," Venkman mumbled, letting his hand move away from the rag at his neck. "What sort of ghost has teeth?"

Janine pulled the rag away, dropping it to the floor. She dabbed at his neck with the damp cloth, and then froze, "Those are some teeth marks..."

Kate moved closer, looking at Venkman's neck. Right at the join of neck and shoulder was a vicious bite mark, with a smudge of dark pink lipstick over the top. "That isn't from a ghost, it's a vampire bite."

"But there's no such thing as vampires! It's a primitive superstition resulting from a few diseases, funky decomposition patterns..." Venkman started, wincing as Janine dabbed some sort of ointment on the bite.

"And ghosts were considered to be an equally primitive superstition coming from unresolved grief and fear of the dark," Kate retorted. "That superstition left teeth marks on your neck, I'd consider that pretty strong evidence."

"And if you say vampire, what would the vampire have looked like?" the black man, his uniform patch reading Zeddemore, asked.

"Ada's medical file described her as five six, brown hair. She was probably smiling, maybe being a bit flirty trying to get someone to invite her inside. I'm guessing she didn't like something that Mr. Smooth Operator said, then her eyes would have turned yellow, heavy brow ridges, sharp teeth. She clearly went for the throat. He's luckier than her husband was, she tore his right out," Kate replied.

"Pretty much dead on, though you didn't mention the matching pink painted fake nails," Zeddemore shook his head. "Vampires. Huh."

"So what do we do about a vampire, break out the garlic and the big, fancy crosses?" Venkman muttered, holding still as Janine taped a gauze pad to his neck while muttering about shots and rabies.

"I just went through this with my new partners at the station", Kate sighed. "You can kill a vampire by beheading, fire, sunlight, or a wooden stake through the heart. Crosses keep them away, holy water burns, garlic does nothing. They can't come into someone's home without an invitation," Kate paused. "Ummm. Do you have someone sleep here in case of late calls? That might work to keep them from being able to come in here uninvited."

"I'll show you where I sleep anytime, gorgeous," Venkman offered with a grin, wiggling his eyebrows at her.

"No personal interest," Kate retorted.

"You said fire kills vampires," Zeddemore had turned and was looking at a couple bulky backpacks against the wall. "What about a blast from the proton packs?"

Kate looked over at the objects, assuming that those were the 'proton packs' in question. "Those are what you had at the liquor store? Those would probably work to kill a vampire, but I'd suggest having a wooden stake or something as a back-up plan."

"So why would Ada be trying to get an invite to her pal's house?"

"Dinner. Maybe a bit of torture and then dinner," Kate shrugged. "Vampires are evil. They eat people."

"How about you come over here and give us the longer version of everything we need to know about vampires?" Zeddemore asked, gesturing her towards a worn looking tan couch.

Kate sighed. It looked like tonight would be long and frustrating.

End part 8.

part 9

The usual basic question and answer about vampires took about ten minutes. With these guys, it took closer to an hour and a half, and was filled with bizarre questions that not only had she never been asked, she'd never imagined. The reaction of vampires to subliminal messages? Alterations in bioconductivity? Kate wasn't even quite certain what 'bioconductivity' was, or how it normally reacted, let alone if it changed for vampires. She could answer the ones about photosensitivity and make reasonable guesses about enhanced sensory perceptions. The topic of altered emotional reactions took considerable time as she tried to make it clear that while a vampire retained their human memories, they didn't react the same way, weren't the same people any longer, and were highly dangerous.

Tired of Venkman babbling about 'inherent prejudice based on appearances,' Kate had sighed and pulled out her big argument. 'Last week, Ada Walters was a quiet, battered wife. Her husband had put her in the hospital several times. A few days ago, we were going to do an unscheduled check, just to make certain things were going better. Things weren't the same, but they weren't better. She'd broken her husband's arms and legs in three or four places each limb and, considering the times of death, forced him to watch while she pinned his pal to the wall with a set of steak knives and started making incisions until he bled to death. Then she tore out her husband's throat. We could see his spine from the doorway, and the coroner's couldn't locate the larynx. Tonight she tried to rip out your throat. I'd call that empirical evidence of behavioral changes, increased violence, and an innate dangerous nature.'

"I'm convinced," Zeddemore spoke quickly, his gaze flickering to the bandage over Venkman's neck. "Vampires are real, and not our friends. You had me convinced with the teeth marks look pretty real for a superstition."

"Alright, I can accept extreme behavioral changes and increased violence as a strong hypothesis. And... ow," Venkman touched the bandage, wincing again as his fingers touched the gauze. "But why? I mean, why the changes, what causes them? How do we go from battered wife to very strong, fangs, and an attitude?"

"I don't know everything. People who have been studying vampires for a lot longer than me have their theories. I don't know if I believe them, but they seem to fit the facts. Those theories are that..." Kate paused, glaring at Venkman, who was grinning at her with that oily charm. "You know what, it isn't my job to educate you about theories explaining the paranormal. There's a group of people called the Council of Watchers, based in London England. They've spent centuries studying that kind of thing. Talk to them. Or there's a bunch of old, heavy books. I'll bring you a copy of the list of book titles I was given, and you can look them up yourselves. I don't know why, I don't care why, and I'm not going to argue the whys with you."

Kate stood up, running her hands through her hair in frustration. "I gave Janine the packet of reports that might be in your area of interest. I explained what happened that caused Ada Walters to sink sharp teeth into your neck - and I'd recommend Holy Water and antibiotic ointment for that, by the way. Be careful of who you flirt with, some of them take the phrase 'man eater' to whole new levels."

Walking away from the guys, Kate paused by Janine's desk. Speaking in a low voice, "I'll drop by tomorrow with a list of some books for them to look up, and some practical basics. Holy water and antibiotics for the wounds, don't give any verbal invitations after dark, and be careful."

"The rest of the guys aren't as over the top as Peter. He can be a bit much," Janine sighed. "I'll be here."

Kate just nodded. Over the top was one way to describe Peter Venkman, perhaps a more polite way than what came to her mind. She reminded herself as she left the former firehouse - if Venkman ever gets killed by vampires, have the coroners immediately remove the heart. He's bad enough alive, a vampire would be even more irritating. Now, just where had she put that list of books...

* * * * *

The rest of the evening was business as usual, though Kate was in an irritated mood for the rest of the night. Petty criminals, a pair of shoplifting teenagers, a drunk driver, another driver who didn't smell of alcohol but swore that he'd been cut off by a little red corvette driven by a scaly green lizard with a two headed poodle. They'd given that one every sobriety test that they could short of hospital lab-work. It was after the third test that Kate's prior experience with demons reminded her that there were creatures out there that looked like humanoid lizards. That the idea of a two headed dog wasn't impossible, though a two headed poodle did sound absurd. In the end, he was permitted to continue on his way with a reminder that he needed to be careful enough that he didn't cause an accident, no matter what the other drivers looked like, yes, even if they were lizards driving red corvettes, even if it was the two headed poodle driving.

As the still shaken man left, O'Rourke grumbled "I want a red corvette."

"Yours can be without the poodle, regardless of how many heads it has," Tashir insisted. "And wasn't Angie allergic to dogs anyhow?"

"Yep." O'Rourke sighed, and muttered almost too low for Kate to hear, "and that almost makes getting a dog worth it. Angie repellent."

"Stepping aside from our various dreams of cars that we may not be able to afford today, I think I'm going to have to tell you a bit more about some of what was happening in LA before I left. Especially if we're going to keep getting lovely crime scenes like the Walker apartment, and not-drunks babbling about lizards in corvettes. It'll keep us awake while we go over the paperwork," Kate was feeling rather tired of all the explanations, so she hoped that getting most of them over with now, while she was already irritated, would help get it over with. Just like ripping a band-aid off fast instead of teasing it up in the futile effort to keep it from yanking out the hairs on her arm.

At least they only asked questions that she could answer.

End part 9.

Chapter 10

After the necessary evil of story-time, Kate had returned to her apartment. It didn't feel quite like 'home' yet, which did trouble her a little. New York had vampires, vampires couldn't enter someone's home, therefore it was vital to her safety that her apartment become 'home' and bar entry to any hungry vampire that might be in the area. With a sigh, she looked at the little pots that were supposed to be growing flowers along the windowsill, and gave them a little misting of water that was mostly tap-water mixed with a couple ounces of Holy Water that she'd picked up at a local Catholic church earlier in the week. She also spiked all the water that she used for her detested house-cleaning with a little Holy Water.

Granted, she didn't know if it would do much to keep away vampires, but it couldn't hurt. Any tiny bonus in the effort of keeping away vampires and demons from her new apartment could only help.

And on that depressing thought, she began looking for that list that she'd been given from Angel and his group of not-quite deranged helpers. After opening two boxes of movies, a box of music that she'd intended to unpack, and her off-season clothing on the thought that she might have left the list in a jacket-pocket, Kate's apartment was looking far less boxy and more lived in. The list was finally located in one of her seldom-used cookbooks, as a bookmark for a lemon-berry meringue pie.

"Now why did I put that in there?" Kate frowned at the cookbook before remembering the engagement part for her cousin. The one that had ended up unfortunately memorable when half the guests wound up staggering drunk after someone spiked the punch. "Now to make copies for everyone..."

Glancing at the clock, Kate winced. "Tomorrow. They should have some sort of copy-machine at the Ghostbusters' old firestation."

Kate dreamed that she had woke up, with her little windowsill seedlings having turned into a jungle that threatened to overwhelm her apartment. She was searching for something to put the plants under control again- some sort of ultimate coffee or perhaps a mocha, which shouldn't have made sense. She finally found her mug of mocha on what looked like an Aztec altar, beside a couple fist-sized beans and a knife made out of dark smoky glass. When she reached for the mug, it slid to the side, dodging her hand. Several more efforts led to a faint chuckling, as someone dressed in some sort of wrapped kilt, yellow, white and green body paint in threatening looking patterns, and shimmering green-yellow feathers stuck into dark hair faded into view, one hand holding her mug.

The man, who refused to give a name, kept grinning at her as she demanded her mug. That was when she realized that instead of being in an overgrown apartment, she was now standing on a tall stone platform on the top of a hill, overlooking a vast jungle. He wouldn't give her back 'the sacred drink' until she agreed that he could have the next vampire. What he intended to do with a vampire and a glass knife was not her concern. All she wanted to do was drink her mocha... Waking up, Kate still found herself craving a mocha. Thankfully, she was in her apartment, which was not the top of a stone platform on the top of a hill in the middle of a jungle. The little windowsill pots had only the smallest traces of green peeking through the dirt - a far cry from the over-whelming greenery in the dream. There were no painted Aztec men, with or without knives.

"What a strange dream..." Kate shook her head and staggered out of bed to get ready to

face the day.

Facing the day included buying a mocha grande on the way to the Ghostbusters' headquarters with the list. Part of her mind still wrestled with the strange dream, wondering what it meant and what had caused it.

By the time she arrived, she had made a few decisions. First, she wanted another mocha. Second, it didn't matter what caused the dream, because she was a rational person who didn't run her life on dreams and omens. Third, she would make certain that she kept her little houseplants trimmed and neat. Fourth, she remembered hearing someone claiming that the Aztecs had believed chocolate to be the food of the gods - a sacred drink. And fifth, she really needed to get a hobby that had nothing to do with crime or dead people, with or without bodies. Reaching the converted firehouse used by the Ghostbusters, Kate glanced at the small sign listing 'hours of ordinary operation' and let herself into the building. Janine was at the desk, carefully painting her nails. She had on a dress with a wild leopard print in brown and bronze, which might explain the bronze polish that she was putting on her nails. Bold choices, and not what Kate considered normal professional wear.

Kate shook her head as she approached the receptionist that she suspected doubled as a keeper for some of the Ghostbusters. "Do they pay you enough to work so many hours?"

"Of course they do, I'm the one that hired the bookkeeper for this business," Janine smirked. "And the only one of them that Louis likes as much as he likes me is Winston."

"I was assuming that there's a copy machine in this crazy place?" Kate pulled out her list. "Books full of creepy old things for them to look up for themselves?" Janine took the paper, and stood up from behind the desk.

"Most of them about three inches thick, with the others bigger. I suggest seeing if Venkman can learn by osmosis," Kate paused to imagine the scene. "Next time he says something obnoxious, hit him over the head with one of the books."

Janine chuckled, "I'll remember that. Are these going to need translation?"

"They're all in English, but for some of them it's a couple centuries old, and a lot of them are pretty dry. I didn't ask for any titles in other languages," Kate admitted.

"Egon's probably the best choice for the list. He and Peter are the best at the technical matters, and Winston's great with the practical details. Ray's just pretty good all around." Janine sighed, "There are days when I wish I could find someone else to help with the phones and things, but between the job and the guys..."

"You've tried to find other people and can't keep them," Kate interpreted.

"Bingo."

"I admit that I'd never imagined anyone making a living at this. Finding people that can cope can't be that easy," Kate felt uncomfortable at the realization that she wouldn't have been able to cope a few years ago. Or that there were days when she still wasn't certain she could cope.

"This isn't what I expected when I was twenty either," Janine admitted.

For a moment, Kate considered her own plans from being twenty. "Life doesn't always follow our plans. Especially when the weird stuff, like ghosts and vampires, starts to get involved."

"You can say that again," Janine handed the original list back to Kate.

"I'll let you get back to things. For now," Kate paused and considered. What sounded really good to her on such a nice day? "I think I'll have another mocha. Chocolate and coffee sound good right now."

End part 10.

Chapter 11

Kate sipped at her coffee as she flipped through pages, catching up on what she'd missed. The usual assortment of parking and speeding offenses, failures to signal or stop. Some drunk and disorderlies and solicitation charges near a few bars. A couple fights bad enough that police had been called in. A car broken into, with the stereo stolen. A few minor robberies from apartments. "It all looks pretty normal. Nothing about monsters or zombies, or magic spells making people act crazy."

"It turns out that the car that lost the stereo belongs to a lizard person. And they have a two headed pet poodle," grumbled Officer Camden.

"One of the fights was a guy convinced that his girlfriend was cheating on him with someone with green skin covered with little blue spikes," added Officer Keller.

"Close enough to normal," Kate declared.

"Why a two headed poodle?" O'Rourke asked.

"Apparently Chihuahuas are too tasty to keep around," Officer Camden shuddered.

For a moment, Kate pondered that idea before deciding, "There are some things that it's best not to think too much about. The comparative taste of dogs is probably one of them."

"True, very true," agreed Officer Tarrant.

"On a note far from dining habits, I'm glad that we don't have the museum in our precinct. It was robbed last night," Officer Porter shook his head. "I don't have the details, but half the stuff in there is bulky and hard to miss someone moving. The other half is valuable stuff that gets half the value from the history and the other half from being made of expensive stuff."

"Black market collectors?" Suggested Officer Camden.

"That would be better than crooks just planning to melt it down and sell the component parts," shuddered Officer Tarrant.

"Tarrant's father is a history professor," murmured Tashir, not quite hovering beside Kate's elbow.

"Ahhhh," Kate nodded. "Will the local Universities be trying to pressure the appropriate precinct for a swift recovery?"

"There's a good chance," he agreed.

"Do we know what area of the museum was robbed?" Kate asked.

"South and Central American artifacts. Aztec, I think. Maybe some other old-tec," Officer Porter explained. "And I only know that much because it was supposed to be a very impressive display, lots of historical significance - valuable stuff. Also rare, on account of the Spanish explorers."

Kate frowned, her mind flashing back to that very strange dream of wandering up to an altar with the man in paint and feathers. Had he been Aztec? She doubted that she'd be able to pick out Aztec from any other South or Central American native people, though

she was aware that there had been many more tribes than just the Aztec and Inca. The man had held a very sharp looking knife, and he'd wanted a vampire. Had it been more than just a dream? Did it have some sort of... some weird meaning?

Shaking her head, she tried not to think about it. There was no reason for her to be dreaming about Aztec priests, or any other old-tec priests. She didn't care what some dream-priest wanted with a vampire. They were all trouble, even Angel who probably didn't want to kill her. Even if there was something there - which there wouldn't be - what could she do about it anyhow?

"Were the Aztecs the ones who used glass knives?" Kate asked, looking towards Officer Tarrant.

"Obsidian, which is volcanic glass. The area is naturally poor in metals that would hold a good edge, so they had to improvise," he gave a small shrug. "Obsidian is rather brittle, but it holds a very sharp edge. Sharper than steel."

Kate nodded, a part of her remembering the smoky glassy knife from her dream, and another part remembering that Aztecs were described as the blood-thirsty savages that carved out their enemies' hearts to offer to their gods. A very sharp knife would make that much easier... Angel had once said that removing a vampire's heart would be just as fatal as removing a human's heart. But how would you hold a vampire down long enough...

Morbid thoughts. Morbid images.

Kate turned her attention back to the lists of bar fights and prostitutes and the car stereo. Normal things. She found herself hoping that tonight would be a normal night. No freaky weird stuff - no removed hearts, no glass knives, no Aztec priests.

"I'm just glad that the university and museum people won't be complaining to us," Officer Camden muttered.

"I want Camden, Whittmore, O'Reilly, Douglas, and Parker. There's a sting tonight and you're going to be assisting. Keller, you're still on light duty, so go help process in that new equipment. As for the rest of you, enough chit-chatting, go out and do some work!" growled the captain.

In a flurry of sir's and rustling papers, the various police officers moved from the desks. Camden, Whittmore, O'Reilly, Douglas and Parker went to learn the details for the sting operation. Keller limped off towards Supply. The rest of them headed away to find suitable things to do.

Kate found herself murmuring, "Just one normal night? Please...?"

* * * * *

Perhaps most wouldn't consider a night full of fights, illegally concealed and improvised weapons, attempted auto theft, theft of car stereos - the thief helpfully identified by the multiple bites from the two-headed poodle - loitering, attempted vandalism - though that turned out to be a group of teens with spray paint - and disorderly conduct as 'a normal night'. In some ways, it wasn't, quite. One of the people with 'concealed weapons' turned out to be a demon with talons, who had a weak glamor that left people thinking he had a knife instead - it also left them thinking that he was a rather large human with a bunch of tattoos instead of a brawny looking demon with multi-colored scales. One case of 'disorderly conduct' turned out to be nothing more than a very hot date by Fyarl standards, resulting in three very embarrassed police officers requesting that such things be kept a bit less public, thank you very much, enjoy yourselves behind closed doors. They let the

teens finish painting the warning-tag that vampires frequented one specific club.

It had to be about three in the morning when they saw the pink-orange lightning bolts reaching upwards that could only be the Ghostbusters proton packs.

"Did you see that?" O'Rourke asked.

"I suggest that we didn't, and neither did you," Tashir countered.

"Is there any solid reason to go ask questions if nobody calls us?" Kate mused.

O'Rourke paused, before slowly stating, "They are an independent business. Most of the time they don't need us for anything, and the property owners can file their own insurance claims."

"Consensus reached, we keep going as we were," Kate smiled. "I suggest coffee... maybe a mocha..."

"You've been craving those all night," O'Rourke grumbled. "What's wrong with a simple cup of coffee?"

"I..." Kate paused, cutting off her protest that it was just a simple craving, and what difference did it make anyhow? "I'm not really sure. They just sound very good. But regular coffee should be just fine."

Kate thought about things for a while, and whispered to herself, "of course regular coffee is just fine. It's always been just fine."

As they headed towards an all-night coffee shop, Kate found herself thinking once again about that dream, and the painted man with the glass knife. About him asking for the next vampire. Wondering just what he'd do with one anyhow.

End part 11.

Chapter 12

Once they all had their coffee, Kate looked at her partners and admitted, "I think we need to find and talk to an expert in South American artifacts. As much as I'd like to assume that the theft was all about the possible wealth of the artifacts broken up, or the less destructive black market in antiquities..."

"You have your doubts," Tashir murmured. "Based on past experiences?"

"Past experiences that had nothing to do with South American artifacts, but they did have the common tie of the strange events tied in to a bigger, stranger, nastier picture. I'd rather look into it and later realize that it wasn't necessary than be caught by surprise by..." Kate paused, thinking back on some of the events. About the Protestant vampire with a fondness for carving crosses in the faces of his victims. The pop-apart stalker. The cursed handbag that really was cursed, and resulted in the women who had it withering away. "Let's just say that the surprises can be nasty, and what little I know about South American cultures suggests that this could be a flavor of nasty that has a high body count."

"Considering that most of what I know can be summed up as step-pyramids, body paint, and carving the hearts out of their enemies to offer as sacrifices to their gods... a little more information might be important," O'Rourke sighed, before adding, "And it probably won't help us sleep well."

"Not too much does with the freaky stuff," Kate shook her head before sipping at the coffee. "One thing that I learned in LA - sometimes when old artifacts are stolen, it isn't about the resale value, it's because the person thinks they can use that thing to do stuff. Often horrible stuff. Worse is when they're right."

"I can see why talking to an expert could be useful," Tashir paused before asking, "Is there anything that makes you suspect this could be more than someone just after the money?"

Kate sighed, and stared at her coffee. "First, South American artifacts were usually stone and obsidian, right? I'm not an expert on stones and gems, but... they aren't normally that valuable, and they tend to be heavy, right? For pure value, they'd probably go for Chinese with all the gold and jade, or medieval European jewelry. Maybe the swords if they think they've got a collector lined up. But heavy, carved stone, and volcanic glass? It doesn't sound like they're in it for the money."

"Thrill seekers who've been watching too many scary movies?" O'Rourke suggested, before adding "It has to be considered. Instead of accurate crazies planning on something that works, what are the chances that they've just seen too many scary movies or read too many of the wrong books?"

"Most of the ones recently have either been Celtic, Vatican-themed, or straight up slasher movies," Kate shook her head. "Unfortunately. The sort that do things after too many scary movies tend to be careless."

"And what if it's just thrill-seekers?" Tashir looked at her.

"Then after we catch them, we all give a big sigh of relief and send the stuff back to the museum." Kate paused, and then mumbled, "It's probably nothing, but I had a weird dream about a guy that might have been some sort of important Aztec or some-tec guy."

Body paint, feathers, and a knife made from smoky glass. That was before I heard about the robbery."

"Hmmm..." O'Rourke looked thoughtful.

"I want it to be nothing. Just a weird dream to let go and ignore." Kate sighed, and sipped at her coffee again. "But I don't think I can count on it being nothing without at least looking."

"Fair enough. So where do we find an expert on South American cultures, and whichever one those stolen items belong to? And when do you find the time, since it wasn't our precinct?" Tashir's summary didn't comfort.

Kate could only shake her head, "Good point, though I'd suggest starting at the museum. They'd know what culture the artifacts belong to, and they'd probably know who to ask for more information."

"And in the mean time, we have our jobs to do. With things that are happening in our area," O'Rourke reminded them.

For the first time, Kate could see some benefit to the fact that Angel was a private detective instead of a cop. He didn't have the same considerations of precincts, and he could pick and chose what he wanted to work on. Granted, there were drawbacks to being a private investigator, and even bigger ones to being a vampire, but she could actually see an advantage in his situation. That didn't help her mood at all.

.....

When Kate returned to her apartment after her shift, the light of her answering machine was blinking. For a moment, she considered the light, "Who'd be calling at night? Wrong numbers and drunk dialing?"

With a shrug, she pressed the button. :Detective Lockley, I think you may have left out a few things in your briefing about vampires,: the voice belonged to Egon Spengler of the Ghostbusters. :We ran into a few tonight and they seem to - at least on occasion - run in packs. Rather similar to feral dogs. Janine relayed your suggestion about antibiotics and Holy Water, and we have taken them. As a more pleasant note, it appears that vampires experience a decidedly exothermic reaction to high concentrations of protons...:

There was a loud comment in the background that she thought was from Winston :He means they catch fire and then explode!:

"Oh dear..." Kate shivered at the idea of those guys combined with explosions. It was far too easy to picture.

The machine gave a beep and played the next message, a slurred male voice. :Juulie? I miss you Julie... I'm sorry that I... I'm sorry. You gotta stop ignoring me baby... Are you there, Julie?: There was a crashing noise, and then a faint, :Julie?: before the connection was broken.

Kate sighed, "Drunks missing their girlfriends."

There was a third message, and the machine gave another click before playing it. There were drums, and some sort of bells in a rapid rhythm that she didn't think she'd heard before but it gave her a very weird feeling. She didn't hear any words. Then the drums stopped and there was ominous silence for a few seconds before the message stopped.

"What the hell was that?" Kate blinked at the machine. She didn't know what it meant, or why the drumming was on her answering machine, but she didn't like it. It also reinforced her feeling that she needed to learn more about the missing artifacts, the culture that had made them, and that whoever - or whatever - had taken them was up to trouble.

So much for pleasant dreams after that....

End part 12.

Chapter 13

Sleep was fleeting, and Kate found herself making her way to the museum, hoping to get some background information on the stolen artifacts. The scattered bits of sleep she'd managed had been filled with drums and bright feathered birds, and mugs of perfect chocolate that kept being just out of reach. Maybe it meant something, maybe it meant she needed a shrink.

Kate would bet money one of the stolen artifacts was an obsidian blade, handle or hilt or whatever you called the gripping part of a volcanic glass knife just longer than a man's fist, the blade a tapered oval about seven inches long. The gripping part might have been wrapped in something that had once been a blue and yellow cord now spattered with blood, probably old dried blood if it was in a museum. The knife had appeared in her dreams, often but not always in the hands of a painted man.

No doubt Angel and his crew would be breaking out books and searching up some creepy portents and weird stuff those dreams meant. Maybe even breaking out foreign languages. If they were really unfortunate, perhaps a prophecy would be involved; no, that was too far. She could accept vampires, and demons, and magic talking sticks, and ghosts, but prophecies were just too much. Those couldn't be real, could they? Shaking her head, Kate decided they couldn't be real, she refused. That would be one too many weirdnesses about this mess.

She ended up with thirty minutes of traffic, twenty minutes to track down the right museum guy " who turned out to be a woman " and two hours of lecture about Aztec artifacts, culture, traditions, and the importance of each artifact, what it was used for, and the fragile nature of obsidian. The high points could be summed up as obsidian was glass, and inherently fragile, but very, very, very sharp. The stolen knife " wrapped with a cord of faded blue and a pale color that might have been white or yellow and stained with old blood " had been used in religious ceremonies and blood sacrifices. There was considerable debate over the nature and frequency of those sacrifices, but at least the occasional heart of an enemy had been carved out to offer to their gods. The sacrifice was often but not always alive when the priest started carving.

If Kate had been able to sleep peacefully before that lecture, she wouldn't any longer.

For a few moments, Kate considered how she might go about finding a Watcher in this area. Someone who knew demons and vampires and important artifacts of doom. Maybe looking at museums and odd university classes on weird languages and obscure history, the owners or managers or those new age shops, or " As she finished her coffee, Kate decided searching like that would be a waste of her time. She had too much she had to do and other things she'd rather do than slog through the city searching for a maybe Watcher that she'd still need to convince she wasn't crazy, she had some idea what was going on, and she wasn't trying to make things worse.

Instead she called Angel Investigations, leaving a message for Wesley, "This is Kate Lockley, and I need you " likely Wyndham-Price - to find me contact information for a Watcher in New York City. There's been an object stolen from a museum, some sort of sacrificial knife. The whole thing gives me a bad feeling, and I'd like someone local to touch base with on the matter. Top hope is discovering I've worried too much because of all the weird stuff, and it's not needed. Second hope is we can stop the problem before it gets too bad. I need at least one name and contact information. Thanks."

She didn't know how long it would take him, but he had to have a better starting point for

such a search than she did. Best to have the information and not need it than need it and not have it.

This was supposed to be her night off from work. A night of relaxing, unpacking, settling in to her apartment. A night to go out and relax, maybe have fun. Not investigate creepy glass knives, and search for the names of people who talked about creepy stuff that ate people.

She saw the distinctive Ghostbusters car zoom past at one point, violating seven different traffic laws that she could see without thinking about it. She ignored it with a firm "not my problem" not on duty', not even wanting to consider where they were going or why they were going so fast. And straddling the lines between the lanes. And why they'd run a red light. No, just no.

One of the guys at the station had managed to get a copy of the report on the museum robbery. The cameras had malfunctioned along with the lights going out, so there wasn't film of the incident, but they could compare before and after images. It seemed fairly simple "the power had gone out, the glass door at the side of the building had been smashed, the glass case had also been smashed, and several artifacts had been removed. There had been the obsidian knife, and several items that were believed to have been part of the priest's ceremonial regalia. There were no obvious footprints or bloodstains from the shattered glass. Oddly, a blue feather had been left on the floor near the case, one since identified as coming from the blue and yellow Macaw. Never mind that both the door and the case were supposed to be bullet proof glass. Never mind the assorted security measures that were supposed to be in place.

Never mind the fact that steel knives could be bought in stores all over the state, cheap and legal. Or a variety of weapons and replicas in specialty shops and pawn shops. Someone had wanted a real obsidian sacrificial blade.

"Someone is planning something, and they want the real thing for their equipment," Kate whispered. She could see similar expressions on the faces of Tashir and O'Rourke.

"Didn't the Aztec ceremonies involve human sacrifice?" O'Rourke looked like he thought the papers might bite him.

"I'm no expert. I found a couple books at the library, and they aren't fun reading. Lots of kill the sacrifice ceremonies, though there were some that stuck with bleeding and mutilation. I don't know enough to even begin to guess, though I think the knife rules out anything involving drown them in a sacrificial well," Kate shuddered. If she hadn't already had plenty of fuel for nightmares, some of those stories, never mind the illustrations and speculations, would have fixed that deficiency.

"I'll talk to Tarrant, see what he and his Dad have to say. Any leads could make it less likely for us to be finding bodies with their hearts carved out," O'Rourke shoved the reports away.

Kate wondered if it would be worth asking if the Ghostbusters had seen anything that seemed South American or old-tec lately. She'd probably ask, even if she doubted they had it wouldn't hurt to have more people watching.

End part 13.

Chapter 14 & 15

Part of Kate wanted to focus on the problems with old sacrificial artifacts and whoever might want to use it. To track down who had it, where they were now. To dig for cultural notes – to solve this just like Angel and his staff would be doing if they were here. A small part wanted to curl up in bed, throw the covers over her head and pretend that she didn't know any of this, that it wasn't happening, and everything would be just fine. She knew that was just child-like wishful thinking, but that part was there. Except she had a job to do, and it wasn't focus everything on one specific mystery. There were so many other problems – stolen things, assaults, murders, drugs.

She wondered if Ada Walters had liked the taste of Venkman, or if he was too smarmy for even vampires. If Ada would turn up again, or if they'd run into trouble with whatever vampire had made her one. There had to be far too many vampires in New York, and she'd never be able to get rid of them all. Though it sounded like the Ghostbusters got a kick out of making them explode with their proton packs...

It was almost enough to make her want to start giving that painted man directions to vampires. Let him start thinning the herd.

Her apartment didn't feel like home yet, but she was mostly unpacked. She'd put up a decorative mirror with some fancy crosses in that elaborate style reminding her of old cathedrals. The dark iron set with red and black stones felt very fancy to her taste, but the crosses and mirror felt more like a security precaution to her. She didn't know if it would help repel vampires, but she didn't think it could hurt. Just like it couldn't hurt that she added Holy Water to what she was giving to her little houseplants, which hopefully wouldn't die like the last potted plant she'd had in LA.

The best thing about her job was it kept her busy. It was hard to dwell too much with all the new problems, irritations and minor errands. There were a few more fire-house runs to drop off things to the Ghostbusters, and she had an invitation to have lunch Thursday with Janine so the other woman could talk to someone halfway sane. It was an invitation Kate was looking forwards to, perhaps more than anything else planned for a while. She was considering seeing if Janine wanted to make it a regular event.

Wesley had finally forwarded contact information for some people local to her. She'd visited the antique store owned by the elderly Mr. Zachary Sutcliffe, a place filled with old furniture, paintings and frames, decorative things she couldn't name, and assorted lamps, bric-a-brac and kitchenware. The fact that a great many of the old frames had mirrors in them or some of the decorative things had cross themes could almost be a coincidence. He thought she seemed like a nice girl, had attempted to convince her to have lunch with his son, and made her promise to both carry a cross and never invite anybody inside after dark. Ms Regina Harper worked at a branch library, and had given her several books on Central American peoples to search for information,

assuring her that they were not the only copies, and she was in no danger of being without needed information at the library. She had also signed up for fencing class with Allan Zabuto at a small martial arts school that apparently didn't feel the need to advertise. At least she knew who to talk to about strange things now, and all three had agreed that with the dreams, the stolen knife, and the mysterious phone call, Kate needed to get more information and be prepared. Unfortunately, nobody was quite sure what she should be preparing for, which didn't help much.

Kate hoped she'd never need to use the things she was learning in her fencing class. But it made a good way to get some exercise and help deal with the stress of work. Considering some of what she'd learned about in the last few years, she'd rather take the class and never need it for anything but a workout than find herself desperately wishing she'd learned while trying not to die. Probably at the sharp bits of something out of a demented fairy tale.

While Kate pondered her new contacts among the Watchers, the city moved on. Crime happened, people went about their lives, schemes were hatched and nurtured, and scavengers searched among the city's refuse. A two-headed poodle was quite pleased at chasing away another would-be burglar. A pack of vampires plotted to destroy another over-confident human predator, the desires for revenge and dinner mingling into a terrifying whole. A young Fyarl demon boasted about a fight with what looked like a painted human with feathers caught in his hair, wielding a blade of solid smoke, showing off the slash that had narrowly missed his eye. And space warped in what had been a small green park, now thick with trees and vines, a few big, bright flowers flourishing in defiance of the city's tainted air. No longer could a person see from side to side across the park, and in the middle, the ground was heaping upwards.

End part 14.

"Another missing person. Ryan Cline, mid thirties, works at an auto garage changing tires, brakes and oil. His boss is complaining he didn't show up for work the last couple days, and hasn't been answering his phone. Go look into it, O'Rourke," demanded the Captain as he tossed a report to the desk.

"On it, Captain," O'Rourke agreed, gathering that paper as well as a few others. Glancing at Kate, he gave a thin smile, "Ready?"

Trying to push back fuzzy bits of a dream involving following a blue and yellow bird through a jungle, Kate nodded. She wondered what trouble tonight's shift would uncover. She hoped everything would be normal problems, involving drugs and violence and traffic violations, instead of demons and possessions and spells. It was a hope she didn't bother voicing, and definitely wasn't willing to bet money over it. "Does Cline have a police record?"

A quick check found that there were two Ryan Clines listed in police records, one of them a seventy year old man and the other their missing person. The Cline they were looking for had a scattering of traffic misdemeanors, and a few drunk and disorderly conducts. What caught Kate's attention was that the last drunk and disorderly had resulted in a group of people being locked up to cool down. Among those people had been Mike Walters.

"Ada," Kate sighed. "From what I've been told, going after people with previous associations is a standard new vampire tactic, and if she considered him a friend of her late hubby..."

"He might be dinner," O'Rourke finished.

"If he's lucky," Kate shuddered.

They were already heading towards the address on record for Ryan Cline when dispatch relayed that an anonymous tip had reported something wrong and what was described as 'a weird smell' at a duplex on George Street. Kate and O'Rourke exchanged a glance and nodded as dispatch gave the number as six forty eight. Ryan Cline's address.

Pulling up to the sad row of duplexes, Kate decided they looked to have been built somewhere in the sixties, based on matching the houses in television shows set back then. From the looks of it, the neighborhood had been slowly decaying ever since, with the houses getting dingier, rooftops partly covered by some dark green mold, and a cluttering of old bicycles, trash cans, scrap metal and a few crumbling cardboard boxes along the narrow divisions. Here and there, windows had been boarded up instead of being replaced or repaired. Some had fencing around the yards, most often chain link or wooden boards which were faded and broken. A dog was barking somewhere, accompanied by the sound of a rattling chain.

There was a smell, strong and disturbing and spreading through the neighborhood. Part rotting leaves and cardboard, part weathered wood, part rusting metal, and a small part blood and fear.

"Bet the blood and fear are coming from Cline's place," Kate muttered, looking along the numbers for the right door.

"No bet," O'Rourke's voice was a bit shaken. He was staring at a faded wooden

door, barely hanging to the frame by the top hinge, the bottom broken and stained a rusty shade. More of the rusty brown had run out underneath the door to pool on the step. "I'd call that an obvious sign of foul play."

She didn't call him on the reluctance clear in every step towards the damaged door. Kate was in no hurry to see whatever the door was so poorly concealing herself. Her nose told her there was a lot of blood, and that special sort of awful stench that meant someone had died, as well as the reek of fear. Most likely the missing Ryan Cline.

Very carefully, O'Rourke used his gun to swing the door open a few inches. His face paled a little and he stepped back, the door swinging back shut with a thump. "Call it in, we have a crime scene. Blood everywhere and at minimum a severed hand. I don't want to contaminate the scene."

"Cline?" Kate wondered if the hand belonged to the missing auto garage worker, or if someone else had been caught up in a messy nightmare.

"I didn't get close enough to tell, but it seemed to be a man's hand," O'Rourke had the tight expression of someone trying very hard to not throw up just now.

So they waited for the CSI crew.

Four hours later, they could say that most of the very dead Ryan Cline was inside. His death hadn't been quick or painless, but there didn't seem to be drugs or alcohol in his system. They couldn't tell if his home had been searched or if he was just... had just been a messy housekeeper. All evidence suggested he lived alone, and some easily portable electronics may have been taken, or perhaps recently sold, going from clutter patterns and outlets. Several bloody prints of a high heel, roughly a woman's six or seven had been found in the mess. There was also an empty wine bottle, with two tumblers, one of them with red lipstick on the edge.

Kate was fairly certain he'd been killed by Ada Walters.

End part 15.

parts 16 & 17

By the time all was said, done and most importantly documented, they had been at the duplex for almost three hours before Kate and O'Rourke were permitted to leave. Several fingerprints had been found, the size consistent with a woman, and they were being run in hopes of a positive identification. The bloody footprints being the same size weren't firm enough " there were literally millions of women living in New York, and hundreds of thousands of them would wear a size six shoe.

The body was confirmed as Ryan Cline. His death hadn't been quick, and likely not quiet. She wondered how many of the neighbors had heard and not called anyone, or only thumped on walls and shouted to keep the racket down. If he might still be alive if someone had called. If it had been the first time there had been screams and shouts.

Kate doubted it had been the first time. But it had become the last time for Cline.

Sometimes she wonders why she tried to save people. So many of them weren't worth it.

Kate shakes her head, not wanting to sink into that sort of sucking despair. It's like quicksand, pulling you in deeper and deeper until nothing helps, not good food, not friends, nothing. You just give up, and either die or become part of the problem. Kate doesn't want to be part of the problem. Not the human problems and certainly not the supernatural ones.

She gets a mocha on the way to their next stop. The drink is a third gone before Kate even realizes.

Several of the cops are worried about a new gang in the area. Buildings have been tagged with new graffiti, strange squarish shapes with complicated things inside, painted in yellow, green, red and blue. In other places, the shapes are done in black or white to show up over layers of older graffiti. The theory going around was the color wasn't the important part here, but the shapes.

Shapes that seemed familiar. Except Kate couldn't place them as she stared at the graffiti covered wall. It was only later that she used a pencil to sketch the five different shapes along a napkin that it clicked. Pictures from South America, showing old stone ruins and walls. Or on some of the museum displays about South America.

Combined with the theft of that obsidian knife, it gave Kate a bad feeling. A very, very bad feeling indeed.

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A young Fyarl demon straightened his shoulders before marching into what had been a small park with a pair of trees and a little fountain. There had been an open area not even as big as one of the apartment buildings, with a sad little fire ring and a lopsided picnic table, easy to see across even in the darkest night. Now, it was no longer possible to see across the space due to the thick grouping of massive trees, hung with vines and strange flowers. Narrow pathways hinted at use, and he could hear the sounds of unfamiliar birds and something else.

The boring yard had become unfamiliar territory. Unfamiliar could mean dangerous, or at least interesting. There might be a way to prove himself, something to use to impress the

girls. What hot-blooded young male didn't want to impress the girls? Well, he thought he remembered one of the elders muttering something about some type of demon or other that didn't have boys or girls, just all of them somewhere in between, but he didn't pay much attention to that. Whatever those were, they weren't like him, and he didn't think they lived here, so why did it matter?

Fy'Saterakath entered the trees boldly. In what felt like only a few steps, he could no longer hear the sounds of the city behind him. In a few more, he couldn't see the buildings between the trees any longer. He would deny the hard swallow and fluttering tension in his stomach.

This shouldn't be possible in the city. These trees shouldn't be here, the huge flowers shouldn't be here. He'd seen strange lizards and a monkey and what he'd thought was a stick that proved to be a big mantis and what he'd thought was a clump of leaves that proved to be a spider as wide as his spread hand. None of this should fit inside the sad yard with the lopsided table.

If he survived, Fy'Saterakath would admit to being afraid when he found the wide, brown river. The river with the water snake longer than he could clearly see with a head almost as long as his forearm. A snake that seemed to find him of particular interest

That was a big snake.

If he lived, this would definitely be something to boast about!

End part 16.

Kate closed the notebook she'd jotted down the details of the stolen regalia in, and sighed. She'd been trying to compare the stolen artifacts to the information she'd found about Aztec priestly regalia, in hopes of getting some idea what to watch out for happening. It hadn't helped, but had instead given her a whole list of unpleasant things Aztecs had done to each other and captured enemies.

It didn't help that her information was limited. Historians and archeologists had a few examples of what the Aztec priests had worn, but nowhere near enough to be sure if it made a difference if the feathers were blue or yellow, if the cords used were white or red or black. Maybe it meant this priest had followed this god, or had been from that town, maybe it just meant there had been a good price on red dye, or he liked that color better. The symbols adorning the outfit were significant, though whether that meant by occasion, temple, or personal history Kate couldn't say. She didn't even know if the experts might be able to give more details, because she couldn't ask them with only the justification of an odd theft and some weird dreams.

Though the glyphs spray painted through town made her more certain something weird was going on, she still didn't feel like it was enough to talk to the historians. And the dream about the painted priest asking or the next vampire bothered her. She thought he'd been in her dreams again, though she wasn't sure once she'd woke up " just an impression of painted skin and someone out of context. The memories of what she'd dreamed slipped away, leaving only the vague impression they had been strange and vivid and not to trust vines. And she wanted another mocha.

One of the cops going off shift was talking, and when he mentioned finding a giant snake head in the middle of a street, it caught her attention. Apparently the snake head had been in the middle of the southbound lane until a yellow economy car hit it going forty in a twenty five zone. Economy car had ended up on its side blocking both lanes and having rebounded off a parked truck. The economy car's driver had been taken to the hospital,

and as they'd been inspecting the scene they'd found the snake head. A head measuring nineteen inches in length, with enormous teeth and a tongue nearly three feet long. A giant snake head which looked to have been torn from the rest of the snake " and where was the rest of the snake? How in the name of everything did a snake get that big without people having screaming fits? The on-site police had been in contact with a herpetologist who'd declared the head as belonging to a constrictor type, likely a green anaconda, which meant the snake was non-venomous.

There was still considerable concern over the current location of the rest of the snake, and if it had been alone. Also, what had killed it? What did a snake that size eat and where had it been finding meals? And multiple people were having fits about the sheer size of the head.

Someone else had run into the two headed poodle. They'd had to get fourteen stitches and a rabies shot, and were still complaining. Apparently it was now dyed cotton candy pink, with white bows around each neck and the tail. Unless there was more than one two headed poodle in New York

Kate hadn't even managed to open the coroner's report on the death of Ryan Cline. She knew it had been messy, but felt no desire to know the gruesome specifics. Just as she was about to open the file, O'Rourke told her they had a report of a body, and to just leave the paperwork for other cases on the desk.

Tashir met them at the car, his face grim and pale. Kate wasn't quite sure he was actually making contact with the ground, or however much contact a ghost who didn't realize he was a ghost could make. "There are ugly rumors. Homeless people disappearing, parks becoming vast patches of wilderness, and a green giant with a broken horn babbling about wrestling with a giant snake. Basements infested with tarantulas. Blue and yellow tropical birds flying about, and in one case a scarlet bird the size of a hawk carrying away a teacup terrier. Those glyphs are spreading. I don't like any of it."

"Ahh did you hear about the giant snake head causing a traffic accident earlier?" O'Rourke asked. "I thought snakes didn't really get that big."

"Ordinary snakes aren't supposed to," Tashir agreed, his words soft and that hint of accent stronger. "There are things in motion which are far from ordinary. I don't know what's happening, but I feel it shifting, like a boat moving on the waves."

"I'm afraid it will get worse before it's over." Kate was surprised to have spoken, but not at what she'd said. Tashir had just summed up something she'd been feeling for a while, and unable to put into words.

It did. The call had been from a hysterical student at a high school, showing up to meet one of the teachers for a study session. There had been a body, and a lot of blood, and the boy was almost incoherent. But he was definitely sure someone was very dead in there, and he wasn't going back inside and he didn't want to be alone there.

"Meeting a teacher alone for some sort of tutoring at eight o'clock? Sounds off to me," Tashir murmured. "Do we know who the body is?"

"No, it was apparently a messy scene," O'Rourke answered.

Messy didn't describe things with any justice.

The man had been stripped naked and tied face upwards across three desks. He had then been flayed, with even the fingers and toes, the ears completely gone, even his eyelids removed. Blood had sprayed everywhere. Whoever had done so had known what

they were doing, and had flayed the dead man with such precision his eyeballs " bloodshot hazel " were undamaged, as were all of his teeth. His killer or killers must have taken the skin with them, as there was no sign of it anywhere in the room. His chest had been opened, and there was a gaping hole. Kate suspected there would be no heart.

"Why were there no footprints?" Kate wasn't quite certain who had asked the question, but there hadn't been any footprints in the room. Some of the blood had flowed under the door, leaving a smear by the doorknob where the student had opened the door before seeing a nightmare. He'd left smears of blood when he'd bolted for a phone to call the police. But there hadn't been any inside the room, not until they'd gone inside after the body.

No footprints from the killer or killers. No skin from the victim. No clothing from the victim. He was probably the teacher the student had been expecting to meet, but they'd have to wait on dental records to verify. No skin meant no fingerprints to check, no clothing meant no identification. And there were many, many men of approximately five foot eight with blood type A positive.

The rest of the night felt like a piece of cake after facing that mess. Some breaking and entry with theft. A few car accidents with nothing worse than a broken arm or the concussion, depending on your reasoning. A fight at a bar, again with property damage and commotion but no serious injuries. They spotted the pink-orange lightning of the Ghostbusters once, about three blocks west of their location, but continued towards the report of trespassing and potential home damage. It turned out someone who may or may not have been a dead brother in law had been standing on the fire escape and had absconded with the window-mounted air conditioner.

Through the whole night, Kate couldn't shake the feeling that things were only going to get stranger, and probably worse. She also thought she needed to talk to someone about Aztec rituals, no matter how awkward it felt.

End part 17.

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