



Old Ghosts

By Cat Kane

Part One

In the far corner of a cold, dark room, guarded by an army of cloven gargoyles and zombie babies, the plain nondescript box leaned against a dank wall. Draped in dust and gently swaying cobwebs, it towered above the minions that surrounded and protected it, and bore no identifying mark as clue to what lay inside. To its left, a half decayed body swung from its bloodied hook, to its right, a mountain of worn and tarnished skulls.

“The hell is that thing?”

“Dunno, man. It just...appeared.”

“Appeared?”

“Yeah. Pretty frickin’ spooky, huh?”

The two men picked their way through red-eyed pot-bellied rats that squeaked when trodden on, dismembered limbs that oozed blood from jagged tears, and wicked temptresses draped in old torn lace to reach the box.

“To hell with spooky,” one of the men grumbled, “more like the shit-for-brains delivery guy forgot to put it on the invoice.”

His friend picked up a box of false vampire fangs, moving it out of the way. “Yeah, I guess. What’d we order that they’d just send us one’a them, though?”

“Who knows. Let’s just get it out front, anyway. If it’s this big then it’s probably gonna be goddamn expensive, too. C’mon, Gerry, help me with this.”

With some difficulty, they managed to insinuate a loading trolley between the wall and the leaning box. Getting it loaded onto the trolley, however, was an entirely different matter.

“The hell...?”

“Damn it, Mitch, this frickin’ thing weighs a ton.” With some effort, wheezing and cursing, they managed to tip it enough to land on the trolley with a thud, almost sending the small metal helper skidding back across the storeroom floor.

“Careful.” Mitch warned. “Bet it’s got some pretty fancy bells and whistles in there, I don’t want it coming outta my wages.”

At least the storeroom was on the same level as the main shop floor; lugging the box up and down stairs would’ve been nigh on impossible.

“What’s that?” The store manager stared at them as they wheeled it in, heading for the area at the back of the store reserved for all the animatronic Halloween decorations.

“That wasn’t on the invoice.”

“We figure they musta screwed up somewhere.”

The manager rolled his eyes. “Sounds about right.” He approached the trolley, box-cutter in hand. “Well, let’s get it out there anyway, if we’re lucky they won’t notice the mistake and we can bankroll the profit.”

He stalled when it became obvious that the box had no taped up seams. The surface – brown cardboard to all intents and purposes, like everything else – had no opening bisecting any of the longer surfaces, and on the trolley it stood a good foot taller than any of the staff.

“Get it down from there, I don’t want it falling on me.”

”Whatever you say, boss.”

Around the room, mechanical growls and groans whimpered from rubberized skulls and severed heads. Lights blinked and flickered, and the fake cobwebs swayed in the air-conditioned breeze.

The box hit the ground with a rattling thunk that temporarily drowned out all the other noise. The men looked at each other.

“Well,” the manager said after a while, “if it’s broken we can tell ‘em it arrived that way.”

There was no seam to tear open on either end either. In the end the box cutter had to create one, a neat snicked line in the cardboard that ran the length of the six-foot-something box.

“Help me get this stuff off.”

They peeled back the cardboard, tearing it around oddly fitting corners when there was no other option.

Finally, the packaging lay strewn around a life-sized, ornately inlaid ebony coffin.

The manager whistled lowly. “We got a price for this thing?”

“Ain’t your regular high school haunted house piece,” Mitch peered close, “that’s for sure.”

“What’s inside?”

“Does it even open?” Mitch knelt at the side of the coffin, running a hand along the gap between the top and bottom lids. “No buttons or controls either, they’re probably inside.”

“Where does it plug in?”

Mitch paused, then shrugged. “Must be battery operated or something.”

The manager sent him a look. “In case you didn’t notice, this ain’t your ex-wife’s vibrator, Mitch. You think something this big runs on a couple D batteries?”

Mitch glared. “Solar powered or something then, how the fuck should I know?”

“A solar powered Halloween decoration?”

“Hey, you know what those frickin’ environmentalists are like these days. You can’t take a shit unless it’s recyclable.”

The manager grimaced at the image, flipping open the latch on the top half of the lid, drawing it back.

“Holy--!” Mitch jerked back. “Okay, that’s fuckin’ freaky...”

Lying inside the coffin, on suitably deep red satin, was the waxiest, tamest looking vampire dummy the Halloween store ever had the ignominy of selling. From the over-done pallor to the shadowed, sunken eyes and thin grimacing lips, the dummy exuded a creepiness all it’s fake-ass own.

“Pfft. It doesn’t even look—“

The sunken eyes snapped open, the pupils beyond a glowing, fierce red. The waxy skin began to gleam like the outside of a frosted candle-holder, the flame within bright and flickering.

“The hell...did you press something?”

“No!”

The thin lips drew up in a snarl, revealing fangs as white and sharp as winter frost.

“Heh.” Mitch grinned. “You pissed him off.”

“Huh. Must be activated by the door.” The manager opened and closed it a few times, each time gleaming the same animated response. “Kinda neat, except we’ll have all the damn kids breaking the door off trying to make it work.”

“Wanna put it behind the counter, then?”

“Fuck, no, damn thing creeps me out. Leave it here with the others, there’s always someone watching that area so the kids don’t break the merchandise.”

“Yes, boss.”

* * *

Jake batted a dangling furry spider—lopsided, with one of its eight legs shorter than the rest—away from his face, and grimaced.

“I hate Halloween.”

“Aw, c’mon.” Carrie clutched his arm. “How can you hate Halloween? It’s the one day of the year when you can be as outrageous as you like and no-one can say anything about it.”

Jake stopped, brow raised. “Uh, you think that sways me?”

”Spoilsport.”

“I prefer to call it anti-commercialism.”

Carrie rolled her eyes. “That’s what you said about Christmas too, but I don’t see you running off to the store to return any presents.”

“That’s different. That’s useful stuff. This…” He waved a hand disdainfully around the shop. “Is spending too much money on one lousy day.”

“Whatever. Either way,” she sidled up to him, hands clasping his arm tighter. “You have to help me pick out a sexy costume.”

Truth be told, he had no interest either way, but on autopilot he said, “You’d look sexy whatever you wore.”

Carrie smacked his arm playfully, and Jake thought that if she kept up her compulsion to whack his limbs every time he spoke, he’d wind up bruised and looking a little like some of the vulcanized rubber dummies in the Halloween store. “And don’t think sweet-talk is getting you out of it either.”

“Yeah, well, make it fast yeah? This place closes in an hour and I don’t wanna be stuck here all night.” He flinched as a ghoulish head popped up from a cauldron bubbling with dry ice and flashing lights.

“Big baby.” Carrie teased. “Too scared to come in here with all the ghosties and creepies, huh?”

Frankly, being there with her was scarier than any of it. “Shut up,” he glared, pulling free of her arm so she wouldn’t feel any more tell-tale flinches. “Just hurry up and go choose something, will you?”

She huffed. “Fine. You know you could have just stayed home if you were only coming to mope around and complain like a teenage boy.”

She disappeared into the rack of bagged costumes and plastic accessories before he had a chance to rebut the remark, but his defense was lukewarm anyway; he should have stayed home. He should have chosen today as the day he finally accepted they were done. When she'd called him at work earlier on that day, the right response to "Wanna go to the mall tonight to check out Halloween costumes?" was "We're through", not "Sure".

"What about this?" Carrie turned, brandishing a full-length vampiress costume that, as far as Jake could tell, was a bodice attached to some lace and little else. Soul-sucking and seductive, he supposed that was about right.

"Why not just a nightgown and two gallons of pigs' blood?"

Carrie stared at him, and wrinkled her nose. "Ew, why would I want to do that?"

"Never mind." Jake waved off the attempted joke. Best to walk away now while she'd partly forgiven him. He ignored the awareness that he didn't much care whether she forgave him or not. "I'll be over here looking at the decorations," he said, moving out of earshot before she could call him back.

The fact that she hadn't gotten the joke just went to show how little they had in common. The only movie Carrie had managed to divert her skittish attention span to in the last year was 'Sex and the City', and only then because "Oh look, Jake, she has the same name as me, isn't that awesome!?". The irony didn't escape him. A couple of good dates and some mediocre sex really wasn't enough to sustain anything.

The decorations barely held his interest. There was something reassuringly fake about demons and monsters that still bore their mold lines and rubberized joints. Okay, so maybe the groaning harpy dragging herself across the floor like a reject from a Japanese horror movie made him flinch, but the 'made in China' stamp on the back of her neck quashed any real unease. Like celluloid scares, they'd fade from his awareness the moment he stepped out of the store.

Judging by how long Carrie took to choose regular clothes, Jake didn't think that'd be any time soon.

He picked his way through the displays, the standard cast list of any Halloween store worth its scary salt: the mummy, the zombie, the werewolf, the headless corpse, the vampire bride, the skin-melted mutant crawling out of a canvas tube painted to look like a barrel of acid.

Jake grimaced, shaking his head. It was beyond him why people found gory joy in these things. He'd left behind a life where the realities he'd witnessed on a daily basis numbed him to the gleeful scares of holidays like this. After all he'd seen, holidays glorifying pain and suffering didn't float his boat.

Between the fire door and a model of Frankenstein whose neck bolts lit up when he spoke, the black inlaid coffin seemed remarkably tasteful. He wondered briefly whether the casket was real; it certainly appeared different to all the other garish displays. Its subtlety made it more unsettling, nothing about it looked fake even though he knew it had to be.

“Hey.” He caught the attention of one of the store’s staff. “What’s this one supposed to do?”

The kid stared vapidly at him, then at the coffin. “You’ve gotta open the door. But we don’t let people do it on account of them breaking stuff.”

Jake blinked. “So how do people know what it does?”

The kid shrugged. “Dunno. Sorry.”

Watching the kid walk off, Jake began to wonder if he was the only sane one left on the planet. Or at least in the Halloween store. Shaking his head, he turned back to the casket, its black wooden frame glinting softly in the shop’s bright light.

“Maybe it’s just us, buddy.”

And now he was talking to inanimate Halloween decorations. Wonderful. Better rethink that sanity thing, even if his shrink had given him the all-clear.

Still. The kid was nowhere in sight, and there wasn’t a sign on the coffin door warning potential purchasers from testing out the merchandise. Jake wondered what Carrie would say if he went home with this thing. She’d probably wrinkle her pretty little nose again and say, “Ew!”.

Good. No better reason to buy the damn thing. It might keep her out of his hair for a while. That and the cold alluring beauty of the piece, looking more like a display of craftsmanship than a novelty toy. Without thinking, he ran a hand over the ebony inlay work, slivers of white that could have been marble recessed into the wood just deeply enough to feel the faint edge of a groove. If he closed his eyes he could imagine an Edwardian drawing room, dark and smoky, with—

The coffin door slid open under his fingers, even though he couldn’t recall pressing anything to make it do so.

Jake stared at the impossibly life-like dummy inside the coffin, almost smelling the tobacco of that drawing room, the must of old letters and books, the tang of a rich wine.

The dummy’s eyes snapped open, flaring red. Jake felt the panic escalating, like a high striker at a carnival, where a strong swing of a mallet sent the puck racing up the tower

towards the bell. He thought he heard the bell clanging in the back of his mind, saw the scatter-fire of flashing lights, like neon fireflies.

The bell was just the sound of a container full of Viking hemlets and spears toppling over as Jake backed into it.

The kid dashed back, a frantic look on his pimply face. “What happened?”

“Ah, sorry...” Jake rubbed a hand to the back of his neck, trying for that winsome idiot look that had often saved his neck when he’d wandered into places he shouldn’t. Better they think you were just stupid. “I tripped.”

The kid eyed him suspiciously. “Are you hurt? Cause, you know, we don’t accept any liability for any injuries caused by the merchandise or—“

“No, I’m fine.” Jake held up a hand to ward off the spiel. “Sorry for the mess.”

The kid just grumbled a reply, setting to work righting the display bin, while Jake cast a fleeing look back at the coffin. The casket lid had closed again. Jake didn’t recall doing that either. It was on some mechanism, he supposed, a timer or something.

“Where did you run off to?” Carrie appeared at the end of the aisle clutching something violently purple in a bag.

“Oh. Just around here. So, did you pick something?”

“Yeah.” Carrie lifted the bag with a giggle. “It’s a purple pixie, and it’s—“

“Great. It’ll look fabulous.” One hand at the small of her back, Jake steered her towards the cash register. “Let’s pay for it so we can get out of here. Get back to my place,” he amended quickly, “to try it on, yeah?”

He caught Carrie’s frown in his peripheral vision, felt the tension in her arm as he reached for it. Was that what she felt every time she touched him?

“What’s the hurry?”

“Nothing! Just, you know...I want to see you in it.” Desperate times called for desperate measures. “And out of it.”

Carrie giggled like a schoolgirl. “Jake, you’re a bad bad man.”

Yeah, whatever. Jake gratefully herded her towards the pouting goth salesgirl at the register, tugging out his wallet with his free hand. Anything was better than staying in the store a moment longer.

* * *

Benjamin..! It had been Benjamin staring at him in abject terror.

After everything, after all the sacrifices, that expression still haunted him, still had the capacity to wound deeper than bombs or bullets.

Ever since he came home, Ben was always afraid, and on days when fear was the only emotion Samuel could wring out of him, he was grateful for any kind of response at all. Better fear than nothing, and Ben so frequently descended into nothing in those final weeks and days.

Samuel managed as best he could. Circumstances allowed him to keep busy; in the years immediately after the war, people seemed more desperate than ever to seek his kind out, indulge in the hedonistic pleasures of vibrant theatres and smoky night-clubs. He always assumed it their affirmation, reassurances to themselves and the world at large that they were still alive, that they had survived.

Every evening they came to the clubs in droves, clamoring to see the magical and daring acts performed by The Amazing Levanto, or in Samuel's case, The Great Count Mirza. He'd considered, briefly, changing the act to something less peculiarly *foreign*, but no one seemed to care. The war was over, and they were all content in their newfound calm.

"How is your dear friend, these days?" The Amazing Levanto, also known as Clarence Francis, asked one autumn evening, whiling away a cigarette in the dark backrooms of the club in between performances. Their rivalry, a concoction to bring in more marks, had never been more than that. Not to Samuel. Clarence was a comrade, a mentor. While Clarence didn't know the true nature of Samuel and Ben's friendship—no one did—Samuel suspected he had his doubts. One didn't place such emphasis on 'friend' otherwise.

He continued polishing the custom made ebony casket, a staple figure in the finale of his act, and kept his tone mild.

"Well, thank you."

"Still the same, then." Clarence lit up a cigar that must have mysteriously bypassed the rationing through the black market. "You know my offer still stands."

"No." Samuel shook his head. "Grateful as I am that you'd trouble yourself to—"

"Hardly any trouble, lad." Clarence shrugged. "At least, not for me." He sent Samuel a foxish sidelong smile. "We're different, after all, you and I."

Samuel nodded. He'd been aware of that for some time, although he suspected it took another magician in the profession to realize that some of The Amazing Levanto's illusions were truly impossible. The audience and the evening papers all lapped it up. Yet he had no desire to taint Ben's soul with the unknown consequences of Clarence's...abilities.

Because there would be consequences, of that he was certain if nothing else.

"So, keep it in mind." Clarence said, before levering himself away from the low doorway, disappearing into the labyrinthine corridors. Literally, for all Samuel knew.

Either way, he had dismissed the notion. Irrespective of the cost to himself—Clarence was sure to extract a cost, too—Ben would never forgive him for bringing darkness into their lives.

Ben went off to war for all his right reasons, just as Samuel had stayed behind for his. Ben never judged Samuel for his actions, and Samuel never condemned Ben for his decision to fight. At least Samuel had the means to do so, to volunteer his services to King and country on the home front instead of the front line. It was those means that permitted him to care for his childhood friend at the Gilbert country estate, and Samuel's appearances became few and far between as Ben deteriorated and Samuel grew loathe to leave his side.

Ben deteriorated every day.

"Wait." He followed Clarence into the dark halls, nearly jumping out of his skin when the older man appeared from the shadows.

"Hmm?" Clarence said. "You've changed your mind."

It certainly seemed as though Clarence had been waiting for him to do just that.

"Are you certain you can do something for him?"

"For him, absolutely."

"Then this weekend. The house in Berkshire."

Clarence nodded. "It's a new moon. That should do nicely."

"And your price?"

Clarence smiled, teeth showing in the dark. "Surely there is no price on your beloved's well-being, is there Samuel?"

Samuel imagined Ben, sitting at the drawing room window, staring out wide-eyed at nothing. Nothing tangible. Nothing that existed outside his memories.

He grit his teeth. “No, there isn’t.”

But Clarence extracted one regardless.

Despite it all, Samuel knew he’d meet Ben again. That if he waited, as long as it took, the benevolence of his intentions would see them through. Despite the faith that had served as a good distraction during the war, Samuel had no doubt, God or none, Ben would return to him one day.

He lost track of the days, the years, but that mattered little now.

Benjamin.

Ben was clothed in the odd garb that everyone he’d seen since the box was opened—colorful but plain, almost a reminder of wartime austerity. Nothing like the clothes he recalled from his last moments of freedom: the silk hats, the spangled dresses, the feathers and the jewels.

He tried to move, tried to speak, as he’d attempted to do with the others, to no avail. Words refused to escape his lips, his gaze refused to move from Benjamin’s terrified stare. If he managed to speak, it must have been a horrifying sound for his precious Ben to stumble back, knocking over a stack of remarkably lightweight weapons.

Weapons? Did Ben ever relinquish his desire to fight?

Before he could think on it further, the doors that kept him in this prison of his own making closed once more, locking him back into eternally conscious darkness.

Yet it wasn’t the same.

Somewhere outside, Benjamin lived, thrived. His Ben. If he concentrated, he could still hear him outside the coffin. Surely Ben still remembered it, still knew its significance?

The silence closed in and claimed him once more, yet the thought of Ben remained.

The time had come for The Great Count Mirza’s finale.

Part Two

“You’re sure you can’t stay?”

Carrie leaned up on her tiptoes, kissing Jake’s cheek. “I gotta be up early, so yeah, I’m sure. Besides, you seem kinda pre-occupied tonight.”

“No I’m not.” The defense was a little too quick, too eager, to be a true denial. Even Carrie could see right through it, and considering Carrie could barely see past an end of season sale at JC Penney’s, Jake thought that was saying something.

“Liar.” She smiled, then canted her head, watching him thoughtfully. “We have fun, right?”

“Where’s that coming from? Yeah, of course we do.”

Carrie nodded. “Then that’s okay. I’ll call you tomorrow, okay? Get some rest.”

Standing on the sidewalk outside his apartment building, Jake watched her walk away until she disappeared around the corner of the block. A gentleman might have offered to walk or drive her home, but Carrie always brushed off the offer. Jake suspected it had less to do with chivalry, and more to do with the anxiety attack he’d had the first time he’d attempted it, unthinking of how the shadowed streets, darkened windows and hidden alleys would affect him. He’d been foolish enough to believe that since he was out with a girlfriend, walking quiet suburban streets, it would keep the panic at bay.

Yeah, some catch he was...

He was fine during the day. When he could see clearly the secrets lurking in his surroundings, it rarely troubled him. When he could tell that the shadow on someone’s porch was just a chair or a pile of pumpkins, when he could see that the dark hollows of the windows around him held nothing more sinister than drapes and a potted plant.

In the dark...the dark was different. Without Carrie’s company, he felt more afraid on the empty street than he’d ever known.

And something was watching him.

A cold prickling tickled the nape of his neck, a tingle of sweat shivering down his back despite the chill of the evening. Not paranoia, not imagining snipers in high windows, not the sense of dread that used to have him turning around, camera braced, ready to capture some new atrocity.

The reality of it.

If he turned around, he’d come face to face with his watcher. He could all but feel their breathing, the gentle shushed displacement of air.

He smelled smoke. It had been a staple in the early days, but this wasn't the same; this wasn't the acrid, foul smelling stench of things he'd rather not know about burning to ashes. It was like wood smoke, a campfire crackling with cherry-wood, cigars and nutmeg, sweet and spicy in the cold fall night.

He'd smelled it somewhere before, if the anxiety that kept him rooted to the cold sidewalk would allow his mind to access it.

"Benjamin," someone whispered, and Jake froze. "Ben."

He shouldn't have recognized the name, let alone reacted to it, but the two foreign syllables sent fingers of ice scraping down his spine.

Once, he might have turned to face things. He'd been a head-on kind of guy. Now, it took all the will he had just to stay upright as he stumbled back up the steps to the apartment building, pushing open the heavy security door and hearing the reassuring thunk of locks closing behind him.

If only that door kept the fear out, then everything would be perfect.

* * *

Outside the comforting dark of the drawing room, Benjamin looked different. Hardly disappointing, he could never be that, especially after all this time, but Samuel despised the terror shaking his frame.

Samuel spoke his name, but to no avail. It frightened his precious charge even more. Perhaps this odd landscape petrified Ben as much as it did him.

For a moment, he stared in bewilderment, trying to fathom when Ben had become so accustomed to the lavish lifestyle that he resided in such a large house. The odd patchwork of illuminated and darkened windows made him think it was perhaps a collection of flats instead; some of the London townhouses were being converted last time he recalled.

It came to him briefly that he recalled very little of the time in between. Short burst of light and activity when some poor unsuspecting wretch opened the casket doors, only to have it slam back shut.

Perhaps he'd never known as much as he thought.

Perhaps Ben still hadn't forgiven him.

Yet it had been Ben's image carouselling through his mind in the darkness, when he realized the tortuous paralysis that kept him prisoner all those years weakened enough to allow him to feel his fingers, his limbs. Moving was insufferably slow, like trudging through mud, extremities awakening with the tingled pain after a particularly acute attack of pins and needles.

When he opened his eyes, he still saw the darkened interior of the casket, but the dark *moved*, swirling and shifting like a monochromatic kaleidoscope.

Take me to him, he thought. *Nothing else matters, just take me to Ben.*

Like the flicking pages of a picture book, the next recollection he had was of the dark haze around him dissipating, brushed away by the cool hand of an autumn breeze. He was on a street, and less than ten feet ahead of him stood his beloved Ben. Safe. Alive.

Afraid. Always afraid.

He'd never been under any illusions that Ben approved of his actions, but hoped that with time, as he grew better and stronger, Ben might at least understand.

Clarence came to the estate just as he'd promised. The late October evening had turned for the worse, a murky, misty night with clouds like flint. Rain lashed as Clarence's car rattled onto the long driveway in front of the house.

"Foul evening, Samuel." Clarence brushed rain off his sleeves, the short journey from vehicle to doorway drenching him thoroughly. Samuel's staff hurried to take his coat and hat, bustling quietly and efficiently.

"This way," Samuel said, not eager to engage in conversation about the weather, nerves taut and shivering, desperate and impatient to get it all done with. At the time, he foolishly believed Clarence felt the same, when the older man simply followed in silence, offering no argument.

Still, Samuel paused at the drawing room door, fingers grazing the handle in a near caress, breathing deeply before pushing the door open.

"Ben." He stepped carefully into the room, moving as he'd seen his father's stable hands move around frightened foals. "Ben, we have a visitor."

The figure at the window didn't budge, though Samuel hadn't truly expected him to. He sighed softly regardless as he walked over to the wheelchair, kneeling next to Ben to check that the blanket was still tucked warmly around his knees.

Before he left, Ben's beauty, passion and intelligence left Samuel breathless. The beauty remained, not so much as a visible scar to mar it, and Samuel convinced himself the

intelligence and passion remained locked away behind those eyes, behind the terrors Ben must have witnessed.

Reaching out, he brushed a lock of golden hair from Ben's empty blue eyes.

"Mr. Francis is here to help you."

Not even a flicker. Behind him, Clarence seemed to grow impatient; Samuel swore he heard a cluck of disapproval as Clarence set a plain brown briefcase down on the table, like a good doctor.

"We should get started."

Samuel nodded, wheeling Ben closer, noticing no change in his lover's expression. He drew an upholstered wing chair to Ben's side, sitting close and reaching for one of the hands Ben held limply in his lap. Clarence raised a brow, but said nothing. Samuel decided it was a scant price to pay that Clarence's suspicions were confirmed.

"Perhaps you would rather wait outside," Clarence said mildly, withdrawing candles, dark and thick as sapling trunks from the briefcase, setting them in an arrangement on the table. Vials came next, apothecary bottles filled with substances Samuel was at a loss to identify, uncertain whether he even wanted to.

"No." He shook his head vehemently. "I won't leave him alone."

"As you wish." A stringed charm followed. Samuel wondered if the briefcase was a living breathing imitation of the bottomless boxes used by magicians. "In fact, you can make yourself useful. Have him hold that, will you?" Clarence handed him the charm, glancing briefly—disdainfully—at Ben. "You'll have more luck than me."

Samuel glared—all he'd thought to do at the time, desperation driving him on—and snatched the charm. It was little more than a tangled twist of fraying twine, on which dangled smaller white objects that clattered together. Samuel grimaced, noticing they looked remarkably like teeth.

"Where did you get such a thing?"

"Hardly any of your concern, Samuel." Clarence glanced up at him dispassionately, renewing Samuel's image of the methodical doctor. "An acquaintance of mine found it in India some years ago, if you must know."

Samuel could imagine Clarence's acquaintances. Unfortunately.

Instead of thinking too hard upon it, he busied himself with the task at hand.

“Come on, Ben.” He coaxed gently, unfurling one of his lover’s unresponsive hands, squeezing softly before attempting to wrap the fingers around the twine. “Try, for us.”

Ben’s eyes slid slowly to his, though Samuel didn’t know what his lover saw—a frightened, cowardly man who was taking the easy way out rather than fighting the doctors and their judgments to ensure Ben proper treatment.

Proper treatment. Such a joke. Even those who gave credence to his condition were liable to pack him off to some institution, and that would be the end of them both.

A frightened, selfish coward, then.

Averting his eyes, he set his lips in a grim line, closing Ben’s fingers over the charm. “Trust me. Please...”

Clarence made another impatient noise, and Samuel reluctantly let go of Ben’s hand.

“You still have made no mention of payment,” Samuel murmured, watching Ben’s gaze drop to his lap. At least the charm seemed to demand what attention he had, like a child with a jangly toy.

“Did you not agree no price was too high?”

Samuel should have quibbled that assertion. “And I stand by my agreement. I only want to know what—“

“The talk of price is later.” Clarence dismissed him. “You seem very eager to pay the piper, Samuel.”

“I just want it done.”

“At any price?”

Later he would remember the tang of pleasure in Clarence’s voice, the lascivious, greedy look, as though he’d been invited to an unparalleled feast.

“Yes,” he said. “At any price.”

But what difference did it make now? Ben was still afraid, even if there was significantly more life in his eyes than Samuel remembered from the days after the war. Those blue eyes saw now, he knew. They witnessed, they appreciated. They *lived*.

He stepped up to the door of the building. Judging from the arrangement of oddly shaped doorbells, then it was a multi occupancy building, yet nothing like the ones Samuel remembered. Ben never afforded nor sought such luxuries, not that Samuel minded a jot bestowing such gifts and indulgences, even when Ben didn’t like to admit he enjoyed it.

There was nothing wrong with the enjoyment of pleasure. Once upon a time they'd learnt that together.

There was no Benjamin Harvey on the list of names next to the doorbells. Samuel decided to press each one, and simply hope that Ben might answer to one of the foreign names.

When a disembodied voice emanated from the wall in front of him, it was all he could do not to leap out of his skin. As he stared around, seeking the source of the voice, the gravelly words formed themselves into a lady speaking. At least, he thought it was a lady; much as the voice crackled and hissed, he couldn't be certain.

“Whadd'ya want?”

A lady couldn't possibly mean him that much harm, could she? Still scanning the wall for some clue as to her whereabouts, Samuel shook his head. “Where are you, madam?”

Silence, then another of those odd crackles. “You sellin' somethin', huh? Well I ain't buyin'! Get outta here!”

Samuel blinked, startled into stillness. “No, madam, I assure you, I'm only—“

“I said get out!” More crackling. “Damn kids...”

A loud click pre-empted her silence.

Still contemplating how her voice traveled that way, Samuel's gaze rested on a small grated square next to the doorbells, similar to the grate of a confessional, and decided it must be a speaker of some kind. Albeit the crackling gave it away, the voice might as well have been standing next to him for its clarity and precision.

Despite everything, Samuel smiled to himself—this truly seemed to be such and advanced age. Mr. H. G. Wells himself could never have imagined such a vision of the future. Perhaps he and Ben could come to enjoy it together, he thought. Perhaps it wouldn't matter that Ben was truly a child of this age now, and simple devices such as the speaker rendered Samuel awestruck.

He ran a finger down the list of names for a second attempt. The grooves and ridges under his fingers reminded him how long he'd been denied the simple pleasures of touch, of moving a hand and feeling the word as a tactile being. The slatted metal of the grate speaker was cool and sharp, and the molded material of the doorbells worn and smooth.

What would Ben feel like to touch in this age? Sinewy muscle and soft skin, hair like silk and lips like velvet. Would those things be the same?

Two of the names were undoubtedly female, and one merely listed a surname. Samuel referenced the latter for later, fingertips resting on the very last button—Jake Corbett.

This one.

He pressed the button. Somewhere in the distance he swore he heard the resonance of the sound, like the echo of a servant's bell from several rooms away.

Eventually, the crackling came again, noise surrounding him like mist.

“Yes?”

One syllable, and Samuel's heart leapt, pulse fluttering so hard in his throat that he wasn't sure he could speak more than the requisite word.

“Ben?”

A loud clatter resounded around him this time, as if Ben—or Jake—had dropped something. Then, softer than summer drizzle, came a quavering, “Who are you?”

“Ben, it's me. Samuel.”

Silence. Samuel closed his eyes, resting his forehead against the grate, desperate to be as close to the ghost of Ben's voice as he could.

“I don't know a Samuel. You've got the wrong person.”

Samuel squeezes his eyes tighter; the tremor in that voice was so surely Ben, even if the name, the tenor and the pitch were different. American, his brain, rusty from lack of use, supplied. Drawn out vowels and a questioning lilt to every word, as though the world itself surprised them, but they could hardly summon the energy to respond.

“Ben, please—“

“Don't call me that. Go away.” It sounded far more a plea than the lady's threat. “Or I'm calling the cops.”

The police? Samuel wasn't certain at all how this society functioned, but he doubted it had changed that much. In any age, the police's involvement was rarely good.

“But you are.” He rested his hands either side of the speaker, as if he could connect with Ben that way. “You wouldn't have woken me otherwise.”

“When he forgives you, my boy,” he could still hear Clarence say, “when he forgives you your selfish sins, then you'll have paid the price.”

“Please—“

“Go away.” The fear twined with a resolution, a defiant edge he’d loved so much.

“Please, just go away.”

Hands curling into fists, Samuel forced himself to breathe, a concept still too long forgotten to be truly habitual.

Not again. He refused to believe his actions were frightening Ben yet again, despite the panic decorating his beloved’s voice like froth edging a rough tide. Samuel barely recalled the panic—Ben had lapsed so quickly into apathy, that stage lasted all of a few weeks.

“Wait, I’m—“

The clicking sound that he came to understand signified the end of the conversation, like the click of telephone exchanges, echoed dully in his head and around the small hallway in which he stood.

Samuel leaned heavily against the speaker, let out a long, shaky breath. Somewhere in this building, Ben might very well be doing the same thing. He traced the grate of the speaker, wishing he could just melt into it, let the wires carry him to Ben, but whatever lingering magic had brought him here refused to help.

He glanced at the name again. Jake. His Ben. Whatever the other man believed, Samuel would have to prove to him that this was real.

Sighing, he levered himself away from the wall, brushing one finger against the nameplate again in the vain hope that Ben would feel the reassurance somehow. In the meantime, he had to find a way to get by in a world he didn’t recognize.

Stepping out of the narrow hallway—claustrophobic by anyone else’s standards, but to Samuel it felt like a ballroom—he looked up at the windows, some dark, some lit.

“Good night, Ben.”

* * *

Jake dreamed of dark drawing rooms, flickering candlelight, and something rough binding his hands. Much as he tried to free himself, his hands refused to co-operate, barely moving to his commands. On the periphery of his awareness, he could hear a rhythmic rattle, and an equally sonorous muttering, almost a chant.

“*Come on, Ben,*” someone said, yearning and soft. “*Try. For us. Please, trust me.*”

He woke up late, disorientated, and with a headache that could trigger earthquakes, but he knew exactly where he was going.

On the way to the mall, he called into work, claiming he was spending the day out of the office on a location scouting mission for one of the magazine's next photo shoot. If anyone asked, the mall seemed like the perfect place to set up a winter themed shoot—commercial consumerism meets Santa's elves.

This early on a weekday with no kids around, the Halloween store was unnervingly quiet. The toys and machines made more noise, less frightening for the whirrs and clicks of motors that betrayed what they really were.

It wasn't the kid who greeted him next to the animatronic displays this time, but an older guy, face pinched by narrow wire-rimmed glasses perched on the end of his nose. He looked a little like a shortsighted ferret.

"Uh..." Jake frowned at the empty space where the coffin had been. "What happened to the decoration that was here yesterday?"

The ferret man made a face. "It's gone."

"Oh."

He ignored the flare of disappointment. Of course the thing would've sold, it was a gorgeous piece of artisan craftsmanship besides being a Halloween decoration. Someone was sure to snap it up, he'd been foolish to leave without the damn thing. Maybe that's why he was going crazy—a Halloween toy was haunting him.

"Do you happen to know who bought it?"

"What?" The man glared at him. "No-one bought it, it's *gone*."

Jake paused. "Gone?"

"The hell are you, kid, some kinda mime? Yeah, gone. We got in this morning and the goddamn thing's just gone."

"But it can't just—"

"Can, and did," the man said. "Shoulda known better when it just appeared outta nowhere. Fricking messed up, I'm telling you."

Jake watched him walk away, before looking back at the empty space, fighting the urge to shiver.

"Yeah," he said softly. "I'm starting to think you're right."

Part Three

By the time Jake made it into work, the headache was a thudding migraine, sending little flickers of light dancing across his peripheral vision. He popped two painkillers before even sitting at his desk, wishing he'd just gone home.

No. Home wasn't a great idea. That man knew where he lived. Granted, if he had that much information, finding his workplace wouldn't be too difficult, but Jake clung to whatever fragment of optimism he could.

Funny, he'd always thought that if he acquired a stalker, it'd be one of Carrie's cast-offs. A crazy ex, one of the guys she'd drained dry of their credit limit and their will to live before she moved onto him.

No, Jake's luck dictated that he got the psychopath who thought he was someone else.

It had nothing to do with the missing casket. On the drive to work, he'd convinced himself that it was nothing more than a bizarre coincidence. Maybe the guy saw him freak out at the Halloween store, maybe it was some sick and twisted creep's idea of a joke. Whatever weird mojo going on with the casket, it had nothing to do with him.

He closed his eyes, leaning back in his chair, scenting candles and cigars and that damned drawing room again. He wasn't even sure he knew what a drawing room was. His apartment certainly didn't have one.

No. It has nothing to do with you, remember?

Still...

Levering himself up, chair clanking back into its rightful position, he booted up his laptop, waiting impatiently until he could hit up a search engine. There were a handful of memos and post-its decorating his desk, several of them in vivid shades of radiation orange. Jake flicked through them, knowing full well he wasn't planning on attending to any matter until his head stopped pounding, or until he found an answer to his mystery man. He was betting on the former, if he had to throw money away.

He didn't have many details, but he typed in what he knew. 'Ivory inlaid black casket' and then, on a whim, 'Samuel'.

The search engine only returned a handful of hits. Most of those referred him to a funeral parlor in New Orleans that specialized in gothic caskets, run by a guy called Samuel. Jake

hit up the site just for the sheer hell of it. This Samuel's picture was on the site—he looked nothing like the dummy in the casket, and nothing like the voice Jake heard last night. Soft. Cultured. English.

He frowned. *English*. Returning to the main page, he replaced `casket` with `coffin`.

Even fewer hits. Sam's casket place in New Orleans still showed up. At the end of the list—a scant three pages long—Jake found a link to a British historical site. Bringing up the cached page, he scrolled through the dense genealogical text to find the highlighted terms, all neatly bunched together in a single paragraph:

'One of the most popular stage magicians of the day was The Great Count Mirza, also known as Lord Jonathan Gilbert's youngest son, Samuel Gilbert. Count Mirza's was a controversial act in its heyday following the Great War, both for its content and the ensuing mystery of Samuel Gilbert's disappearance in late 1921. Both Gilbert and his famous finale act, an ivory inlaid black coffin claimed to be used in occult worship, disappeared from the dressing room of a London nightclub. Lord Jonathan spent his remaining days seeking his son's kidnapper, implicating along the way both the family of Gilbert's recently deceased childhood friend, and rival illusionist Clarence Francis. No prosecution was ever brought.'

The article trailed off into an analysis of Lord Gilbert's House of Lords sittings, and the bills passed during his tenure, but Jake could barely even focus on the screen. Words kept drifting through his awareness, as surely as the highlighted text.

Samuel Gilbert. Magician. Coffin.

The glittering, hazy aura at the edge of his vision crowded closer, until all he could see was a blurry image of the laptop, thick black text against a painfully white screen. He squeezed his eyes closed, palms against his temples, as if pressure alone could temper the ice-pick stabbing.

1921. It was impossible. Crazy. Ludicrous. Ridiculous. What the hell was stalking him, a ghost?

The lights flickered, sending a wave of nausea rolling through his stomach.

"Wow, Jake, you're not looking good." Tommy, his colleague, paused as he passed the open door. "You okay?"

Jake managed a weak nod. "Migraine, that's all."

He'd cultivated a reputation for evil migraines; it wasn't an outright lie by any means, but they also served to cover up for the days when Jake's other little issues kept him from even getting out of bed.

"Ah. Man you look at death's door. Why don't you go on home? It's quiet here today anyway."

"Yeah." Jake cracked open his eyes, grateful that, for a moment at least, the aura receded. "I think I might."

"You got anyone to give you a ride home?" Tommy asked. "Cause you ain't looking too hot to drive, buddy."

Jake thought about calling Carrie, but couldn't deal with the thought of her incessant chatter. Either she'd insist on telling him about the great new pair of shoes she'd bought, or she'd keep prodding and niggling to find out what was really wrong. Jake tried to imagine her reaction if he told her he might be the stalking victim of a ninety year old Halloween dummy come to life.

It just wasn't happening.

"I'll be okay," he said. "Meds should be kicking in any minute."

Tommy looked at him skeptically. "Well, if you're sure. If you can wait around an hour or so, I'll take you, but—"

"No, thanks." He managed a smile of gratitude, but he didn't want concern. He wanted sleep and forgetting.

Sometimes the light of the migraine aura looked so much like mortar fire, like crackling gold across a black sky. He didn't want to be around people if that happened.

"Kay." Tommy nodded. "I'll let 'em know you took off. Look after yourself, buddy."

The flares died down enough for him to get back down to the parking lot, realizing briefly that he'd been in the car more than he'd been in the office today. Hell, he'd been in the Halloween store longer.

He took the drive slow, unsure sometimes what was the aura and what was a stop light blaring its colors.

There was no-one outside his building, or in the lobby, but he approached with caution anyway. At least he could refrain from entertaining an undead stalker two days before Halloween. And that he was even entertaining the possibility spoke of a need for more sleep and stronger meds. Much stronger.

He was on his floor, letting himself in when Mrs. Doyle from 4b stomped outside, all hair curlers and slippers, skinny cigarette and yesterday's newspaper.

"Hi, Mrs. Doyle." Jake smiled weakly.

"You get that damn salesman at the door yesterday too?" She demanded, making no pretence of chit-chat and a part of Jake was intensely grateful. "Or it was another of these damned trick or treaters. I hate this damn holiday, ain't safe for old folks, I'm telling you."

Jake had been mulling whether the trick or treaters weren't at greater risk from the likes of Mrs. Dolye, when the actual content of her words registered. He froze at the door, one hand on the doorknob.

"He talked to you, too?"

"Damn right." Mrs. Doyle took a drag on her cigarette, coughing loudly. "Don't know what he was sellin', but he sounded like a smarmy little shit. Glad we got those intercoms is all I say."

"Yeah..." He watched her disappear back into her apartment in a cloud of smoke and rustling paper. "Me too..."

The stupidity of returning to a place where that man could easily find him reared up again, the migraine calling in reinforcements just out of spite.

Locking the door again, he turned back down the hallway; he could waste time at the grocery store a few blocks away, stock up on painkillers and ice-packs. If there was anything he knew that might ward off psychosomatic ghosts or real-life stalkers, then he'd load up on that, too. And if Samuel, or whatever the hell his name was, came back, well, Jake would take his chances with the cops.

He couldn't stay here. Not yet.

Not till he was sure that whatever he was dealing with, it was flesh and blood.

* * *

After a night of enduring it, Samuel began to rethink his assessment of the glories of this advanced age.

If the car drivers had anything to do with it, he'd be lucky if he survived it long enough to see Ben again, let alone convince him that he spoke the truth.

Automotives had been dangerous enough in his day. He recalled the zippy little Sunbeam he'd purchased brand new in the year before his awful mistake. Driving around in it—admittedly a privilege and a luxury—the wind in his hair, the countryside rolling by under his wheels, he'd almost known what it meant to be invincible

These contraptions, hulking metallic beasts with roars louder than a bomber, wouldn't feel so much as a bump if they hit him. And so many of them! Perhaps all classes owned vehicles in this day and age. They barely slowed as he tried to cross the street, and Samuel yearned for the sight of a simple carriage, or more pedestrians.

Although, perhaps fewer pedestrians made things simpler. They already stared at him as though he was the most peculiar sight they'd seen this century. One particularly indignant stare left him wishing sorely he could retaliate without drawing further unwanted attention to himself.

I'll have you know, madam, he thought to himself instead, *that these garments are from the best tailors in Mayfair. You, on the other hand, appear to have escaped the circus.*

Somehow, he suspected voicing such an opinion would involve the police again. The people of this age seemed awfully eager to involve them in all minor disputes, and his explanation would have been odd at best.

Safer to mind his business and bide his time. Time mattered little now, and sleep was a chore he'd just as soon neglect for now. He didn't venture far from Ben's residence, afraid that one wrong turn would leave him hopelessly lost.

He'd been lost for far too long already.

When he saw one of the gleaming, deadly contraptions stop outside Ben's door, he backed up into an alleyway across the street. If it was Ben, Samuel didn't want to frighten him again.

He needn't have worried; Ben didn't even look around as he got out of the car. He headed for the entranceway without a second glance, but not before Samuel saw the pain etched onto Ben's face.

Different face, different name, different voice, but Samuel would recognize Ben anywhere, even at the ends of the earth. He'd given up everything for a chance to take that pain away once, and he'd gladly do it again.

Samuel moved from the shadows without thinking, crossing the road as he might have in his day, paying little heed to any oncoming traffic.

A car honked its horn, the blaring noise echoing off the walls.

Ben turned, eyes wide. Samuel braced himself for an impact that never happened.

Evidently, Samuel thought, trying to put his thoughts and racing heart back in good working order, cars in this age were more adept at stopping.

“The hell are you doing?” the driver yelled, leaning out of the window. “Watch the frigging road, moron!”

“Ah, I...” Samuel glanced at Ben. “I’m truly sorry. It was my mistake.”

“Damn straight it was,” the man grumbled, revving the engine as he pulled out, driving around Samuel with a screech of tires.

On the other side of the street, Ben still watched him, staring in horror and—Samuel hoped—a little curiosity.

“I’m sorry to you, too.” Samuel began, before Ben regained his senses and ran again. “I truly have no desire to frighten you, believe me. Please, trust me.”

Ben’s eyes widened impossibly at that. Samuel pressed on, certain that this remarkable and unexpected window of opportunity would be small.

“I mean you no harm, I promise. I just wish to talk to you. I just want you to listen to me. Please.”

“I’m not Ben,” the man on the other side of the street mumbled, looking away, one pale hand rising to his temples. “I’m Jake. I’m not Ben. I don’t know any Ben.”

“All right. Jake, then.” The word tasted odd, but at that point Samuel would have called the other man anything he chose. What did names matter when the one he’d been waiting for, so horrendously long, was a scant few feet from him? “I am Samuel—“

“Gilbert,” Jake said dully, as though it was an everyday occurrence to recall a long-lost lover’s name. “Samuel Gilbert, right?”

“Yes, that’s correct.” Samuel nodded, before lowering his gaze as the implications of Jake’s knowledge occurred to him. “If you know my name, then you must know—“

“I Googled you.” Jake shrugged, another flash of pain dancing across his face. He closed his eyes briefly, but clearly didn’t need to see Samuel’s perplexed expression to realize the strange term was lost on him. “Never mind. I found some information about you. About your disappearance.”

“Ah.” Samuel rubbed a hand across the back of his neck. Perhaps Jake didn’t know all the details, in that case. “Yes, well. As you can see, that’s not quite, ah...”

Jake shook his head, holding up a hand to pre-empt Samuel finishing off that half-constructed thought.

“I can’t do this out here.” Jake turned for the door. “Come on. Right now, if you’re gonna kill me then you might put me out of my misery. I have nothing to lose.”

Bewildered and bemused by the remark—much of this age, and this man, bewildered him, he realized wryly--Samuel nonetheless followed, helpless to fight this turn of events. Had he not wished, hoped, yearned for this? He ought to grasp it with both hands, and yet something made him hesitate; perhaps it was the pallor of Jake’s skin, or the husky edge of pain in his voice.

“Are you all right, Jake?”

Jake turned, stared at him. “Yeah. Fine. Why?”

Samuel offered a small smile; Jake was as terrible as liar as Ben had been. “You appeared a little unwell.”

“I’m fine,” Jake repeated, even less vehemently, sending Samuel a look that, had he been up to the game, he should have interpreted with little difficulty. “I just want to get this over with.”

Not entirely the admission Samuel had hoped for, but how could he complain when Jake opened the door that led from that small room with the doorbells and speaker, inviting him into the residence proper? He gazed around the Spartan, utilitarian lobby, and a pang of longing raced through his blood for his estate, for his home, for the things he remembered.

Perhaps B--*Jake* didn’t remember those things any longer. He couldn’t, if he was content with this.

But then, his Ben had never been one for trappings. That had been Samuel’s province alone.

In a narrow hallway that reminded Samuel of the boarding houses where some of the theatre people stayed, Jake opened another door, gesturing for him to enter with the barest tilt of his head.

Even looking moments from keeling over, he was still lovely, Samuel thought. Gold hair that gleamed even in this dim and paltry light, blue eyes a little too bright, betraying a pain Samuel was yet to understand, but feared he’d caused somehow.

I always cause you pain, don't I?

He paused, helpless to keep from reaching out, fingers brushing Jake's cheek. With a sharp intake of breath, Jake stared at him, accusing and as confused as Samuel felt.

"If I could have stayed away from you, if I could have refrained from causing you any further pain, my love, then I would have. Believe me. Hurting you is the last thing I ever wanted."

Close enough to feel the shush of Jake's breath, Samuel allowed those beautiful eyes to transport him back to easier times. If he closed his eyes, he could hear the applause of the crowd, smell the dust and paint of the theatre. He could feel the wind in his hair as he raced the Sunbeam down country lanes, Ben laughing at his side.

Jake pushed him away, glaring. "I'm not Ben."

As Jake strode into the room, Samuel sighed, running a hand through his hair. "Of course. I'm sorry."

The flat was more comfortably appointed than its exterior suggested. After the previous night's escapades, Samuel longed to sit and rest, but resolved to wait until Jake invited him to do so; this age might have lost its manners, it certainly didn't mean Samuel had to discard his.

Jake appeared to have no intention of inviting Samuel to do anything. Without a word, he crossed the room to a small galley kitchen filled with odd machines and utensils, and rummaged through the bag he carried.

Samuel blinked, saw Clarence rummaging through his briefcase. Blinked again, saw Jake retrieving a small rattling container. He watched, silent and patient while Jake filled a glass with water, emptying some of the container's contents into his palm. Medicine, Samuel judged.

"You aren't well," he said.

Jake swallowed the pills, brushing off the concern with a half-hearted wave of his hand.

"You should rest," Samuel said. He'd seen that bravado far too often to believe it was anything other than Ben's stubborn resolve, refusing to accept help or show weakness. "We can talk later."

"We talk now." Jake's voice was breathy, hoarse. He leaned against the edge of the counter, eyes squeezed shut. "And then you get the hell out of here."

"Jake—"

Blue eyes snapped open, staring at him as though that new name was the last thing Jake had expected to hear.

“What do you want with me?” The desolation in Jake’s voice broke Samuel’s heart all over again, just like Ben had done that damp, foggy Halloween morning. It was a different kind of pain—he hoped nothing would ever feel as hopeless and fathomless as the chasm that opened in his soul when he found Ben that morning—but a familiar pain, nonetheless. “What do you...?”

“Jake?”

Those lovely eyes fluttered closed, as Jake’s hold on the counter—the only thing holding him standing, Samuel realized a moment too late—wavered, and he teetered briefly before his knees buckled, limp body about to crash to the ground.

Samuel barely caught him before he hit the floor.

Part Four

Jake woke and stretched, bleary gaze squinting up at the living room ceiling. He couldn’t remember falling asleep on the couch, but at least the pounding migraine had dulled to a tolerable—

Wait...

He sat up, head protesting feebly.

“Jake,” Samuel said, smiling at him from the mismatched easy chair. “I’m so relieved you’re awake.”

If it had been something serious, Jake thought, would Samuel have thought to take him to the ER? Probably not. Jake doubted it was the done thing in Samuel’s day.

In his day? Am I really believing this crap?

Running a hand through his hair, he slumped back against the chair.

“Jake—“

“Look, just tell me whatever you wanted me to hear.”

“But you’re—“

“I’m fine.”

Samuel had the tenacity to fold his arms over his chest, and raise an eyebrow. “Pardon me, Jake, but last time you said that, you keeled over ten seconds later. Permit me to take that statement with a grain of salt.”

Jake caught himself before he pouted. “Yeah well, I mean it this time.” Samuel looked at him skeptically, and Jake frowned. “Honestly. The keeling over wasn’t good for me either, you know.”

It didn’t quite appease Samuel, judging from the continued quirk of one dark brow, but at least he gave up arguing.

“Very well.” Samuel sat back. “Where would you like me to start?”

A million places, Jake thought. There wasn’t a single part of this entire situation that he understood, and only Samuel had the answers.

“Who are you?”

“It would appear that you know much of that already.” Samuel smiled wryly. “I’m Samuel Gilbert. I am—was, a magician.”

Jake tilted his head. “Pulling rabbits out of hats kinda magic?”

Samuel chuckled softly. “Amongst other things, yes. I preferred doves to rabbits, though.”

“But Samuel Gilbert disappeared.” Jake shook his head. “You’re saying you didn’t? You were, what, trapped in that coffin in the Halloween store the whole time?”

He was asking too many questions, snapping them out like gunfire, and Samuel certainly looked the part of the guy in the firing line. When Samuel stood abruptly, Jake couldn’t help but flinch, but Samuel walked past him, stopping at the living room window and pulling back the blinds. Jake knew the view that greeted him, the darkening cityscape, glitter and gloom under a smoggy sky.

“What year is it?”

As far as odd questions went, that had to rank a ten, maybe ten and a half.

“Two thousand eight,” Jake said.

Samuel’s gaze snapped up meet Jake’s. He let go of the blinds, and they clattered back into place, swaying gently.

“I know it was a long time,” Samuel began softly, “but...”

There was a lost bewilderment in dark eyes that couldn't be faked, Jake thought, even if Samuel was the best actor in the world. Guilt. Guilt and longing, a yearning for something—some *time*—he'd lost.

Jake saw that look in his own eyes sometimes, when the man in the mirror looked like a stranger and he longed for a way to go back, make different choices.

But then he wouldn't have been Jake if he had; he wouldn't have been honest to himself, and in the calm spaces where nothing seemed so terrible, he could admit that living with the fear was a better option than living a half-life, living a discontented lie.

“Sit,” he told Samuel, getting up and heading for the kitchen. Getting two glasses out of the cupboard, he filled one with water, and one with a shot of the only cheap whiskey he had in the apartment. Samuel looked like he needed a drink, and Jake seriously wished he could join in. Either way, he didn't feel in much mortal danger anymore. “Tell me how come you're coffin ended up at the Halloween store.”

Samuel, who'd surprisingly enough done as Jake asked, accepted the drink with a nod of thanks.

“Halloween store? The place we met, it's a shop of some sort?”

“Yeah.” Jake shrugged. “They sell...you know, costumes and decorations and stuff.”

Samuel canted his head, looking thoughtful. “Like theatrical supplies?”

“Ah, yeah, sort of.”

“In that case, I'm not sure how I came to be there.” Samuel paused. “Perhaps first I should tell you about Ben.”

Jake resumed his spot on the couch. There wasn't much Samuel needed to tell him on that score, not really. A guy didn't go around calling a total stranger ‘my love’ unless the one he'd mistaken you for meant a great deal to him. “He was your boyfriend?”

“My lover, yes.” Samuel fixed his gaze on his drink, swirling the dark gold liquid around the bottom of the glass as though he saw something at the bottom of his glass that Jake didn't. “He was a soldier in the war. It was what he wanted, he chose to go.” The defense struck Jake as desperate, as if Samuel was used to defending Ben. “He wouldn't have been able to live with himself had he not tried. But when he came home...”

An ice chill scratched down Jake's spine. His fingers tightened on the glass.

“He wasn't well,” Samuel said simply, after a moment's silence. “He wasn't the same. The things he'd seen, done...damaged him, I suppose. Damaged his soul, his heart. All I

wanted was for him to be well again.” He looked up, gaze locked on Jake’s as though willing him to believe. “All I wanted was for him to be the man he’d been.”

“How?” Jake asked, unable to summon more than a whisper.

This man couldn’t know. He couldn’t possibly know.

And if there was a way, would Jake take it?

Yeah, his soul whispered, *and see what it did to this guy? Would you be willing to sacrifice that much?* Sometimes, when the fear of intangible, old ghosts overwhelmed him, Jake thought he just might.

“I had a colleague—“ Samuel began, and Jake’s mind latched onto the article on the net—latched onto anything that didn’t leave him mired in his own thoughts.

“Clarence Francis.”

Samuel looked at him, eyes narrowed, dark and angry with a rage that Jake doubted was aimed his way. “Yes. He wasn’t like the rest of us. Unlike us, his magic was…” Samuel lowered his gaze. “Real. Dark, but real.”

“But there’s no such thing—“

Samuel smiled wryly, and Jake all but shrank back into his seat.

“I beg to differ, Jake. Proof that it was all too real sits here before you now.”

Deciding that answering that remark either way was far beyond his scope for reasoning, Jake asked, “So what happened? Didn’t it work?”

“Oh, it worked.” Samuel’s smile became sadder still. “It worked perfectly. That’s the problem.”

* * *

Jake stared at him mutely, but Samuel’s memory slipped back several notches, back to that stormy October evening, far, *far* too long ago.

He remembered his utter confusion at Clarence packing away his potions and tools, getting to his feet with a brusque nod.

“But—“

“It’s an enchantment, my boy,” Clarence smiled wryly. “It isn’t a divine miracle. Give him a day or two.”

“You didn’t tell me that.”

“No,” Clarence agreed mildly. “I didn’t, did I?” He closed the nondescript briefcase containing some of the most esoteric items Samuel had ever seen with all the calm of a factory worker clocking out. “Watch him. If nothing comes of it in a day or two, come and see me.”

He followed Clarence to the door in silence, an odd combination of disappointment and relief running through his veins. Yes, nothing had happened, but on the other hand *nothing had happened*. If the worst repercussion of this was that Ben remained exactly as he was, then Samuel thought they might escape relatively unscathed.

And if he improved...well, Samuel would gladly pay the price for Ben’s happiness.

“Oh, and Samuel?” Clarence paused at the door. “Please don’t miss your performance next Friday. We’ll discuss payment terms then.”

The house seemed eerily silent when Clarence’s car drove away. Samuel dismissed the servants for the evening, and headed back to the drawing room.

Putting either of them to bed seemed a monumental task for which Samuel had neither energy nor motivation. He couldn’t stand the idea of being apart from Ben, even in adjoining rooms, not now. If there was any change, and Samuel missed it, he’d never forgive himself.

Tucking Ben’s blanket more snugly around his still-unresponsive form, Samuel knelt back at his lover’s side, resting his head on Ben’s lap.

“Sleep, my love. Sleep and it will all be better in the morning.”

He hadn’t expected sleep to claim him so quickly, but the strain of the evening—the strain of it all, truth be told—took its toll. And perhaps he dreamed, but would never recall the contents.

Perhaps a happy dream, he thought later. He hoped so, anyway.

He awoke to a hand resting gently on his hair, trembling with every breath. Samuel sat up, reaching for that hand and grasping it tightly.

“Ben?”

Ben—*his Ben!*—stared down at him, tears tracking down his face.

“What did you do, Samuel?” Ben shook his head. “What did you do?!”

Samuel blinked, struggling to find his voice. “Helped you. Healed you.”

Ben shook his head again, more vehemently, like a horse tossing its mane to ward off flies. “No...”

As Samuel continued to kneel at his side, Ben stood. It was the tall, graceful character Samuel remembered him to be that walked over to the window, none of the past weeks’ listlessness or sluggishness present. The fog closed in overnight, and the drizzle only exacerbated the hideous morning.

“You have no idea what you’ve done, do you?” Ben turned to him, eyes wild for a brand new reason. “I can feel it, Sam. In my blood, in my soul. It’s...unnatural. It’s *wrong*.”

“No.” Samuel got to his feet. “It can’t be wrong. It’s brought you back to me, don’t you see? Everything’s back as it should be!”

“At what price?” Ben stared at him. “Sam, I should never have come back at all, can’t you accept that? Prolonging it by such...such *dark* measures is just—“

“Yes, you should!” Samuel strode to Ben’s side, hands on his lover’s shoulders, a breath from shaking him. This wasn’t how it should have gone, damn it all! “You’re meant to be here by my side!”

“And so you turn me into a monster?” Ben whispered. “I can feel it. It’s not me. There’s something...” He clawed at Samuel’s hands, shoving him away, moving to stand behind the heavy oak desk, putting himself between Samuel and the door. “It isn’t meant to be, it isn’t meant to be...”

“Ben...”

“I didn’t want this, Sam! I never asked for this!”

When Ben turned and fled, Samuel was still to immobile from terror and delight in equal parts to react quickly enough. Before giving chase, his gaze landed on the other side of the desk, where Ben had stood, and the open drawer.

The pistol Samuel kept there was missing.

No...

He heard the sound of the front door rattling, Ben fighting against the locks and bolts until the old doorway opened. Samuel raced after him, heart hammering, nausea coiling in his stomach.

It wasn't meant to be that way. Ben should have been glad, happy, they should have been together. He wasn't supposed to be chasing his lover like a frightened, cornered animal who'd rather chew through its own paw than remain in this trap.

A trap I laid. This was all what I wanted. It was all about me.

Shaking off that terrible thought, he shoved through the door, running down the steps into the garden, following the path of disturbance through the grass and flowerbeds, lips and heart screaming desperately for his lover.

“Ben...*Ben!*”

No answer. There'd never be an answer.

Never. Just endless dark.

“Samuel?” A hand pressed against his arm.

—a hand resting gently on his hair—

He froze.

—reaching for that hand and grasping it tightly—

“Samuel.” More insistent this time.

Ben. No, not Ben. *Jake.*

“I didn't think,” he heard himself say. “I didn't stop to think that he wouldn't want it too. I thought...”

When he couldn't go on, Jake spoke for him instead.

“What happened?”

He couldn't put it into words, the dread of following Ben's footprints across the dew-sparkled lawn, tracking through mud and dirt into the woodland beyond the house. There could never be any articulation for the wrenching pain of hearing the single gunshot deep in the trees, shattering the stillness of the morning. Birds squawked, rising up into the lead gray sky, and Samuel remembered falling to his knees, remembered the way his scream never did drown out the ringing and rushing of his blood in his head.

“Samuel...” A hand cupped his cheek, long cool fingers smudging moisture he could barely feel.

“He died.”

* * *

A man who meant him harm wouldn't cry that way over a memory. There wasn't a whole lot Jake knew about the past day's events, but of that he was certain. Samuel's eyes were haunted with an unspeakable pain, and Jake read between the lines of all the things he couldn't say with those two words.

There was plenty he couldn't say himself.

I understand.

Were his ghosts the reason Samuel mistook him for Ben in the first place? Could this stranger see the same pain in Jake, the same fears?

He had no answers, and even less comfort to offer, but he couldn't help closing the distance between them, pressing his lips to Samuel's.

The last vestige of the crazy idea that this man was a ghost vanished with the first brush of Jake's mouth against Samuel's, warm, gentle lips parting in a soft sigh of surprise beneath his. The cheek under his palm was cool, damp, but reassuringly real.

Samuel breathed his name, another whisper of heat against Jake's lips.

He should have stopped, pulled back, thought about what he'd just done. Samuel didn't want him, Samuel wanted Ben, wanted whatever ghost of his lover he saw in Jake.

But he didn't want to stop. Stopping meant having to think, meant having to make the vaguest attempt to wrap his mind around reason and rationale that eluded him.

No stopping. He could live with being Ben for a little while, if it meant Jake could forget and Samuel lost that awful pain in his eyes.

"Jake," Samuel said again between kisses, as if he'd only just realized that Jake had moved from the couch to sit on the chair's armrest. It still wasn't close enough. "What are...?"

"Ssh." Both hands cradling Samuel's face, Jake's kisses became nuzzles, closed-eye mapping of Samuel's face by touch alone. "This is what you want, right?"

If Samuel protested, Jake didn't hear it; everything beyond his awareness evaporated the moment Samuel's arms wrapped around his waist, tugging Jake off the armrest and onto his lap with a fervor that bordered on desperation.

So what if he's not desperate for me?

It was easy to forget Ben in the heat of Samuel's kisses. Easy to forget the headache, work, Carrie, the rest of the world. Hands in Jake's hair, stroking and tangling, Samuel kissed him as though—

As though he's waited a lifetime for this.

Maybe he had. Dazed by kisses, lips tingling with playful nips and sweet licks, his body drowned out the common sense that suggested exercising caution was a wise move.

Caution be damned. He could lose himself in this. Samuel could chase away the fear.

He heard Samuel murmur something against his lips as Jake slid a hand between their bodies, fingers catching on the soft, clearly expensive fabric of Samuel's shirt. He hadn't paid much attention before, but it didn't much look like something Samuel could pick off the rack today. The high collar looked as though it should have hosted a cravat or some elaborate kind of tie.

It was just as easy to open as any regular shirt, though, much to Jake's relief.

Samuel hissed a breath when Jake's hands found skin, and Jake swore he felt an odd electrical charge licking his fingers with every caress.

Hunger, he thought. Just hunger, just a desire for something he'd never get with Carrie. She did the best she knew how, he couldn't fault her on that, but he'd never feel this way with her. Never feel protected. Never feel as though, for a second, nothing could ever scare him again.

Samuel's embrace was fierce, protective, and in that moment Jake felt a deep, vicious envy for whoever Ben had been before his demise. Anyone who left a longing this profound, and just threw away any attempt his lover made to help him didn't deserve better.

He let his hand skim down Samuel's chest, savoring warm skin that, along with the arousal just nudging the inside of his thigh, told him he was most definitely dealing with a flesh and blood creature.

"Wait." Samuel pressed one hand, flat-palmed, against Jake's chest, not quite pushing away. Just getting his attention. "Perhaps you should be resting."

"I don't want rest." Jake settled himself more snugly on Samuel's lap. If he'd been thinking at all, he'd have realized it felt much too comfortable—much too familiar—in this man's arms. Maybe he'd been waiting for this for a lifetime too.

I wish I was the one you were looking for.

“Jake,” Samuel said. His name again, not Ben’s. Damn it.

“You don’t have to call me that, you know.” Catching the hands that restrained him, albeit gently and carefully, Jake pinned Samuel’s wrists to the armrests.

“But—“

Grinding his hips down, knees sinking into the gaps in the cushion between Samuel’s thighs and the sides of the chair, Jake dug his fingers harder around Samuel’s wrists. Holding on. Keeping this man near, whatever the consequences.

Please, just make me forget. Just make me remember...

Maybe it was ghosts and magic. Jake didn’t think he’d mind much if it was.

“You can call me Ben.” He nipped the skin beneath Samuel’s earlobe, tasting a crispness like a winter breeze and the tang of some fancy cologne. Nothing a ninety-year-old ghost should taste like. “I won’t mind.”

Samuel stiffened beneath him, but not in the way Jake would have liked. As he shifted on Samuel’s lap again, he could feel the hardness burgeoning against him, feel the heat of Samuel’s body, hear the quickened pace of his breathing.

Yet he’d stopped.

He let go of Samuel’s hands, only for them to wrap around him, pulling him close.

“I’m sorry,” Samuel murmured against the crook of his neck. “Whatever you may believe, this isn’t the reason I sought you out.”

Jake shrugged, suitably mortified at the dawning awareness he’d just flung himself into the lap of a total stranger. And yet... “Doesn’t matter. I can’t give you what you wanted anyway, so...”

“What do you mean?” Samuel leaned back a little, staring up at Jake. “I wanted nothing more than to meet you.”

Disentangling himself, Jake stood, rearranging his clothes. He wanted a shower. He wanted to sleep for a year. He wanted to be far, far away from this man.

“You wanted Ben,” he said, arms wrapping around himself as though to ward off a chill. He walked over to the window, putting distance, and some furniture for good measure, between himself and Samuel. “And I’m not.”

“But—“

“I thought it wouldn’t matter. But it does, doesn’t it?”

It’s not me you want.

“Very well,” Samuel said, voice stiff with forced calm and politeness. “If that’s what you want. I apologize once more for troubling you. If nothing else, please believe your happiness is all that matters to me.”

“My happiness?” Jake managed a weak laugh. “Don’t you mean Ben’s happiness?”

No answer. Jake felt a chill swirling around the room, as if he’d opened a window and let in the cold evening air. It felt a little like being out on a cold, murky morning. For a second he believed that anything he touched in his own apartment might feel cold and damp with dew.

Something cracked, like a gunshot, and the air left Jake’s lungs on a single breath of pure panic.

No. Oh, God no, not now...please, please...

When he turned around, Samuel had vanished.

Part Five

The apartment was empty. So was the hallway, and the elevators, the stairwell and the lobby.

Impossible. No one disappeared.

Standing on the silent, empty street outside his building, Jake wondered if that was true. He scanned the desolate street, seeing no sign of life besides the highway traffic that sulked and rumbled by at the intersection at the far end of the block.

He used to love the highway lights, once. He used to love the night-time itself, watching the world go by in a haze of light and noise. Now, the traffic a hundred yards away was about a hundred yards too close.

Samuel...

What the hell did he expect, when he’d all but admitted that he didn’t care if Samuel fucked him while thinking about his long lost beloved Ben.

No. Jake ran a frustrated hand through his hair. It felt too impersonal calling it fucking; it was a cold, distant term for the tenderness in Samuel's eyes, in his kisses.

Tenderness for Ben.

Damn. This jealousy of a dead guy was really a new low.

And even if Samuel came back, Jake had no idea what to say to him.

As the adrenaline and heat of Samuel's touch faded, the anxiety at being out alone on a dark street resurfaced like the déjà vu echoes of a bad dream. The windows seemed more sunken than usual, the alleyways seemed darker.

Jake shook himself out of it; he wasn't going to find Samuel if he allowed himself to succumb to these stupid damn fears. Not now.

Samuel made him stronger. As long as he remembered that, he'd be fine. He'd be—

“Hey, mister. Trick or treat?”

Most people got elementary school kids showing up at their doors in messy witch or ghost costumes. Most people had plastic pumpkin shaped buckets shoved under their noses, whiny little voices demanding candy in the way only the entitlement generation could.

Jake, he was beginning to realize, wasn't most people. Just like he didn't get an ordinary stalker, he got the bratty high-schoolers whose costume consisted only of a Jason mask and buckets of attitude.

He hoped they didn't see how badly they'd spooked him.

“I don't have anything with me. Sorry.”

He tried walking briskly back towards the apartment, but the kids followed him. Out of the glow of the streetlight, they looked far more sinister than Jake knew them to be. His panic didn't care, revving up the adrenaline and the jitters irrespective of his slender grip on common sense.

“Aww, c'mon, man,” one of the kids said. “You gotta have somethin'.”

Pretending not to hear—not hard, it wasn't easy to hear them speak past his pounding heartbeat—Jake kept walking. He couldn't remember how many of them there were in the group, four, maybe five, and he sure as hell wasn't in any state to be taking on a bunch of teenagers. He might only have been ten years older than them, but he felt fifty years older.

“Hey.” The tone took on a harsher edge, less playful. “Don’t just frickin’ walk away, asshole.”

Jake walked faster, almost breaking into a run. “I said I don’t have anything. Leave me the fuck alone.”

“C’mon, you live here, right?” The menacing tone continued, Jake’s fear making it lisp and drawl, sibilant and dangerous. “We can go with you, if you wanted. Pick up some cash, maybe some beer.”

The others laughed, sharp sounds like the whiz of a bullet shattering glass.

“No.”

“Aw, don’t be like that, man.” A different voice, no less threatening. In Jake’s head, the sweetest endearment would be threatening about now.

It occurred to him that potentially, the reality of things was nothing like he perceived it to be. Maybe the kids were just playing around. Maybe Jake’s stalker really was an undead magician.

Maybe he really was going absolutely crazy.

“I said leave me alone,” he muttered, close enough now to the safe haven of his building that he could taste it. Yeah, they’d threatened to come in, but they couldn’t. Right?

Please, leave me alone...

“And I said, don’t fuckin’ walk away!”

A hand reached out, bone-cold fingers catching his sleeve. Jake’s blood ran like ice, nausea coiling in the pit of his stomach. Every incremental step felt as though he was in a funhouse, tilting left, right, up, down.

He turned sharply, hands flailing blindly to try and shake off his assailant.

“Get the fuck off me!”

The kids said something, but Jake couldn’t make out what it was. He’d turned for the building, stumbling and laboring his way towards the door. Just a little further.

Samuel...I can’t even come and look for you. Was Ben that pathetic, huh? You wouldn’t love someone that hopeless...

He tripped on the curb, landing hard on one knee, palms scraping the concrete sidewalk. The pain didn't even register, a small price to pay in an attempt to get away.

"Hey!" One of the kids yelled, but even as Jake tried to make the world stop spinning long enough to get to his feet, the yell turned into an abrupt cry of fear.

"Oh shit!" Another of the kids shouted, as Jake heard thudding footsteps running past him. "Get the fuck out of here!"

Jake listened till the footsteps faded, and all that remained was the sound of his breathing, the rustle of his clothes against the cold sidewalk. He tried to push himself up, but the grazes on his palms finally began to sting with the effort.

Shit...

He closed his eyes, too exhausted to do anything else. Whatever had scared the kids off, he'd take his chances with it.

Just before the dizziness roared around him, the world outside sounding like the rushing of a violent storm-swept tide, he thought, just maybe, he heard someone whisper his name.

* * *

He drifted in the dark, swimming and sinking with every breath. Up was down, fighting was drowning. The panic subsided into a low, roiling unease, until a hand reached through the darkness, warmth seeping into him from the gentle touch.

With all the soothing power of a sedative, the warmth infused him with calm and distraction, wrapping around him like a blanket until it was all he could focus on.

"Ben."

Jake opened his eyes, blearily, as though waking from the deepest dream. Samuel gazed down at him, eyes red-rimmed but his smile remained soft.

He tried to speak, to move, panicking to realize he couldn't. Samuel didn't seem to expect it of him, instead reached down again to brush quivering fingertips against his forehead, through his hair, down the side of his face. The touch felt warmer still, Jake thought, losing himself in it till he couldn't remember what frightened him anymore.

"I'm so sorry, Ben," Samuel said, little more than a whisper. "I'm so sorry, my love."

Before Jake could even ask why, the image shifted.

This time, he knew where he was before he even opened his eyes. Only one place smelled like cigars and old books woven through with a thread of cold fog.

At least Samuel looked happier this time, he thought, opening his eyes to take in the drawing room he'd so often caught glimpses of in the past couple of days. Sensory memories, fleeting little ghosts compared to this surround-sound immersion.

“There...” Samuel finished tucking a blanket around his knees, then moved him over to a vast picture window looking out onto an equally impressive garden. Jake was used to a shelf of potted plants, ferns and cacti he regularly replaced after his unerringly black thumb killed them off. He'd never seen gardens like this outside of parks. Just out of his line of sight, he knew—without really knowing why—there was a huge ornamental fountain, horses and chariots spewing cold frothy water into the autumn sky. “Will you be all right while I'm gone?”

Jake couldn't reply here, either. The briefest of moments brought a look of anxiety to Samuel's dark eyes, and he rested his hands over Jake's.

No, over Ben's.

“I have to go, love. I wish to speak to Clarence tonight, and besides...your doctor told us that the best thing for you is to keep doing as we've always done, didn't he?” Samuel touched his cheek, leaned in to kiss his hair. “If we do this, then perhaps...”

Perhaps things would get back to normal. Samuel didn't say it, but Jake knew. He had a feeling Ben did too; another fear underlay his own, a tension that spoke of disappointment, disillusionment and despair.

He stilled, giving Samuel the only sign of acquiescence he could, given the circumstances.

“Good.” Samuel smiled, though Jake could see the feather-edges of anxiety tightening his eyes. “I'll hurry back, I promise.”

The image shifted again.

So distracted by the full control he had over his limbs, Jake stumbled mid-walk, only for someone to catch his elbow.

“Careful,” Samuel laughed, touch lingering along his arm as he let go. “It'll be hard to explain if we go back with your face all bashed in.”

“Oh, please.” The words weren’t Jake’s, but they came as naturally as breathing, as though he was acting out someone else’s script. “As if anyone would believe you could bash anyone’s face in!”

“Oh that’s how it is, is it?” Samuel grinned, stepping in his path and winding his arms around Jake’s waist before he could pull away. “I see.”

A warm breeze blew, carrying with it the scent of summer flowers. Jake looked around, taking in the overgrown country lane, tree-lined and shaded. In the gaps between the trees, a sun-drenched meadow, busy with a riot of red and yellow flowers, led off towards a small village, where a pale church spire jabbed up into a pristine blue sky.

“This is beautiful,” he murmured without thinking. “So peaceful.”

Samuel held him close, face buried in the crook of Jake’s neck. Jake felt the sigh more than heard it.

“Yes, it is. This is what you’ll leave behind, you know.” Samuel turned his head, lips brushing the side of Jake’s neck. “I’m what you’ll leave behind.”

“Sam...”

It wasn’t quite Ben’s conflicted thoughts Jake felt, and not quite his own, rather a weird overlapping of both. His soul knew that Samuel’s intentions would never be anything less than honest and true, but there was a desperation in the flutter of those lips against his skin that spoke of taking any steps, any measures necessary.

“No.” Samuel shook his head, hair tickling Jake’s jaw and sending flickers of pleasure skidding along his skin. “I know you must go, I stand by any decision you make, you know that, but...”

There wasn’t much Jake could say to that. There hadn’t been much Ben could say, either. Instead he just stroked Samuel’s hair, stared up at the tangled canopy of leaves and branches and sky.

“Jake,” a voice called. “Jake?”

The face hovering over his didn’t look much different from all the times before, but the worry creasing Samuel’s dark eyes made Jake wonder what horrific scene he’d landed in now.

Wait. Samuel just called him *Jake*.

For the second time in as many days, Jake saw the apartment ceiling from a whole new angle. It could do with a new coat of paint, he thought, trying to fill his head with anything but Samuel and the things he’d just experienced. If he thought too hard about

that, he was pretty sure his head might explode. Instead he tried focusing on how he'd gotten from the street to his couch.

Sitting up, he weakly brushed off Samuel's concern.

"Jake—"

"What happened?"

"Ah, well..." Samuel sat back, smiling wryly, one hand rubbing the back of his neck. "I think perhaps my appearance startled those youngsters..."

Jake paused at the term 'youngsters'. Samuel barely looked five years older than those kids himself, and neither he nor Jake should have been old enough to call teenagers 'youngsters'. Maybe in Samuel and Ben's day, Jake thought, when today's high school kids would have been the front line soldiers and factory workers, maybe the difference seemed that much greater.

"I'm not entirely sure how I returned," Samuel went on, "I only knew you needed me, and..." Another wry smile. "Here I am."

Closing his eyes, Jake just nodded. "The magic can do that?"

"Probably," Samuel said. "Foolishly, I never did enquire too much about the potential side-effects..."

Jake listened to the silence for a long moment, breathing in the peace and calm that came from this man's presence.

Denial was over. Something was going on beyond his scope of imagining, and the only way he'd come to terms with it all would be by embracing it. Believing it.

"You need to tell me everything," he said. "You need to tell me how you got into that casket. And you *really* need to tell me how I got you out of it."

* * *

Ben's family took the news of his death with remarkable grace. Far more than Samuel, that much was certain.

"Thank you, Samuel." Ben's mother, dabbing her eyes with a large kerchief borrowed from Ben's father, patted his arm as she left. "Thank you for all you did to take care of him."

All he'd done? Driven Ben to his death, that was the extent of Samuel's so-called help.

No one questioned it. The doctors suggested at one time or another that it might be a potential outcome—they'd experienced it with others in Ben's situation. No one blamed Samuel, even though it was all his fault.

Even the knowledge that Ben had hardly *lived* in his condition, not truly, helped ease any of the guilt. Samuel was the only one who'd seen the deterioration, day in and day out. If he stood back and did nothing...would the outcome be the same?

No one would blame him for pulling out of the show.

No one but Clarence.

Samuel wasn't sure how Clarence would incriminate him in Ben's death, not without giving his own secrets away, but he had no doubt the older man would, if Samuel reneged on their deal. But there wasn't a deal, not anymore. Samuel had nothing to show for it.

"Terribly sorry to hear about your friend," Clarence said, walking into the theatre dressing room before Samuel had a chance to say anything. "That's the risk we take sometimes, unfortunately."

Carefully arranging his neck-tie and cloak, Samuel did his best to keep his hands from trembling. "Well," he said softly, "I suppose now I can't possibly owe you payment for something that never happened."

"Pardon me?" Clarence narrowed his eyes. "I upheld my part of the bargain, lad. What came of it is of no consequence to me."

"No consequence?" Samuel hissed. "Ben is *dead*."

"And it was your choice to involve me, my boy," Clarence said. "You will pay the piper, Samuel. Balance must be struck."

Clarence strolled out, cigar smoke trailing behind him, as though they'd shared a conversation about the appalling weather they'd endured lately. Samuel let the tension leave him on a shuddering breath, a brief respite from the admission of his fate.

A price worth paying? How stupid.

"Ten minutes till curtain, Mr. Gilbert." One of the stagehands, a scruffy boy younger than Ben had been when he left for war, stuck his head around the doorway.

"Yes," Samuel said. "I know."

He all but sleepwalked through his show, relying on the by rote instinct that had his illusions and tricks memorized. The crowd either didn't notice, or didn't care, and Samuel suspected it was a combination of both. They cheered and gasped at all the right moments, though their awe couldn't reach him—he didn't think anything could, not anymore.

The finale of the Great Count Mirza's show, the trick that still gleaned his father some rather menacing letters demanding that he “control his abhorrent heathen of a child”, was named The Relentless Resurrection, and featured the lovely work of art that was his ebony coffin.

Real ones didn't cost as much, he'd learned. He still wished he didn't know.

As a prelude to the finale itself, he would close a small animal in the coffin, a mouse or a dove. With the close of the door, a small panel at the bottom of the box would open, closing off the live creature and allowing him access to a dead version, placed there previously. He would invite a member of the audience—usually the gruffest, most reliable looking gentleman he could find within the first two rows—to check on the authenticity of the dead creature, before putting it back. Closing the door once more would reverse the mechanism, revealing, upon opening the door a final time, the creature alive and well, apparently resurrected.

When that was done, he repeated the procedure. With himself.

Slanted mirrors and images of a grotesque corpselike dummy replaced the panels that opened and closed to reveal the dead, then very much alive, creature. He'd choose another member of the audience—this one a theatre worker in on the act—to open and close the door, and to announce fearfully to the audience that the Great Count Mirza was indeed, dead.

Stepping into the coffin never usually troubled him; he'd never been so closely accustomed to death as to fear the implications of his act.

He remembered gazing down at Ben in his coffin, so lovely and peaceful despite it all. The undertaker had indeed done a magnificent job. No one would guess the horrors he'd endured, just by looking.

When the door closed on him, muffling the sounds of the crowd outside, Ben's face was all he could see.

“Ben...” He whispered, closing his eyes.

He needed to flick the switch for the trick to proceed, but the tears threatened and all he could do was grope blindly along the wall for the concealed button that set things in motion. He'd be granted a moment's privacy, at least.

The sound of the crowd faded. Samuel frowned, opening his eyes. The reflection of the corpse peered back at him, twisting and changing until it took on Ben's features, beautiful at first, just as Samuel remembered him, but rapidly decaying, skin peeling, mouth opening in a silent scream.

"Ben!"

"Too late for him, I'm afraid." Clarence's voice came from everywhere, came from the dark itself. "As for you..."

"Clarence, please...!"

A sigh, a sound that permeated everything around him. "I truly wish it were too late for you, my boy. It would be much easier on you if it was."

Even though he couldn't see, could barely move, Samuel tried to twist around, trying to fathom where the voice came from. "What are you talking about? Clarence, stop this madness this instant! You can't scare me with your theatrics!"

"You know they are far from theatrics, lad." Despite it all, Clarence sounded resigned, weary. "I am not to blame for your misfortune. Perhaps you should have made certain your boy wanted to be saved before you went ahead and did so."

"You don't know what you're talking about!"

"Regardless. The due must be paid, Samuel. But in all good conscience I can't extract the full price for your choices. You've already gone some way towards settling your debt, and your intentions were true."

"I don't--!"

"It's a blessing you already own the vessel that will extricate payment," Clarence said. "It's a blessing you love this contraption so much. You and it will be well acquainted for some time to come."

The darkness deepened. Samuel had never dreamed such a thing was possible. Outside, he could just make out the muffled cries and shouts. "He's gone!" and the crowd's cheering. The stagehand's panic must have seeped into their blissful enjoyment, as the cheers became murmurs, became yells.

"What are you doing?"

"When he forgives you, my boy," Clarence said, which, Samuel noted, wasn't an answer at all. "When he forgives you your selfish sins, then you'll have paid the price."

"I don't understand!"

“One day he’ll find you. One day you’ll atone.”

“Clarence!”

No answer. The dark swept around him, like swimming in a cold lake at midnight. The noises faded till all he could hear was the rushing of blood in his head and the harshness of his own breathing.

Then nothing at all.

* * *

“And that was it? Till the Halloween store?”

“Not completely. I recall some instances where the coffin was opened, but nothing happened.” Samuel watched him carefully. “Not like you.”

“Because it wasn’t me.” Jake nodded, still a little numb and detached. He stared down at his hands, noticing the grazes had been cleaned off while he’d been out of it. “Because it wasn’t...”

Samuel sighed. “Jake, regardless of what you think, <I>you</I> were the one that woke me from that magic. You. Yes, I might have become confused and—“

“Do I look like him?”

“Yes,” Samuel nodded, “you look a great deal like him. But I’m in no way insinuating that—“

“I was a photographer, before.” Jake got to his feet, feeling a little steadier but by no means stable. “War zones, disasters, places of mass human suffering, you know...” He tried gamely for a depreciating smile. “The stuff that rakes in the money.”

Samuel just watched him. Jake found he couldn’t move too far away from him, as though Samuel himself created a field of something resembling serenity. Something that allowed him to talk.

“For a while I was okay with it, you know. I was making great money, I was traveling the world. People wanted my work. People wanted me, needed me for something. I thought for a while that...” He shook his head. “I don’t know. What I did mattered. Made a difference, somehow. People could see what was going on in places they’d barely even heard of, maybe some of that shit’d get fixed.”

“You felt...compelled to do this.”

It wasn't a question, but Jake decided to treat it that way. “Yeah. I guess. And I tried pretending it didn't faze me, wasn't getting to me more and more every day. I mean, I was just doing my job, right?”

“Jake...” Samuel stood, taking slow, tentative steps towards him.

“I didn't quit 'cause I wanted to. I just...people were telling me I was acting strangely, I'd have these...blackouts, memory lapses, whatever. Eventually my doctor told me that if I didn't quit, I'd end up with serious problems. 'Course by then, I already *had* serious problems...”

He didn't flinch when Samuel wrapped his arms around him, feeling as comforted by the action as he had in the dream, the memory, whatever he'd experienced.

“When I managed to get separated from the rest of the press party somewhere in Israel two years ago, and spent three days hiding in someone's basement 'cause I was convinced if I came out I'd be shot, they decided enough was enough. Sent me home, told me I had post-traumatic stress disorder...” He leaned back a little, enough to look up at Samuel. “I guess in your day that would've been called shell-shock or something.”

Samuel stared down at him, eyes narrowed. “Do they treat you better in this day and age?”

“Better?” Jake smiled a little. “Yeah, I guess.”

“Good.” Samuel drew him closer again, and Jake closed his eyes, cheek pressed against the soft warmth of Samuel's shirt.

“Why do I feel so safe when I'm with you?” His lips nuzzled the fabric with every syllable. He felt Samuel draw breath, release it with a soft sound of contentment.

“That, I don't know. But it doesn't have to be such a bad thing, does it?”

Jake shook his head, just as Samuel lowered his, their lips meeting in a ghost of a kiss, the contact little more than the movement of warm air.

“I was out there looking for you, you know.” His hands reached up to tangle in Samuel's hair. “I wanted you to come back, I wanted to explain, to apologize...”

He felt Samuel's smile in the brush of lips against his forehead, his cheek, his jaw. “You have nothing to apologize for, my love.”

Jake tilted his face up to claim Samuel's mouth again, the kiss no less gentle for its intensity. His arms wound around Samuel's shoulders, arching up against him as Samuel's embrace tightened.

"Sam..." Jake breathed.

Samuel froze, hands on Jake's shoulder, pushing him back till their eyes met.

"What did you just call me?"

Jake had to track back through his thoughts for a second, everything too jumbled by that odd cocktail of contentment and want.

"Sam," he said again.

Samuel's eyes darkened a shade deeper than their usual impossible depths, lips parting on a silent breath. When he spoke, his voice was rough with need, and hearing desire in that proper, precise accent made Jake's knees weak.

"Again."

"Sam." Jake let Samuel yank him closer, crushingly tight. "Sam..."

With a near inhuman growl, Samuel kissed him, deep and demanding, tongue tracing the seam of Jake's lips before yielding to the temptation and plunging between them.

He'd never been kissed like that before. Never been so overwhelmed by someone else's need, someone else's hunger. He should tell Samuel about the memories, he thought, but that could wait while they made some new ones.

There was no resistance this time when he unbuttoned Samuel's shirt, eager to feel the real, solid warmth of his lover's chest beneath his hands.

This was his. Somehow, in ways Jake couldn't explain. And equally, a part of his soul he'd always known searched, longed for something, belonged squarely to Samuel. He wouldn't be so foolish as to let him go twice.

No. Make that three times.

"Do you have...?" Samuel began, speaking against Jake's lips in between kisses, dark gaze darting around the room. "Should we, ah...?"

Simple to decipher the code, as if he'd been interpreting Samuel's words forever. Never quite letting go, never losing that warmth and contact, he led Samuel the short distance across the room towards his bedroom.

He managed a sheepish “Sorry,” as Samuel drew him close again, dismissing his worry with a smile and a kiss. If he’d known he’d have company, he’d have tidied up. As it was, he kept the mess around to antagonize Carrie.

Carrie. Jake vowed that, first thing in the morning, he’d call her up, explain things as best he could. He was already convinced she’d happily snag the attentions of a dozen guys if she went out dressed in that skimpy pixie costume. Besides, she’d known, she’d realized long before he had that Jake’s mind and heart were elsewhere.

He’d felt many things with Carrie, but that strangely sweet shyness wasn’t one of them. Perhaps he’d been Samuel’s lover decades ago, and perhaps his soul even remembered that, but his body felt every inch the new lover, anxious and anticipating all at once.

For someone who’d waited for this for ninety years, Samuel had the patience of a saint. The shaky rise and fall of his chest was all that betrayed his need as Jake pushed the shirt off Samuel’s shoulders, hands mapping the smooth, pale expanse of shoulders, arms, chest. Relearning something he already knew.

Samuel backed up against the edge of the bed, sitting down, arms wrapping around Jake’s waist as his lips nuzzled the thin cotton of Jake’s t-shirt. Funny how he’d never noticed the cold earlier, as though Samuel was still close by, wrapping him in warmth.

“I’m sorry...” Samuel whispered, but Jake knew it had nothing to do with any regret about the embrace.

It still didn’t feel like his place, but either way, he’d felt what Ben felt, knew the conflict that tore up his thoughts when it came to Samuel and the choices Ben made. Leaning down, lips against Samuel’s hair, he breathed, “I forgive you.”

Samuel’s arms tightened, lips pressing open-mouthed kisses through the fabric. Hands skimming up Jake’s back, he pushed up the fabric enough that lips brushed skin, sending sparks of sensation crackling through Jake’s blood.

“Jake.” The word was a vibrating purr, as Samuel’s lips moved toward the jut of Jake’s hipbone, teeth faintly scoring skin, kisses and licks soothing any imagined hurt. One hand clumsily unfastening Jake’s jeans, letting them shush down his legs to pool at his ankles, Samuel muttered something about garments in this day and age, and Jake laughed.

Pausing in his task, Samuel looked up at him, smiling softly, *happily*, and even as his body thrummed, fever hot, taut as a guitar string stuck in a fireplace, Jake’s thoughts tumbled back, latching onto another time he’d seen Samuel smile that way.

He recognized the field of flowers, red and gold dancing around him on a sweet summer breeze. There was a blanket beneath him, but he could still feel the thick lush movement of the grass through it as Samuel moved above him, all pale, sun-warmed skin and insistent kisses.

Ben. Jake. It didn't matter. He was one and the same, and in that moment, wherever it was lost in time, he was Samuel's world.

"Sam," he murmured, then and now, hands tightening in his lover's hair as Samuel's kissed tracked down his body, lavishing attention to every inch of skin he could reach. Kisses to the inside of his elbows, his wrists, the jut of a hip, the vulnerable soft skin of his inner thigh.

The sun beat down, warm and bright enough that Jake had to close his eyes, but Samuel's mouth was hotter as it closed around his arousal, wet and tight and perfect and so achingly familiar that Jake cried out, and his thoughts spiraled again.

In his apartment, Samuel pressed him back into familiar sheets, but in Jake's head, there was an oak tester bed, rich dark red damask sheets, and a roaring fireplace. Firelight danced across Samuel's bare skin, making the sheen of sweat sparkle like lamp light on snow. His hair was in his eyes, darkness shadowing an even darker gaze, but Jake knew what he'd see there if the glow of the fire banked light into Samuel's face. Passion. Tenderness. Love. Jake's legs parted around Samuel's hips, ankles crossed to lock them together, and the hard heat that pressed against him, pressed into him, was sweeter than meadow flowers, hotter than the raging fire.

Safe, but intense in its thrill. Like coming home, but like the first tentative exploration of an unknown land.

This, this was what he'd waited for. This was what he'd searched for, and with every kiss, every touch, every thrust, the fear melted away like ice in the face of a blazing sun, a roaring fireplace.

Now, and then, he clung to Samuel, arching up to meet every erratic shift of his lover's hips, any trace of resistance or hesitation faded to nothing. Just the need. Just the desperation to bridge a gap that at once seemed impossible, and seemed to disappear with every second, like a bumpy country road beneath thin, speeding tires.

It would never be enough, and there'd never be enough time to make up for what they'd lost, but when Samuel's hips stilled, thrust driving deeper into Jake than he'd ever known, something shattered inside his soul that made the time apart irrelevant.

They had forever. In flower fields, in dark fire-lit rooms, in the familiar detritus of Jake's apartment, where the headlights from the highway cast striped shadows on the ceiling, and his body tensed beneath Samuel's as the climax hit with the tenderness of petals, the ferocity of flames, and the sweet lick of magic.

And, as they lay in each other's arms, silent save for their heartbeats, the push and pull of breathing, inhale and exhale, the digital clock on the nightstand beeped midnight.

Jake smiled, burrowing into Samuel's arms.

Maybe those old ghosts would rest easy tonight.

END