Sweet Poison Wine

An InCryptid Story
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by

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The mice surrounded the crib in a ring three-deep, watching raptly as the baby slept. Occasionally, he would kick his little feet or scrub at his face with a tiny fist. Every time this happened, the mice would give a muted cheer, pitched softly enough not to wake him.

Fran stood in the doorway, her travel valise clutched in one hand and an anxious expression on her face. “I’m just not sure he’s ready for this.”

“Daniel will be fine,” said Enid firmly, taking her daughter-in-law by the elbow and steering her away from the room. “Alex and I have plenty of experience with infants. He’s two months old, and that’s plenty old enough to spend a few days with his grandparents while his mama and papa go off and have their honeymoon.”

“But—”

“The mice will be here too, and you know they’d never let anything happen to that little boy. They’d die before they let him come to harm.”

Fran’s face twisted, like she couldn’t decide whether she wanted to smile or scowl. “Rodent babysitters aren’t exactly the norm, Enid.”

“In this family, they are.” Enid continued to guide Fran down the hall. “You and Johnny are married now. You deserve a little time alone with each other to figure out exactly what that means.”

“But—” This time, Fran cut herself off before Enid could do it for her. “I’m just not sure that I’m ready for this.”

“You’re not.” Enid let go of Fran’s elbow when they reached the top of the stairs, smiling at the younger woman. “Here’s a secret, though: you never will be. He’ll grow up a little more every day until it’s you wiping away tears at the back of the wedding hall, and you still won’t be ready. So right now what you need to do is go on your honeymoon, and trust that between me, Alex, and the mice, we can keep a baby intact for a week.”

Slowly, Fran began to nod. “I was taught that it’s rude to argue with my elders,” she said. “I guess that means I ought to listen.”

“I guess it does,” agreed Enid. “Now get your behind down the stairs before the train leaves without you.”

Only stealing one glance back at the bedroom where her infant son was sleeping—attended by a congregation of worshipful mice—Frances Healy laughed and went running down the stairs.

Enid followed more sedately, shaking her head and smiling to herself. She couldn’t fault her daughter-in-law for her reluctance, or for her eagerness to get away for a little while, now that she was certain it was allowed. Fran had been too pregnant to see her own toes during the wedding, and while Enid would never dream of prying, she was quite sure that couldn’t have made for a satisfactory wedding night. And then Daniel had shown up, just as pretty as you please, and he hadn’t made things any easier, being a baby and all. Even the best baby in the world exists to make sure its parents don’t get any private time together, and Daniel was rather fonder of screaming his head off than some of the babies Enid had known. That was Fran’s side of the family showing through.

Jonathan was waiting at the base of the stairs, his own bag next to his feet. He was dressed in his usual traveling
attire: a plain brown suit that neither drew nor obviously deflected attention, sensible shoes, and a simple trilby hat. The suit had been fitted to him, naturally, and was designed to conceal a multitude of weapons, along with the garrotes hidden in the hat brim and the spare knives in the shoes. Jonathan had been born and raised a Healy. He knew better than to go anywhere unarmed.

At the moment, however, he didn’t look like a man who was thinking about weapons, or much of anything else for that matter. He was watching Fran come down the stairs and smiling to himself, and if anyone had ever questioned whether Enid Healy’s dour little boy could grow up to love a woman, that expression would have answered them right on the spot.

“Are you ready?” he asked.

“As I’ll ever be,” Fran said, stepping off the last step. “I had to get my throwing knives.”

Jonathan raised an eyebrow, studying her. Fran’s travelling clothes consisted of a blue cotton sundress under a white wool sweater, sensible heels, and a broad-brimmed straw hat. Finally, he asked, “Where did you put them?”

“I’ll show you in Chicago,” said Fran, and linked her arm through his.

Outside, Alexander Healy—who was driving them to Ann Arbor to meet their train, or would be, assuming they ever made it out to the truck—honked the horn. Jonathan sighed and looked up the stairs toward Enid.

“I suppose we’re off,” he said. “We’ll be at the Carmichael Hotel if you need us for any reason. We can be home almost immediately, if—”

“Johnny.” He stopped talking, run aground on the calm beach of his mother’s voice. Enid descended the stairs, arms crossed, looking at him levelly. “There won’t be any problems, and as I’ve just reassured Fran, your father and I know how to keep a baby alive. Now get out of here before he wakes up and you lose your nerve.” She made a small shooing gesture. “I’m serious. Get. I don’t want to see you for a week.”

“But—”

“Get.”

“Come on, city boy.” Fran tugged him toward the door. “I think she’ll start throwing things next.”

“See you in a week, Mother,” said Jonathan, as he allowed himself to be tugged.

“Stay longer if you want to!” Enid waved, and kept waving until the pair was safely outside, leaving her alone in the house with her grandson, and the mice. She dropped her hand and sat down on the stair behind her, letting out a small sigh of relief. The kids would have their honeymoon.

No matter what might come next—and she’d been dealing with the cryptid world for long enough to know that there was always something coming next—the kids would have their honeymoon. That was good enough for her.

Enid Healy closed her eyes, leaning sideways against the wall, and listened for the sound of her grandson waking
up.

The train ride from Ann Arbor to Chicago took a little under eleven hours, during which time they did not punch through into any parallel dimensions, were not attacked by imps or sprites of any kind, and did not have to share the private car that Jonathan’s parents had so thoughtfully hired for them. Instead, they spent the first hour carefully searching through their bags to be sure that Jonathan’s plea for a mouse-free honeymoon had been obeyed.

“I think we’re in the clear,” said Fran, finally beginning to refold her clothing.

“There’s only one test left to perform.” Jonathan stood up a little straighter, cleared his throat, and said, “I truly wish to learn the Catechism of the Well-Groomed Priestess.”

Silence answered this statement. Silence, and staring on the part of Fran, who was looking at him like he’d just grown a second head.

After waiting a full minute, Jonathan nodded. “Either we’re alone, or they’ve sent us a mute mouse. In either case, I declare this the closest we may ever have to privacy.”

“Who in the hell is the ‘Well-Groomed Priestess’?” asked Fran. “I thought Enid was the Patient Priestess.”

“She is, and you’re the Violent Priestess,” said Jonathan. “Remember that the mice have been with us for generations. My grandmother, Caroline, was the Well-Groomed Priestess. The mice learned quite a few tips on hair and wardrobe maintenance from her.”

“And see, I wondered why they had so many opinions on shampoo.” Fran closed her valise with a snap. “I guess it really is just you and me, city boy. Back on the road together.”

“Ah, but this time, our destination is not a horrible flesh rending creature of the night,” said Jonathan, sitting back down. Fran promptly moved to perch in his lap. He smiled as he slipped his arms around her waist. “Nor is it a biological oddity that demands my full attention.”

“I’m pretty odd,” said Fran, and kissed him.

The next ten hours seemed to pass with remarkable speed. Before they knew it, the conductor was calling ten minutes to Chicago, and the train was beginning to slow, the landscape outside becoming more and more defined. Fran moved to press her nose against the window while Jonathan was still doing up his trousers.

“It’s so big,” she marveled. “People really live here? Like this?”

“Since I doubt they maintain the whole place solely for the benefit of tourists, yes, I’m reasonably sure that people live here.”

Fran turned around and hit him with her hat.
Jonathan laughed as he pulled it from her hands and replaced it on her head. “I mean, yes, absolutely, my love, people live here. Happy, well-content people whom we will now go and visit in their natural habitat, which is absolutely not a sham.”

“Why did I marry you again?”

“To be honest, Fran, I have no idea. But I am thankful every single day that you did.”

Fran grinned at him. “Wait until we’ve been married a little longer, and then I’ll be impressed to hear you say that.”

“I intend to say it every day until I die.” Jonathan stood, moving to the cabin’s small vanity mirror in order to adjust his tie. “The Carmichael Hotel is very nice. I think you’ll enjoy it.”

“You keep saying that, and every time, I get a little bit more suspicious.” Fran removed her hat again, this time to finger-comb her hair and twist it back into a vague semblance of the tidy curls she’d started the trip with. “What’s wrong with the place? Is it owned by vampires or something?”

“Don’t be silly, Fran, vampires don’t exist.”

“Says the man who had to search his luggage for talking mice.” Fran put her hat back on and folded her arms. “What’s wrong with our hotel?”

“The mice have already turned Daniel’s conception into a holy ritual; did you really want them to come along on our honeymoon?” Jonathan picked up his trilby, removing a piece of lint from the brim. “As for the hotel, it’s owned by a very pleasant family that has lived in Chicago for several generations now.”

“Mmm-hmm. And they are...?”

“What makes you so very sure they’re not human?”

“I’ve met you, I’ve met your family, I’ve gone traveling with you before. It seems like the only time I see other humans is when I go into town to do the shopping.” The train shuddered to a stop, and the voice of the conductor shouting out the station drifted in from the hall. “Now what are they?”

“Gorgons,” said Jonathan, and opened the cabin door, stopping Fran’s protests before they could properly begin. Oh, no one would think anything of it if they heard her discussing mythology with her husband, but she knew better than to make a scene by arguing with him in public. Attracting attention at the very start of their honeymoon would just make it more likely that something would try to kill them before they were ready to go home.

That didn’t stop her from glaring as she took his elbow, squeezing a little too tightly in the process. Jonathan winced. Fran bared her teeth in the semblance of a smile.

“That sounds lovely, dear,” she said. “Let’s go meet your friends.”

“Yes, let’s,” he said, and led her off the train into the city of Chicago.
As Jonathan had expected, Fran’s annoyance had managed to last until they caught their cab outside the station, and she was distracted by the city itself. Chicago was a city more than capable of distracting visitors and residents alike, but for Fran, who had grown up in the west and then moved to the wilds of rural Michigan, it might as well have been the marvelous Land of Oz. The buildings were taller, the streets were more crowded, and the people were more fabulously dressed, moving along the sidewalks like a dozen types of exotic bird. Fran pressed her nose against the glass, still holding onto Jonathan’s arm—only now she was holding onto an anchor, not trying to express her sharp-nailed displeasure.

The cabbie chuckled, watching them in his rearview mirror. “Where are you kids in from?” he asked.

“Ann Arbor,” said Jonathan. “It’s our honeymoon.”

“Aw, that’s sweet. Chicago is for lovers.”

“So I’ve been told.”

The cabbie chuckled again, pulling off the main thoroughfare and onto a narrower street, following it until the flat mirror of the lake became visible between the buildings. He pulled to a stop in front of a four-story brownstone that looked like any other business, save for the discreet sign above the door that read “Carmichael Hotel.”

“I wondered if anyone ever stayed here,” he said. “How’s the lodging?”

“Terrible,” said Jonathan. “The beds are hard, the food is atrocious, and there are mice.”

The cabbie twisted in his seat to frown as he took the cash that Jonathan was offering him. “Then if you don’t mind my asking, why in the world would you bring such a beautiful young woman here for her honeymoon? Miss, if you decide you need to find yourself a better husband, you just look me up.”

“I’m thinkin’ about it right now, believe me,” said Fran, who was eyeing Jonathan with frank disbelief.

“The owners are friends of my father,” said Jonathan. “We’ve made a reservation for the weekend, to keep everyone happy, but we’re actually going to be in town for a week. We’ll be moving to a nicer hotel as soon as we’ve fulfilled our familial obligations.”

“Ah,” said the cabbie, understanding lighting his face. “Family’s hard sometimes. Well, you have a wonderful time, and Miss, please don’t judge our city by this rat-trap.”

“I’ll do my very best not to,” said Fran primly, and slid out of the cab, with Jonathan close behind. They retrieved their luggage from the trunk. Jonathan retrieved his change from the driver. And they stood outside the hotel, watching, as the cab pulled away.

Once they were alone, Fran slanted a look Jonathan’s way. He smiled a little. “Yes, I was lying,” he said.

“Why?”

“Because cabbies talk. It’s what they do. And one of the things they like to talk about is where people can stay
when they come to visit the city.” Jonathan picked up his suitcase and started for the hotel door. Fran paced him. “The Carmichael doesn’t need the business, and most of the people who would be likely to hear about the place wouldn’t be very happy if they came to stay here. They’d probably have the experience I just described.”

“But we won’t?” asked Fran dubiously.

“No, we won’t,” he said, and opened the door for her. “After you.”

Still eyeing him dubiously, Fran stepped into the lobby of the Carmichael Hotel.

It was a small, plain room, better suited to a tailor’s shop or bus station than a hotel. The wallpaper was old and faded, and the furniture looked like it would fall to pieces if someone sat down on it with too much force. There was a receiving desk, but there was no one there. Jonathan kissed her cheek as he walked past her and rang the tarnished brass bell.

“This isn’t building my confidence, Johnny,” she said.

“Have patience.” A minute ticked by while Fran glared at the furniture and Jonathan waited. Finally, he rang the bell again, this time waiting only a few seconds before he rang it a third time.

“I’m coming, I’m coming,” snarled an irritable female voice. A plump young woman with tinted green spectacles and a kerchief tied over her head emerged from the door behind the desk, glowering at the pair like they had inconvenienced her beyond all reason. Her features were strong and Greek, matching her olive skin, but she had no visible hair—not even eyebrows. “What do you want?”

“A room, please,” said Jonathan.

“We’re full,” snapped the woman.

“We have a reservation.”

“We lost it.”

“It’s under the name ‘Healy.’”

The woman’s demeanor changed instantly, scowl becoming a smile that lit up her entire face. “Johnny? Johnny Healy?” she demanded.

“The very same,” he said. “This is my lovely wife, Frances.”

“Hello,” said Fran suspiciously. “You would be...?”

The woman kept smiling as she said, “My name’s Asta Kalakos. This is my family’s place, and any wife of Jonathan’s is welcome here.”

“Asta, really?” Jonathan asked, sounding delighted. “You grew up!”

“So did you,” Asta replied. “My father will be thrilled to see you. Please, come with me.” She gestured for them to step behind the counter. Jonathan offered Fran his hand. After only a moment’s hesitation she took it, and they
followed the kerchiefed girl as she walked back through the door she had used to enter.

The hallway on the other side was virtually featureless, with a splintery bare wood floor and wallpaper so filthy that it made Fran’s skin crawl.

“Isn’t it a little odd to leave your lobby unattended?” asked Fran.

“Oh, it would be, if that was the lobby,” said Asta. “Here we are.” She stopped at a large oak door that looked entirely out of place in its surroundings. “Welcome to the Carmichael Hotel,” she said, and pushed the door open to reveal an opulently decorated lobby that looked like it took up the better part of the ground floor.

“Oh my word…” breathed Fran.

Grinning, Jonathan took her arm and led her inside, past the smug-looking Asta.

The décor was perhaps thirty years out of date, calling back to an era of decadence and plenty. The walls were draped with gold and brown velvet, and the carpet was so plush that even Fran’s sensible heels sank deep every time she stepped down. Small conversation nooks had been formed near the bar and the fireplace; their occupants looked up, tensing when they saw the young couple, only to relax again when they realized that Asta was following them.

A young woman who could have been Asta’s twin was standing behind the wide mahogany desk. She was wearing a brown and gold uniform that matched the lobby. That was not, however, what properly held Fran’s attention, or caused her to tighten her grasp on Jonathan’s arm to a painful degree.

“Johnny,” said Fran carefully, “that young woman has snakes instead of hair.”

“Yes,” said Jonathan. “You’ve met gorgons before. Remember Clark, from the train? He was a Pliny’s gorgon. The Kalakos family are lesser gorgons.”

“The snakes are bright orange.”

“That’s what I just said. Lesser gorgons.”

Asta passed them, removing her kerchief as she walked. The red and orange striped snakes atop her head promptly uncurled, stretching before settling into a more languid position. “It’s Johnny Healy,” she informed the other girl, sounding almost smug. “He got married.”

“No!” The girl with the orange snakes looked to Jonathan and Fran and asked, “What is she?”

“She’s human,” said Jonathan, sounding amused. “Hello, Chruse. We have a reservation for the honeymoon suite?”

“I saw that, but I thought it was your folks coming out for a little getaway.” Chruse pushed a ledger across the desk toward him. “Sign in here, I’ll get your keys, do you need any help with your luggage?”

“This is a pleasure trip,” said Jonathan. “We didn’t bring much.”

“Not planning to work while you’re here?” There was a slight tension in her voice, like she feared his answer.
“No, and if I were, I wouldn’t be staying at the Carmichael.” Jonathan smiled reassuringly. “You know I’d never bring that to your home on purpose.”

“That’s part of why we like you.” Chruse handed him a key. “Mr. and Mrs. Healy, welcome. If there’s anything you need, someone will be at the desk at all hours. My family is delighted that you’ve honored us with your presence, and we thank you for your patronage.”

“It’s lovely to see you, too, Chruse,” said Jonathan. “Please let your parents know that we would be delighted to take a meal with them at their convenience.”

“I will,” said Chruse. Asta waved, and the pair dissolved into giggles as Jonathan led Fran toward the stairs up into the hotel proper.

“Sisters?” she guessed, once they were out of earshot.

“From the same clutch,” said Jonathan. “Lesser gorgons are oviparous, and they tend to lay multiple eggs at one time. The children will resemble each other to such a degree that, were they human, they would be considered twins or triplets.”

“Huh,” said Fran. “It’s a funny world.”

Jonathan smiled at her. “Yes,” he said. “And we’re fortunate enough to live in it.”

The room was large and beautifully appointed, with a view of the lake. Not that they had much time to look at it; they had barely been in the room a minute before Jonathan was closing the curtains and Fran was unbolting her shoes, and then the pair—who had had precious little privacy at home, even before Daniel came along to complicate things further—fell to the mattress, and paid no mind to their surroundings for a while.

Finally, when they were both pleasantly exhausted, Fran slid out of the bed and began to collect the knives that had been scattered around the floor by the process of her disrobing. Jonathan remained on the bed, propping his head up with one hand as he watched her. “You like the view?” Fran asked, glancing back over her shoulder at him.

“Yes, very much,” said Jonathan. “Come back to bed.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be showin’ me Chicago right about now?”

“Yes. This hotel room is in Chicago. If you look outside the window, you will see even more Chicago. I have thus shown you Chicago. Now come back to bed.”

Fran straightened up, turning to waggle one of her throwing knives at him. The menace of the gesture was perhaps slightly undermined by the fact that she was naked as the day that she was born. “I don’t think you’re taking this tourism that we’re supposed to be enjoying exactly seriously. I’ve never been to a city this big before. I’d like to enjoy it while I have the opportunity.”

“I thought you were enjoying it,” said Jonathan, looking wounded.
“Now don’t you make those big sad eyes at me, Jonathan Healy, I know better than that, and so do you. Of course I was enjoying myself, and I will enjoy myself again in the week that we’ve got here, but there’s a whole city outside this hotel that I want to see.”

Jonathan sat up in the bed, squinting at her. Then he grinned and sank back down into the pillows. “You just want to get a better look at our hosts.”

“I do not!” Fran protested.

Jonathan raised an eyebrow.

“...all right, maybe I do a little, but can you blame me? Gorgons are old hat to you, but the only other one I’ve ever met was the conductor on that train, and we didn’t really have time for small talk, what with the impending doom and all.” Fran picked up another knife before walking over to sit down on the edge of the bed. “I promise not to stare or ask them inappropriate questions, but I really, really want to see them up close for a little longer.”

“So that you can ask me inappropriate questions?” guessed Jonathan.

“Oh, yeah. Like why do they have titties when they got snakes growing out of their heads? Can’t they make up their minds on whether or not they want to be mammals?” She shook her head, looking frustrated. “Snakes don’t have titties.”

“Ah. That, I can answer. Snakes belong to the biological class Reptilia, making them true reptiles. Gorgons—all types—belong to class Synapsida, making them ‘mammal-like reptiles.’ They are reptiles which display mammalian traits. In the case of the lesser gorgon, these mammalian traits include feeding their young. Hence the ‘titties’ you mentioned earlier.”

Fran eyed him dubiously. “You saying they’re mammals, and not mammals, at the same time?”

“Yes. Much like the Questing Beast.”

“I didn’t care much for the Questing Beast.”

“Since you killed it, I don’t think it cared much for you, either.” Jonathan glanced at the tiny crack of sky that was visible through the closed curtains, sighed, and reached for his trousers. “I suppose you’re right, however: we should get dressed if we’re intending to go down for supper. Unless you have a better—”

Fran’s mouth finding the side of his neck cut off his sentence before it was fully formed, and demonstrated that she did indeed have a better idea.

They did not make it down for supper.

“Well, wasn’t that just a thing?” asked Fran, one arm looped demurely through Jonathan’s as they left the dim foyer of the Adler Planetarium for the brilliant light of the Chicago morning. “They put a whole sky in one room just so we could look at it without needing a sleeping bag.”
“Sometimes you are willfully uncultured,” said Jonathan.

Fran beamed at him. “Yup. Other times, I’m just crass.”

“And that’s why I love you.” He kissed her temple before starting down the planetarium steps. “The next honeymoon activity is yours to select. Thank you for indulging my shameful interest in our universe.”

“I’m tolerant,” said Fran, beaming. “Why don’t we go for a walk down by the water? Some folks were talkin’ about the construction that’s going on while we were waiting in the lobby, and I’d like to see it.”

Jonathan looked at her dubiously. “Are you hoping for the opportunity to knock me into a large mud puddle?”

“Maybe,” said Fran sweetly. “Now come on.”

It was a beautiful day, and the pair of them looked anything but dangerous: Fran was wearing a ladies’ walking dress in heavy blue cotton, with button sleeves that went all the way down to her wrists, and Jonathan was in another of his ever-present brown suits. The casual observer would have found them to be quite the modern pair. The casual observer would have, by necessity, overlooked the twenty or so knives which Fran had concealed on her person, along with the three guns, six knives, packet of poisoned needles, and chloroform that Jonathan was carrying.

Appearances can be so deceiving.

It was little trouble to hail a cab heading back toward the city. They left the peninsula where the planetarium was located and rode to what they were assured was a particularly picturesque slice of the river walk. During the drive, Fran oohed and aahed at the boats and scenery, while Jonathan peppered their driver with questions about the ongoing construction. In the end, the man was quite pleased to receive his payment and get them out of his cab.

Back on the street, Jonathan took Fran’s hand decorously in his and led her onto the narrow gravel river walk. It was clearly intended for fishermen and running enthusiasts, not women in proper shoes and men in long pants, but neither of them exhibited any discomfort. They had both dealt with far worse in their time.

Once they reached the water, Fran paused, looking to Jonathan. “The construction is supposed to be going on in both directions, based on what those folks were sayin’. If we head down that way,” she pointed south, “we’re likely to find where they’re really tearing things up.”

“Are you basing this opinion on someone saying that we should, under no circumstances, go that way?”

“Yup.”

Jonathan shook his head. “Why am I not surprised?”

“Come on, city boy, it’ll be fun.” Fran resumed walking, a little faster now. “I don’t know about you, but I’ve been cooped up enough these past few days to last me for a lifetime. I want to get out and do things.”

“Like looking at enormous mud puddles.”

“If that’s what I have available, then yes.” Fran looked out at the water and frowned. “Does that look dirty to
"A bit," Jonathan admitted. "Silt kicked up by the construction, no doubt. No matter how careful you’re trying to be, when you work next to water, you’ll always wind up changing things. The river will recover."

"Huh."

They walked in silence for a little while. Jonathan frowned, studying Fran’s pensive expression. Finally, he asked, "What aren’t you saying?"

"Every time the circus would roll into a new town, we’d have to set up. About half the time, we’d be in some fallow field that the farmer wanted cleared for the season. We’d be free labor, in addition to paying rent. And thing was, we’d wind up kicking up all kinds of weird stuff: Turtles and snakes and jackrabbits and once a whole family of what I would’ve sworn were cactus cats, if cactus cats actually—" She paused. "Cactus cats exist, don’t they?"

"They do," Jonathan confirmed. "Your point is a very good one. Construction on this scale is likely to, ah, ‘kick up’ quite a few things—"

"I mean, they were cats, but they were green, and they had spikey bits all over ’em. What kind of self-respecting feline goes and lets their fur get matted like that? The kind that wants to look like a cactus, that’s what."

"—so it’s probably best that we’re going in for a closer look." Jonathan’s mouth thinned to a hard line. "Well, at least our honeymoon won’t be boring."

"Oh, like that was ever a risk," said Fran, and laughed.

They walked on.

They were coming around a bend in the river walk when there was a loud splashing noise from up ahead. It was followed, barely a second later, by someone starting to scream. Jonathan and Fran exchanged a look before breaking into a run. Fran, whose skirt and shoes both conspired to slow her down, was quickly outpaced by Jonathan, who had no such impediments. By the time she made it around the bend, he was already scrambling down the rocky bank toward the water, where three hunched-over shapes were in the process of dragging what looked like a hogtied man toward the water.

"Best honeymoon ever," she said, and charged down the bank after him.

As she got closer to the hunched-over shapes, she saw that they were women, sort of, if your idea of “women” involved a lot of the attributes usually associated with frogs and toads. They had long, matted hair, and their skins were a mottled gray-blue color that gleamed slickly in the light. One of them turned and hissed at her, revealing a mouthful of jagged, razor-sharp teeth. She didn’t have much in the way of a nose, and her eyes were small and mean, set deep under a bony brow.

Jonathan had produced a gun from inside his jacket, but wasn’t firing at the creatures. Instead, he seemed to be lining up his shot, taking his time about getting into position.
The hogtied man, on the other hand, was going wild now that the cavalry had arrived. He bucked madly, trying to break away from the webbed hands that were dragging him, inch by unyielding inch, toward the water.

“Johnny?” asked Fran. There were throwing knives in her hands. They hadn’t been there a moment before, and even had someone been looking, they wouldn’t have been able to see her draw. No one was faster with a knife than Frances Healy. “I’m confused. Are we rescuin’ this man or not?”

“These are river hags,” said Jonathan. “Note the length of their claws, and the spurs on their heels. Those are venomous, so keep clear.”

“Not answering my question,” Fran snapped.

“Wait for my signal.” Jonathan steadied his aim. The river hags continued dragging their prey toward the water. Less than a foot to go. “Johnny...”

“Wait for it.” There was a note of urgency in his voice that she found difficult to ignore. Fran adjusted her grip, waiting for the signal to fling her knives and save this poor man—who certainly didn’t look happy about his predicament—from the hags.

Wait.

He didn’t look happy, but... “Johnny, why isn’t he screamin’ anymore?”

“That was my question as well.” Jonathan suddenly spun around, firing at a spot behind him. Someone shouted, and rocks fell down the bank as whoever he had just shot at—or, more likely, shot—ran away. Fran was too busy running toward the man on the beach to check. The river hags had hissed and fled into the water at the sound of the gunshot, leaving him half in, half out of the river.

He was also, she realized when she got close enough, gagged. He couldn’t have been their screamer. Making her knives vanish back into her jacket, she grabbed him by the shoulders and began hauling him back onto dry land. A few seconds later, Jonathan joined her, and together, they were able to get the man to safety.

Fran pulled one of her knives back out and knelt on the rocks. The man’s eyes widened when he saw what was in her hand. He began to thrash, prompting Fran to scowl at him.

“Do you want this gag off or not?” she asked. “Right now, you’re makin’ me think we should let you figure out what comes next by yourself.”

He stopped thrashing.

“Good man.” Fran grabbed the gag and sliced it cleanly off before starting to work on the rest of the ropes. “You’re welcome.”

“Thank you,” wheezed the man. His eyes darted back and forth between the pair, apparently unsure of who he should be watching. Jonathan had straightened up and was scanning both the beach and the surface of the lake for potential dangers. As for Fran...

“Whoever tied you up really did it good,” she said, almost cheerfully, as she sliced through another knot. “I guess
when you’re getting torn to pieces, it doesn’t matter so much if you can be untied later.”

“Something like that,” agreed the man. He pulled his arms free of the loosening rope and sat up, rubbing his wrists. “Who are you folks?”

“I’m Jonathan Healy; this is my wife, Fran,” said Jonathan, still scanning. “Tell me, who was trying to kill you, and why?”

“My Johnny’s not big on social niceties, which is funny, since I’m the one who was raised by circus folk.” Fran stood up, knife vanishing again into her jacket. “Still, those are good questions. I’ve got a third one: who are you?”

“My name’s Arturo Gucciard,” said the man. He climbed to his feet. Neither of them moved to help him. “What were those things?”

“River hags,” said Jonathan, finally lowering his pistol. “Mr. Gucciard, it is of the utmost importance that you tell us who was trying to kill you, and why.”

Arturo shook his head. “I would if I could, but that’s the problem. I honestly don’t know.”

Jonathan sighed. “Of course you don’t. That would be too easy. Well, then, Mr. Gucciard, I suppose we should go and find ourselves a nice place to get a cup of coffee.”

“What?” Arturo blinked. “How do you figure that?”

“The screaming we heard was intended to attract and enrage the hags. That meant that you weren’t merely intended to drown—you were meant to be eaten. With that in mind, it seems that you may be unsafe on your own. Hence, friends.”

Arturo paled. “I, uh, know a nice diner near here.”

Jonathan smiled. “Good man. It’s time for lunch anyway.”

Meanwhile, and not that far from the beach, two men were loading their wounded companion into the backseat of their car. He had blacked out from the pain shortly after he was shot, and he wouldn’t stop bleeding all over everything.

“The boss ain’t going to be happy,” muttered one of the men, getting into the drivers’ seat.

“The boss never is,” said the other.

The first man hit the gas, and the trio vanished into the streets of Chicago.

Arturo’s “nice diner” proved to be a hole in the wall that Jonathan and Fran would have walked past without a
second glance if they had been on their own. Inside, it was shabby but scrupulously clean, with a scuffed tile floor and a painted frieze of the Italian countryside covering the walls. The hostess—who was also the waitress and, Jonathan increasingly suspected, the cook—hadn’t spoken a word of English since they arrived. Arturo had conducted a brisk conversation with her in Italian, and somehow this had resulted in the three of them being tucked away in a back corner booth with cups of remarkably strong coffee and a basket of steaming rolls.

“I hope you don’t mind, but I took the liberty of ordering the house special for all three of us,” said Arturo, taking a roll.

“Is it deep-fried frog eyeballs or somethin’ else foreign?” asked Fran.

Arturo blinked at her, clearly unsure whether she was making a joke or being sincere. She looked back at him guilelessly, and he finally said, “It’s foreign, yes, but Italian food generally doesn’t go in for frog eyeballs. It’s a seafood stew.”

“Cioppino?” asked Jonathan. Arturo nodded. He smiled. “Ah, excellent. It’s a really quite nice, Fran, and since we’re on the water, it should be quite fresh.”

“I’ll try anything once,” said Fran, and picked up a roll. Focusing on Arturo again, she asked, “So what’d you do to get yourself so well-liked around here that your friends think it’d be fun to feed you to sea monsters?”

“Technically, river hags aren’t sea monsters,” began Jonathan. “They’re strictly freshwater, although some species have been known—” He stopped as both Fran and Arturo turned to stare at him. “Ah. This is going to be one of those adventures, isn’t it?”

“Don’t mind Johnny, he’s like a fortune telling machine on a midway. Stick in a quarter and you get a fun fact about something gruesome.” Fran’s attention returned, laser-like, to Arturo. “I believe you were about to answer my question when we got interrupted by the encyclopedia entry on river hags.”

“You don’t let up, do you?” asked Arturo.

“Nope,” said Fran. “I can do this all day.”

Faced with two well-dressed, heavily-armed out-of-towners, Arturo Gucciard did what any sensible man would have done: he lied. “I honestly have no idea. I was walking along the river, and then wham, they were on me. Next thing I knew, those river-whatzits were pulling me toward the water. If you two hadn’t come along, I woulda been a goner.”

“So you could say that you owe us your life,” said Jonathan.

Arturo frowned. “I suppose, if you want to look at it in those terms.”

“Since that’s the situation, why don’t you do us all a favor, and stop lying to us?” Jonathan’s tone never varied, remaining mild throughout. Belatedly, Arturo realized that perhaps he had chosen the wrong Healy to be concerned about during an interrogation.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he mumbled.
“Mmm,” said Jonathan. The food arrived then, big steaming bowls of soup accompanied by a platter of tomato slices and mozzarella cheese. Conversation stopped while the pleasant hostess-waitress-cook put down bowls and plates, beaming the whole time. She said something in Italian to Arturo, her tone matching her smile. He responded in kind and she went bustling off again, vanishing into the kitchen.

“What’d you say?” asked Fran.

“That you were customers of mine,” said Arturo.

“Ah.” Jonathan picked up his spoon. “Tell me, do all the bootleggers bring their new clients here, or is it an arrangement that you have with the owner? She seems quite pleasant, although I distinctly heard the Italian word for ‘poison’ at least twice. Thank you for answering in the negative.”

Arturo paused with his spoon halfway to his mouth. Then, slowly, he put the spoon back down in his bowl. “You speak Italian?”

“I speak Latin. They have roots enough in common that I can pick up a smattering of words here and there, especially words that might be attached to an attempt upon my life. I’m very fond of my life, you see, especially right now.”

“We’re on our honeymoon,” said Fran, smiling brilliantly across the table at Arturo.

“Congratulations,” said Arturo slowly. “I’m sure you’ll be very happy together. What makes you think I’m a bootlegger?”

“What other activities end with a rival being tied up and thrown to the hags?”

“Mr. Healy, this is Chicago. I can name about ten other activities off the top of my head.” Arturo grimaced. “But to be fair, most of them paint me in an even worse light than bootlegging. Yeah, I brew a little bathtub gin and run the occasional shipment across the lake. There’s no harm in it, and it serves a genuine need in the community.”

“True enough, but I’d venture that you’re not the only one trying to serve that ‘genuine need,’ are you?” Arturo didn’t answer. He didn’t need to. Jonathan shook his head. “Mr. Gucciard, we’re trying to help you. We can’t do that if you’re not willing to help, at least a little.”

“Yeah? If you’re so eager to help, why didn’t you shoot those hags back down at the lakeshore? Make sure they don’t attack anybody else.”

Fran, who had been busy eating while Jonathan grilled their host, lowered her spoon and stared at Arturo. “Shoot them? For what, the crime of being hungry and tryin’ to eat something that looked and sounded like prey? For shame. I know we only just met, but I’d already started thinking better of you.”

“Fran has been receiving a vigorous education in my family’s way of doing things,” Jonathan said. “We’ve discovered that most so-called ‘monsters’ are a necessary part of the natural world—even an essential one, much of the time. Remove them without careful study of what they eat and what they chase away, and you could find yourself with a far worse mess. If they were coming out of the lake and hunting children, that would be one
thing, but this is something else entirely.”

“It’s not their fault they’re hungry,” said Fran, mellowing into a glare.

Arturo blinked. “So what are you people, some kind of monster missionaries?”

“Not quite, but we do try to look out for the...let’s say ‘well-being’ of the various monsters trying to get by in this modern world. It can be surprisingly difficult for them, especially with construction coming in and tearing up their habitats. Someone must have seen the river hags when they were disturbed by the work down by the lake, and realized that they would make a perfect means of body disposal. There’d be nothing left to find.”

“Not seeing why these aren’t things we should shoot,” grumbled Arturo.

“Because they’re not the ones who put you in that lake,” said Jonathan. He sighed. “Difficult as this may be to grasp, we really are trying to help. The first step is figuring out who would have tied you up and thrown you to the hags. Now that we know that you’re a bootlegger, that gives us something to work with.”

“No, it doesn’t,” said Arturo. He stood. “I’m happy to buy you lunch for the save, but this is the end of it. I don’t need your help. I can deal with whatever this is on my own. Thank you for what you did before. It was a lifesaver, literally. Now if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to settle the bill and get out of here. I have things to do.”

“We’re staying in the honeymoon suite at the Carmichael Hotel, should you change your mind,” said Jonathan, looking unflustered.

“Thank you for lunch,” added Fran.

Arturo looked at the two of them for a long moment before he shook his head, muttered something in Italian, and turned to walk away.

“You just going to let him go?” asked Fran softly.

“He’ll call if he needs help,” said Jonathan, picking up his spoon again. “If he doesn’t, then either he doesn’t need help, or he’s been eaten by river hags. You can’t help a man who doesn’t want you to help him, Fran.”

“Swell,” sighed Fran.

“Look at it this way: we got an excellent lunch out of it, and I bet they have tiramisu here.”

“What’s that?”

Jonathan smiled. “Something every bride should experience on her honeymoon.”

They returned to the Carmichael Hotel an hour later, having enjoyed a leisurely lunch— with tiramisu—before mutually deciding that a nap was the next essential order of business. There were no messages waiting for them at the front desk.

“See?” said Jonathan. “He handled things on his own.”
“I hope he gives them hags indigestion,” replied Fran.

When they reached their room, they both found that they suddenly had a second wind, one which mysteriously coincided with the removal of their clothing. It wasn’t until they had exhausted themselves for a second time that they finally curled around each other, yawning and content, and slipped into the arms of sleep.

The sound of the phone ringing shrilly woke them both at virtually the same time. Fran made a distressed mewling noise, trying to burrow deeper into the pillows, while Jonathan rolled over, fumbling for his glasses on the table beside the bed. He shoved them onto his face with one hand as he picked up the receiver with the other.

“This had best be an emergency of earth-shattering proportions, or I will be quite cross,” he said, voice still blurry with sleep.

“There’s a man in the outside lobby,” said Asta. “He says he’s a friend of yours. Says you told him to come here.”

“Oh, for Pete’s—is he tall, with dark hair and a beard in need of trimming?” Jonathan sat up, covering most of his face with one hand. Fran rolled over, pulling her head out of the pillows as she eavesdropped shamelessly.

“That’d be the one. Do you want us to let him in?”

“For the love of God, no. The only non-humans he’s encountered were river hags, and they were trying to eat him at the time. If he sees the real lobby, he’s likely to suffer a psychotic break of some kind. Tell him that Fran and I will be right down.”

“You got it, Johnny.” The receiver went dead in his hand.

Jonathan sighed, dropping it back into its cradle. “Arturo is here,” he said needlessly, before standing and beginning to collect his clothing from the floor. “Asta has him waiting outside the lobby.”

“Why’d he go and show up here?” Fran rolled out of the bed, taking the top sheet with her, and started picking up her underthings.

“If I had to guess, I’d say that he learned something dreadful had happened to one or more friends of his, he became concerned, and that was enough to make him decide that our help was worth accepting.” Jonathan yanked his trousers on. “Bastard.”

“You wanted him to accept our help back at lunch,” said Fran.

“That was before he woke me up,” Jonathan rejoined. “I’d throw him to the river hags myself if it wouldn’t upset their diet.”

Fran smiled languidly at him before picking up her dress and slipping it on over her head. Her hair was still in disarray, making it quite clear that she’d been roused from her bed, although it wasn’t entirely clear what she’d been doing there. “Zip me up and kiss me before we go downstairs to deal with our new toy?”

“Yes, dear.” Jonathan did as he was told, in the appropriate order, before resting his forehead against Fran’s and saying, “I’m sorry we’ve acquired a complication. I wanted our honeymoon to be perfect.”
“You’re silly,” said Fran, reaching up to pat his cheek. “This is us. It wouldn’t have been perfect without the monsters.” She stepped away, pausing to grab her coat as she moved toward the door. “In my head, you arranged this just to keep me from being bored.”

“Of course I did,” said Jonathan, and followed her.

Every eye was on them as they descended the stairs and moved through the main lobby of the Carmichael Hotel. Fran stepped a bit closer to Jonathan, taking his arm as she murmured, “Doesn’t look like we’re makin’ any friends among the locals.”

“They think we brought an uninvited human to their doorstep,” Jonathan replied quietly. “It’s no wonder that they’re annoyed. I’d be going for the guns if I were in their position.”

“Well, isn’t that nice.” Fran clapped a smile on her face, so practiced that only someone who really knew her would have been able to tell that it wasn’t sincere. She kept walking. “Should we pack our bags?”

“It depends entirely on what happens next,” said Jonathan.

They stepped out of the lobby and walked down the narrow hall to the second, much smaller lobby that was used to distract and detain human visitors. Asta was there, with a kerchief tied over her serpentine hair and a scowl fixed firmly on her face. Arturo was perching gingerly on one of the decrepit-looking chairs, clearly about as uncomfortable as it was possible for a man who wasn’t actively being tortured to be.

Judging by the look on Asta’s face, that “not being tortured” problem could be solved for him, and quickly, too, if he insisted on lingering around the Carmichael.

“Mr. Gucciard, perhaps I am unfamiliar with your big city ways, but in Michigan, when someone says ‘call me,’ they do not in fact mean ‘present yourself at my current place of residence in the middle of the night.’ As you can see,” Jonathan waved his free hand to indicate the lobby, including Asta, “this is not a friendly locale, especially after dark.”

“You know, I could help you find a much nicer place to stay while you’re in the city,” said Arturo. “As a friend. This place probably has diseases or something.” He paused as a hiss resonated through the lobby. “Did you hear that?”

“No,” said Jonathan.

“Hear what?” asked Fran.

Asta, whose hair was the source of the hissing, put a hand on her kerchief and said frostily, “If that was all you needed, sir, I bid you good night. Mr. and Mrs. Healy, please remember that we do not allow visitors and that curfew is strictly enforced.” She turned and flounced into the hall—although Fran noticed that she was moving a bit faster than was strictly necessary, maybe to prevent her hair from getting free and starting to bite.

“As I was saying,” said Jonathan, dragging Arturo’s attention back to him. “What seems to be so important that you had to come all the way out here? I thought you wanted nothing to do with us.”

“That was before I found Big Tommy,” said Arturo. There was a grimness to his voice that hadn’t been there
before, not even when he was freshly rescued from the river hags. “Will you come with me? I think you need to see this.”

Jonathan and Fran exchanged a look before shrugging, almost in unison. “All right,” said Jonathan, turning back to Arturo. “But we’re going to need you to pay for the cab.”

“I drove,” said Arturo. Exchanging another look, Jonathan and Fran nodded and followed him out of the lobby, into the Chicago sunset.

Arturo drove like a bootlegger: slowly, carefully, and obeying all traffic laws. The only way he would find himself being stopped by an officer of the law would be to receive a commendation, and possibly a medal. He refused to talk while he was driving, preferring to focus on the roads. Jonathan kept himself busy by making notes in a small blank book that he had produced from his pocket; Fran took the time to arrange her knives in a more comfortable configuration. That actually earned her a few wide-eyed glances in the rearview mirror, as Arturo was distracted by the sight of her hand disappearing down the front of her dress.

“Mr. Gucciard, are you married?” asked Jonathan, not looking up from his notation.

“Heaven’t found the right girl,” Arturo said.

“Ah. Well, you see, I have, and I assure you, marriage is a very pleasurable state. Especially when one has married a woman who carries quite so many knives.”

“A girl can never have too many hats or too many knives,” said Fran.

“Got it,” said Arturo, and kept his eyes off Fran’s reflection for the remainder of the drive.

They paralleled the lake for a while before turning off into a shady-looking stretch of dockside. They were close enough to the construction that the water was dark with silt, although the construction site itself couldn’t be seen. Arturo pulled up in front of a large, unlit warehouse. “Come on,” he said.

“Are you taking us out here to kill us by any chance?” asked Jonathan, getting out of the car. “I ask purely out of curiosity, mind you, and not because I’ll attempt to stop you from trying. It would be entertaining to watch, if nothing else.”

“You like to talk, don’t you?” Arturo shook his head. “No, I’m not going to kill you. I want to show you something, so you can tell me how concerned I need to be.”

“That’s always an encouraging thing to hear,” said Jonathan.

Arturo started walking. Fran followed him, waving for Jonathan to follow. He shook his head and trotted after her. At least if they were walking into danger, they were doing it together, and that made it an appropriate—if unusual—honeymoon activity.

The sun had continued to slip downward in the sky as they drove, and now it was almost completely beneath the horizon, leaving the shadows and the early night to claim the city. A few of the warehouses had floodlights on
their eaves, but most of them weren’t turned on, and more than a few appeared to be broken. Jonathan eyed them, shaking his head.

“This is an invitation to hungry lake monsters,” he muttered.

“What was that?” asked Arturo.

“Nothing,” Jonathan replied, and walked a little faster. If anything emerged from the waters of Lake Michigan, he was grabbing Fran and running for the safety of the car. Arturo could take care of himself.

“All right,” said Arturo. They had reached the edge of the dock. Without pausing, Arturo stepped into the open mouth of a nearby shipping tunnel, disappearing into the darkness.

“We’re following a man we just met, who’s admitted to illegal activity, into a tunnel, under cover of darkness,” commented Jonathan.

Fran blinked at him. “Well, yeah. What’s your point?”

“No point. I just wanted someone to have actually said it.” Jonathan walked to the edge of the tunnel and stepped in after Arturo.

“Silly boys,” said Fran, and followed.

If it had been dark on the dock, it was pitch black in the tunnel. “All here?” asked Arturo.

“Yes,” said Jonathan.

“Uh-huh,” said Fran.

“I heard a gun cock and a knife being drawn just there,” said Arturo. Sudden light blazed through the darkness as he clicked on the flashlight in his hand and aimed it at their faces. “You weren’t planning to kill me and leave my body down here as a warning to others, were you?”

“We were preparing to defend ourselves from a virtual stranger, if such was necessary.” Jonathan raised the hand not holding the gun to shield his eyes. “Please, could you direct that at the ground and tell us what we’re doing here?”

“We came when you called,” said Fran, in a chiding tone.

Arturo lowered the flashlight, looking faintly ashamed. “Sorry, ma’am,” he said. “Follow me.” With no more fanfare than that, he began walking along the tunnel toward the water.

“Ah, native guides who refuse to explain themselves, either out of a sense of the dramatic or due to an imp of the perverse,” said Jonathan, sliding his pistol back into its holster. “Those are my favorite kind.”

The three walked for a few minutes in silence before Arturo said, “I was coming out here to check on my boys, see if they’d been able to get to shore safely without me waiting to guide them in. I would’ve told them to call off the shipment, but I didn’t have any way of getting hold of them before they went out.”
“I see,” said Jonathan.

“Do you? Do you really?” Arturo stopped, his glare only barely visible in the flashlight’s weak beam. “Because I don’t understand this at all.” He swung the beam around, illuminating a small stretch of open lakeshore.

Fran gasped. Jonathan frowned.

“Ah,” he said. “Yes, I suppose that does put a different face on things. You had two men waiting?”

“Yeah.” Arturo gave him a suspicious look. “How could you tell?”

“For lack of a better way to say it...the volume of viscera.” Jonathan left the tunnel and began picking his way down the shore, careful to avoid stepping on any vital organs.

A casual onlooker seeing the scene—the beach, painted in blood and chunks of flesh that had once belonged to human bodies—would not have been amiss in believing that the two men who had been waiting for Arturo’s shipment had somehow exploded from within. No pieces larger than a brick were in evidence. No matter how carefully Jonathan stepped, he couldn’t avoid treading on blood spatter and bits of bone and organ.

“There are two livers here,” Jonathan said, looking back at Arturo and Fran. “They’re virtually intact.”

“Uh, yay?” said Fran. “Honey, I understand you’re fond of some pretty strange things, but...”

“River hags love the taste of liver. It’s one of their primary reasons for going after mammalian prey. We’re a great deal of trouble compared to fish and frogs. What’s the point in hunting us if we’re not somehow delicious?”

Fran made a face. “Just so you know, in a relationship characterized by really upsetting phrases, that one may be the worst you’ve come up with yet.”

“Have a look at this,” Jonathan said, beckoning for Fran to come closer as he crouched down. “It’s rather cunning, really...”

“She’s not going anywhere until you explain yourself!” snarled Arturo, grabbing Fran by the arm as she started to step forward. He froze half a heartbeat later, going pale as he realized what he had just done. As for Fran, she looked curiously down at the fingers that were wrapped around her bicep.

“How many of those did you want to keep?” she asked. “In the range of zero to two, I mean. Anything more than that would be greedy.”

“I’m sorry, ma’am. I don’t know what came over me.” Arturo pulled his hand away like he’d been burned. “It’s been a heck of a day.”

“Abusing my wife will not make your day any better, I assure you,” said Jonathan. He was still crouching and peering at the beach, having apparently decided that Fran was fully capable of taking care of herself. Somehow, that didn’t make Arturo feel any better. “Whoever killed your men went out of their way to make it look like a whatever had been responsible.”

“What are you talking about?” Arturo folded his arms and glared, choosing bluster over continuing to think about how close he’d just come to losing a finger. “I saw those river hag things with my own eyes. There’s monsters in
the lake, and now two of my boys are dead. It doesn’t take a genius to put two and two together.”

“No, it doesn’t, but if you’ll listen to an experienced monster hunter instead of relying on your own vast experience, you may find that you’re operating on a few misassumptions.” Jonathan glanced up as Fran came to join him, and then pointed at the semi-intact piece of bone that was lying on the ground nearby. “Look. What do you see?”

Fran squinted. “Looks like a soup bone,” she said, finally.

“Eating people is generally considered rude.” Jonathan pulled a pencil out of the inside pocket of his coat and reached over to nudge the bone. “See? All the score marks on the bone are clean.”

“They look like the sort of thing I’d make with my knives.”

“Precisely.” Jonathan stood. “Whoever tried to feed you to the river hags killed your ‘boys,’ Mr. Gucciard, and staged it to look like the hags had been responsible. There’s too much meat here—”

“Don’t talk about them like that,” said Arturo.

Jonathan continued, undaunted, “—and all the internal organs are present, largely intact. That would be like finding a dead bird untouched next to a hungry cat. It makes no sense, unless the cat didn’t kill the bird...and more, is somehow being kept from claiming the unguarded meal.” He turned and walked abruptly toward the water’s edge, ignoring the possible damage to his shoes as he took several steps into the shallows.

“Is he nuts, or just operating on a different set of priorities?” asked Arturo.

Fran shrugged. “You’re the one who grabbed me. There’s people who’d happily use that as proof that you’re not all there.” She smiled, dimples forming in her cheeks. “In most cases, they’d be right.”

“You’re downright spooky when you want to be.”

“Thank you kindly.”

“That’s it!” Jonathan sounded jubilant. They both turned to see him holding what looked like a pitted white brick in one hand. It was dripping, and the sleeve of his coat was wet almost to the elbow. “Salt.”

“Salt?” said Arturo dubiously.

“Salt?” said Fran.

“Salt!” Jonathan shook the water off his feet as he stepped back onto the beach and moved briskly between the bits of human debris to brandish his find at Fran. “It’s a salt lick. It’s only been in the water for a few hours—that’s why it hasn’t dissolved, just started to wear away.”

“Uh-huh,” said Fran. “What’s that mean, city boy?”

“Don’t you remember what I told you earlier? River hags are a strictly freshwater species. They breathe through their skins when in the water, and salt interferes with that. There are blocks of salt like this all down this stretch of beach. Not only were your friends killed by a human, Mr. Gucciard,” he turned toward Arturo, “but the person
who did it knew enough about river hags to ward them away.”

“I find the bodies, I think it’s the monsters,” said Arturo slowly. “I don’t go looking for human perpetrators.”

“Exactly. Why would you? You know what killed your friends. Maybe you’re even upset enough to hunt them on your own, with no real understanding of what you’re tangling with. You’d die, of course. It would be messy and painful, and extremely convenient for whoever is trying to get you out of the way.” Jonathan walked back over to Arturo, pausing to be sure that he hadn’t tread in any human tissue before he asked, “Who are your main clients?”

“Oh, I don’t think—”

“I’m pretty sure some of this was done with a butcher’s saw,” said Fran, who was still examining a piece of bone. “You don’t get cuts like this with an untrained hand. They’re too level. Even I’d have trouble getting the scoring to be this exact if I was doing it by hand.”

“Someone who knows about river hags and butchery is trying to kill you, or at least put you out of business,” said Jonathan. “Don’t you consider that sufficient reason to tell us who you sell to? Maybe someone on your client list is worth poaching.”

“I know I said I make bathtub gin, but what I left out is that I also run a lot of wine from Canada,” said Arturo, looking away. “The families around here, they’re traditionalists. They like their wine with dinner, and there shouldn’t be anything wrong with that.”

“So you supply the restaurant we had lunch at, I assume.”

“Yeah. We supply a bunch of restaurants, along with some private homes, a few of the smaller hotels—the big ones are all controlled by family men—and...” Arturo stopped. “What are you looking at me like that for?”

Choosing his words carefully, Jonathan asked, “Do you, by any chance, supply the Carmichael Hotel with wine? From...Canada?”

“Yeah, I do.” Arturo frowned. “They get a real specific vintage, same number of bottles every month, pay their bills on time—they’re good folks. No idea how they keep that rat-trap of a hotel open, but hey, that part’s not my problem, right? As long as the cash keeps coming and they keep placing orders, I’ll keep bringing over the goods. It was their shipment that was supposed to be arriving tonight.”

“Do you know the name of your client at the Carmichael?”

For a moment, Arturo looked like he was going to refuse to share the information. Then he glanced at the bodies on the beach, and thought better of it. “Hector Kalakos.”

“Ah.” Jonathan looked down at his wet shoes, then back up at Arturo. “We need a number where we can reach you, and then we need a ride back to our hotel, if you would be so kind.”

Arturo blinked. “What for?”

“We have a dinner date that I feel could be very enlightening.” Jonathan took one more look at the bodies
scattered around the beach. “For all of us.”

Asta had been delighted to hear that Jonathan and Fran would be joining the family for dinner, and had bustled off to notify her parents, the unpleasant incident of the human in the lobby clearly forgiven. Jonathan and Fran retreated up the stairs to change their clothes, he into another of his seemingly endless succession of plain brown suits, she into a red dropped-waist gown that had been the height of fashion in the mid-twenties, but was somewhat outdated now.

“Do you think I have time to do my hair?” she asked, fussing with it in the mirror.

“I think we’re dining with women who have snakes atop their heads,” said Jonathan. He removed the brush gently from her hand. “They’ll be fascinated no matter what you do with it, but I think they’ll be most impressed if you leave it down.”

“Do they feed the snakes? During dinner?” Fran turned to face him, expression dubious. “Because I’m as broad-minded as the next girl, but I gotta tell you, Johnny, I’ll find that a mite unsettling. It might even put me off my food.”

“The feeding of one’s hair is a private matter among lesser gorgons. They’d only feed their hair in front of you if you were a member of the family, or intending to marry in.”

Fran sighed. “There are too many rules to consorting with monsters, Johnny. I’ll never learn them all.”

“That’s what you have me for.” He offered his arm. “Come along, Mrs. Healy. It’s time for our dinner engagement.”

“I thought you’d never ask.” She settled her hand lightly in the crook of his elbow. As hard as she was trying to seem casual, he could feel the tension in her trembling fingers. He cast an encouraging smile her way and walked her to the door.

Once in the hall, he turned away from the main stairs, heading instead for a smaller stairway tucked away into a far corner. It wasn’t shabby by any means—the steps were carpeted, and the bannister was polished brass—but something about its construction spoke of privacy and seclusion.

“This way.” Jonathan pulled his arm away in order to start down the steps, which were too narrow to allow more than one person at a time. Feeling increasingly like this was a very poor idea, Fran followed him.

The stairs descended to the level of the lobby, and then below, before letting out into an unexpectedly large room. Jonathan stepped aside to let Fran see. She stopped where she was, eyes going very wide.

“Holy cats,” she said, after a moment’s contemplation. “It’s like bein’ in a big top.”

“A bit like, I suppose,” said Jonathan, and offered her his arm again.

The ballroom at the Carmichael Hotel—for that was what it was; no other word encompassed the scope of the place—seemed too large to fit safely underground. The floor was marble, and the walls were draped in brown
and gold velvet, like the lobby upstairs. Couches and chairs formed circles around the edges of the room, and at
the head, where a band would have been established in a more normal setting, was a long table around which a
full dozen gorgons stood.

“The marble is from Greece, naturally,” said Jonathan. He spoke casually, like this was the most normal thing in
the world. “I’m not really sure how Hector’s father was able to import so much of it to the States. It was before
my time, anyway.”

“How is this structurally safe?” Fran asked.

Jonathan blinked, and then smiled at her. “Not the question I was expecting, but it’s a good one. They consulted
with the local Oreads and kobolds before they built the place. They probably have better structural stability than
any other building in the city.”

“And better hearing, too!” said the largest of the gorgons, a big, beaming man with black and yellow snakes
coiled around the top of his head. He spread his arms wide. “Johnny Healy! It’s been too long!”

“Hello, Hector,” said Jonathan pleasantly. He turned to the woman next to Hector, whose snakes were blue and
white, with a delicate diamond pattern. “Layna. You look as stunning as always. May I introduce you both to my
lady wife, Frances Healy?”

“Charmed, I’m sure,” said Fran, smiling stiffly as she tried to keep from staring at the snakes.

The other gorgons around the table laughed, their snakes hissing in time to the sound. Layna just smiled.

“It’s a real pleasure to meet you, Frances. Any bride of Jonathan’s is welcome in our home. We owe the Healys
a great debt.” She looked lovingly at Hector, who laughed a great booming laugh and slung an arm around her
shoulder.

“What she omits is that it was your husband’s parents who smuggled her across the border for me,” he said.
“Marriage is hard enough when you’re the currently dominant species. When you’re not...” He shook his head.
One of the snakes briefly woke, hissing in annoyance. Layna patted the snake, and it lay back down amongst its
fellows. “Come, pretty lady. Sit at our table, and dine with us.”

“We accept and appreciate your hospitality,” said Jonathan, and moved to pull a chair out for Fran. She sat,
looking puzzled. He mouthed the word “Later,” and she nodded. As little sense as the current exchange of
pleasantries made, she could wait to hear about it in their room.

Hector pulled a chair out for Layna, who sank gratefully into it. Then, as if they had rehearsed it, all the other
gorgons settled into their chairs, until only Hector and Jonathan were standing.

“Do you admit yourself a guest here in my home?” Hector asked.

“I do, and call you head of household,” Jonathan said.

“Then sit, and be welcome.”

“Gladly.” Jonathan sat, smiling at Fran as he reached for his napkin. “I’ve just told Hector that, for the duration
of the meal, I answer to the authority of his household. That means, for example, that I’ve promised not to poison him.”

Fran blinked. “That seems, uh, a little extreme.”

“I’ve also promised not to turn your man to stone,” said Hector, and winked.

Now Fran paled. “Can you do that?” she asked.

“Not as such,” said Layna, and elbowed Hector. “Forgive him. He’s testy when he hasn’t eaten. Girls?”

“Yes, mother,” chorused three gorgon girls who looked to be edging up on their teens. Like Asta and Chruse, they were identical except for the color of the snakes atop their heads. They rose as a group, and walked quickly toward a door in the nearby wall, their snakes alert and hissing all the way.

“I’m not testy,” grumbled Hector.

“Of course not, dear.” Layna turned to smile at Fran. “Now, where did you and Jonathan meet?”

“Well, ma’am, it was Arizona...” Fran began. She was still talking when the three girls began returning with tray after tray of food, most of it faintly foreign-looking, in that way of complicated cooking: flat breads and olives and platters of assorted meats and cheeses, roasts and loins and a whole platter of tiny roast chickens that smelled strongly of rosemary. The trays were placed on the table. No one reached for the food, and so Fran kept talking.

She had just reached the Questing Beast when the girls came back with baskets of bread, placed them on the table, and retook their seats. Fran glanced to Hector for a sign of what to do next.

“It sounds like a lovely first encounter; you’ll have to tell us the rest after dinner,” he said smoothly, and reached for one of the tiny chickens. That seemed to be the cue that the rest of the gorgons had been waiting for. They began loading their plates, chattering gaily, and it was suddenly a family meal, rather than an oddly solemn gathering with rules she only barely understood.

“I don’t know what to try,” she said. “It all looks so good.”

“Try a bit of everything.” Jonathan advised, and reached for one of the tiny chickens. “Even the pigeon is lovely.”

“I thought it was chicken.”

“Appearances can be deceiving.”

A pitcher of water with slices of lemon floating in it was making the rounds. Fran filled her glass, and blinked as she realized what had been bothering her about the place settings: she and Jonathan were the only ones who didn’t have wine glasses.

Hector followed her gaze, and offered apologetically, “I hate to deprive a guest, but you would not enjoy our local vintage, milady.”

“No, I rather suppose she wouldn’t, since it would probably kill her.” Jonathan speared a chunk of eggplant with
his fork, watching that, and not the gorgon patriarch, as he asked, “Are you still having your wine ferried down
from Canada?”

“Ah, it’s hard, with these damned laws in the way.” Hector spat on the floor next to his chair. Fran straightened,
startled, but no one else was reacting; this had to be another of those strange customs. “I tell you, Johnny, there
was a time when a man could buy his wine honestly, with none of this sneaking about.”

“Yes, but the laws have changed, and while I’m sure they’ll change back, I’m equally sure you must be getting
your Medusa from somewhere.”

“Ah, you know...”

“Is your supplier Arturo Gucciard?”

Sudden silence fell over the table, confirming the answer to Jonathan’s question. Every head turned to face the
pair—every head. Not a single snake was sleeping, and most of them looked agitated.

“You tread in matters that are not your concern, Johnny,” said Hector, his words underscored by the hissing of
his snakes.

“Arturo doesn’t know what he’s importing,” said Jonathan. “He thinks you’re just a hotel with a fondness for a
certain unusual brand of good red wine. You’re lucky he’s never tried to steal a bottle.”

Hector scoffed, seeming to relax into his chair. His snakes settled back against his head. “He’d be dead before
the bottom of his first glass.”

“Well, then, it seems to me that you’d have had good reason to warn him about that, to keep him from trying to
sneak a sip and find out what it was about this specific wine that made it worth the risk.” Jonathan put down his
fork. “How many bottles do you have in reserve, Hector?”

“That’s none of your concern.”

“Someone killed two of Arturo’s men tonight. They tried to make it look like a river hag attack, but they didn’t
do a very good job.”

Layna paled. “Tonight?”

“Yes, tonight.” Jonathan switched his gaze to her. “There were no cases with their boat when we arrived, yet
Arturo was sure that the boys had been out on the lake to collect your shipment. There’s a case of Medusa
somewhere in Chicago, and I don’t know who has it. So the question becomes, Hector, Layna...do you?”

Hector swore in Greek. Layna put her hands over her face, her snakes curling down to wrap around her palms.
The other gorgons murmured distress, some hiding their faces like Layna, others turning to embrace their
neighbors.

“Uh, I don’t mean to interrupt your portents of doom and gloom and...oom and all, but does someone want to
explain?” asked Fran. “I thought Medusa was the first gorgon, not something that came in a bottle.”

“Medusa is the patron saint of gorgons—lesser, greater, and Pliny’s. She’s the only thing they all agree on,” said
Jonathan, sliding easily into what Fran thought of as his lecturing professor tone. “Gorgon-owned vineyards produce a special variety of wine, mulled with venom extracted from their snakes. They call the wine ‘Medusa,’ to honor her. It’s fatal to humans, naturally.”

“...naturally,” echoed Fran. “Because poisoned wine, that’s a swell idea.”

“It is if you’re a gorgon,” said Jonathan. “Medusa is an important part of their culture. Without it, they can’t complete many simple social contracts, such as marriage.” He focused on Hector. “Why were you stocking up on Medusa, Hector?”

“Our oldest boy,” said Hector, slowly. “He’s gone courting.”

“Ah. New York, I assume?”

Hector nodded silently.

“You’ve been gathering the wedding wine.”

“Yes.”

“Did you change suppliers recently?”

“A few months back,” said Hector. “The old ones, they were arrogant. Kept trying to up the prices on me, kept threatening to keep back a bottle or two for themselves. I was tempted—let them find out what happens to men who drink the gorgon wine—but I didn’t want to waste the Medusa, or deal with the police investigating a poisoning.”

“So you went looking for an independent who could do your smuggling for you.” Jonathan sighed. “I’m willing to fix this, Hector, but there’s something that I’m going to need from you.”

“Anything.” Hector reached out and took Layna’s hand, pulling it gently away from her face. “Whatever you want.”

“I need the name of your former supplier.”

Hector blinked. “Is that all?”

“We don’t do this for profit,” said Jonathan. He shook his head. “You should know that by now. The name?”

“Francesco Russo.”

“Excellent.” Jonathan picked up his fork. “Pass the lamb?”

The rest of dinner was unremarkable, if awkward. Fran ate until she felt like she would burst. Jonathan ate even more. Layna insisted on wrapping up some honey and almond pastries after they begged off dessert, and they walked back to their room slowly, like survivors of a shipwreck.
“Please, please tell me we’re not goin’ looking for their missing wine now,” groaned Fran, collapsing onto the bed. “I feel like I’m going to die.”

“At least you had the courtesy to wait until after our wedding night.” Jonathan sat down beside her. “I never wanted to be one of those lovelorn gentlemen from the ballads.”

“You didn’t answer my question,” said Fran suspiciously.

“Ah. Well, in that case: no, we’re not going looking for the missing Medusa now.”

“Oh, thank—”

“We’re going to wait until midnight, which means we have two hours to take a nap and get ready to face the city.” Jonathan raised his hands defensively when Fran turned to glare at him. “I’m sorry, dear, but it would be better if we recovered the Medusa before those poor criminals could drink it and condemn themselves to a singularly unpleasant death.”

“I’ll condemn you to a singularly unpleasant death.”

“You don’t mean that.”

“Don’t test me,” Fran grumbled, and rolled onto her side, not bothering to undress. “Fine. Wake me when we’re going to go do something stupid.”

“All right, sweetheart.” Jonathan leaned over to kiss her on the cheek before standing. “Sleep well.”

Her only answer was a grumpy mumble.

Jonathan chuckled as he moved away from the bed and began gathering weapons for the night ahead. Truth be told, he really had no idea how he was going to pull this off. What he knew about the criminal organizations in Chicago was minimal, at best, and mostly boiled down to “avoid them whenever possible.” There was the distinct chance that he were about to offend a group of people who were better armed and more irritable than he was. But his position in the delicate balance between the human and inhuman worlds meant that he had to at least try if he wanted to be able to live with himself.

The Medusa was key to gorgon culture: that much was true. What he hadn’t explained yet—largely because he was sure Layna would have started to weep, and he hated to make a woman cry—was that without it, there would be no wedding. It was against their religion. Hector and Layna’s son would be forced to wait until more Medusa could be procured, and depending on the size of the vineyard, that could be a year or more. To say nothing of the fate of any thieves foolish enough to drink the stuff. Jonathan shuddered. He sometimes felt as if his mind had become a repository of horrible ways to die, and death by gorgon venom still ranked among the worst.

Fran slept on, occasionally mumbling to herself, as he gathered weapons, checked the edges on knives, and generally prepared for what was ahead of him. Finally, he kissed her on the cheek and slipped out of the room, easing the door carefully shut behind himself.
It was the silence that woke her. Jonathan didn’t snore, but he had a charmingly irritating tendency to steal all the covers in the middle of the night, which would wake her up. The sound of his breathing always lulled her down again. Well, this time when she got cold, there was no one breathing in the room.

“Johnny?” Fran sat up, scrubbing at her eyes with the heel of her hand. “Is it time yet?” When there was no answer she looked around the room, still with only mild alarm. “Johnny?”

He didn’t answer. He wasn’t there.

Fran’s eyes widened, as much with shock as fear. “Oh, you didn’t really do what I think you did, did you, city boy?”

Five minutes later, dressed in jeans, a workman’s shirt, and a scowl, Fran came storming down the stairs to the lobby. Asta was behind the desk. She started to say something; Fran cut her off with a wave of her hand.

“Unless you’re tellin’ me where he went, I don’t want to hear it,” Fran snapped.

“He’s by the fireplace,” Asta said meekly, and pointed across the lobby. Fran turned to see Jonathan waving at her from the loveseat where he was sitting. Arturo was sitting across from him, looking faintly thunderstruck.

“Thank you kindly, and I apologize for what’s about to happen,” said Fran, before turning and storming across the room toward her husband. Jonathan started to rise when she reached him, and fell back into his seat as her palm met his cheek with a resounding crack. “Don’t you scare me like that!” Fran snapped. “I thought you’d gone off huntin’ bad things without me!”

“I would never dream of it,” lied Jonathan. He rubbed his cheek, wincing. “You have a remarkably strong swing, dearest. Now please, have a seat.”

“Not sure I want to be sitting with you right now. And what’s he doing here?” She pointed at Arturo. “I thought he wasn’t allowed all the way inside.”

“I’m right here, you know,” said Arturo.

“Hector sent two of his sons to collect Mr. Gucciard as soon as dinner was finished,” said Jonathan. “He felt that perhaps a discussion could confirm that Mr. Russo was actually behind the disappearance of the wine.”

“I still don’t understand how I didn’t know this was here,” said Arturo. “Who has a place like this and doesn’t share it? Heck, even if they don’t want to be a big hotel, they could be running the biggest speakeasy in the world. Nobody’d ever think to look for a nice joint inside the Carmichael.”

Fran blinked before giving Jonathan a sidelong look. He shook his head.

“I’ve been trying to explain, but Mr. Gucciard seems to be intentionally pig-headed in this regard. I say ‘monster,’ and he defaults to ‘man.’”

“Well, that’s pretty easily solved,” said Fran. “Remember tryin’ to explain things to me? It took talking religious mice.”

“Yes, dear, but we left the mice at home.”
Arturo looked between them. “Ah, finally, I see why you married him. You’re both mental cases.”

“Not quite,” Jonathan twisted in his seat, signaling for Asta to come over to them. “Fran, please be prepared to restrain our guest.”

“On it,” said Fran, moving to stand behind Arturo’s chair.

Asta walked over, looking puzzled. “Yes?”

“Asta, your father said I could do whatever it took to ensure Mr. Gucciard’s cooperation,” said Jonathan. “With that in mind, will you please remove your kerchief?”

Asta blinked. Then, a wicked smile sliding across her face, she said, “I’d be happy to oblige,” and pulled her kerchief off. Her serpentine hair uncurled and slithered into a new arrangement, dozens of tongues flicking out to taste the air. Arturo gasped, the sound devolving into a wheeze as the snakes all turned to study him, tongues still flicking. He began muttering to himself in Italian.

“Please put the kerchief back on, Asta, we don’t want Mr. Gucciard to drop dead in your father’s lobby.”

“If you insist,” said Asta, and tied her kerchief back into place, clucking at the fussier snakes as they tried to resist her efforts to smooth them down. “Do you need anything else, or did you just want to taunt my hair?”

“I’ll let you know,” said Jonathan, smiling warmly. “Thank you, Asta.”

“Only for you, Johnny.” The young gorgon turned and walked pertly back to the registration desk, leaving the three humans alone.

Arturo was still wheezing, but at least he was breathing again. Jonathan and Fran waited until his breathing had steadied before exchanging a look. Jonathan nodded, and Fran said, “Well? Do you believe in monsters now, Mr. Gucciard?”

“That woman—her hair—she was—”

“You should really have researched your clientele better,” said Jonathan. “Asta is a gorgon, as is her entire family. It was their wine your competitors stole. They’re quite anxious to have it returned to them.”

Arturo paled. “You’re not going to hand me to the monsters, are you?”

“Now, don’t be silly. They’re quite nice people, really. They just want what they’ve paid you for. As they’re not the ones who tied you up and threw you to the river hags, it would befit you to be a bit more open-minded.”

“We just need to know if it was really this Mr. Russo who took their wine,” interjected Fran, before Jonathan could fully commit to scolding the bootlegger. “Once we know that, we can take steps to recover it.”

Arturo blinked. And then, to both of their surprise, he laughed. “You think you’re getting it back? You really are both touched in the head. I don’t care how many monsters you’ve got on your side. Francesco Russo doesn’t let go of what’s his.”

“Anyone who drinks that wine will die. Horribly, if the reports are accurate.” Jonathan’s tone was calm. His
eyes, however, were blazing. “It will begin with numbness of the extremities and an odd dryness of the eyes and throat. From there, the symptoms will progress to light-headedness, difficulty breathing, and finally, hardening of the epidermis, growing progressively worse until it becomes apparent that the foolish individual who drank the gorgon wine is, in fact, transforming into stone. I can describe the process in more detail. I think you would prefer that I not do so.”

“Mother of God, what are you people?” whispered Arturo.

“Honeymooners,” said Fran. The sweetness of her tone somehow made it worse, although Jonathan couldn’t have said how. Making perfectly reasonable things sound horrific was a talent of hers.

“Where do we find Mr. Russo?” asked Jonathan.

“What do I get if I tell you?”

Jonathan snorted. “Are you genuinely trying to bargain with us when you’re sitting in a hotel for monsters, having lost their wine to a man without the common sense to simply shoot his opponents? Using river hags to do your dirty work isn’t just inappropriate; it’s inefficient. He should have known better.”

“What if I am?” Arturo shrugged. His eyes were cold. “My boys are dead, and some of my best customers ain’t even human. I may as well come out of this with something.”

“I like him,” said Fran.

“Oddly, so do I,” said Jonathan. “All right, Mr. Gucciard: you help us with this, and I’ll put in a good word for you with the owners of the Carmichael. You could wind up supplying this city’s entire inhuman community—a group which is not inconsiderable in size—with their alcoholic beverages.”

“Also, we won’t feed you to the river hags,” added Fran. Jonathan and Arturo both turned to look at her. She frowned. “What, I don’t get to play?”

“Not until you become somewhat less menacing at it, dear.” Jonathan turned back to Arturo. “Where do we find Mr. Russo?”

Arturo looked from Jonathan to Fran. Took a breath.

And told them.

Francesco Russo was not a man who was accustomed to being woken in the middle of the night. He was even less accustomed to being woken for idiotic reasons, such as, quote, “there’s two tourists in your warehouse with a bucket of liver, looking for their dog.” No one seemed to really understand how the tourists had been able to get into the warehouse, or why they couldn’t be removed. Two men had tried. Neither of them had come back out again. It thus fell to Francesco, as the head of the operation, to put his trousers on and make an example for the natives.

By the time his car pulled up in front of the open warehouse door, his mood had gone from confused to purely
murderous. The three men he’d brought along to assist in proving his point climbed out on his signal, following
him inside. The car creaked and groaned, resting higher on its tires once all four passengers were out.

“We don’t kill them until we know how they got in here,” he instructed, keeping his voice low.

Not low enough, although to be fair, he hadn’t been expecting the female of the two to be standing next to the
door. “That’s mighty sportsmanlike of you!” she said happily, her words accompanied by the small, terrible
sound of the hammer cocking on a gun. “Why don’t y’all just keep walking? My husband has some questions for
you.”

“Madame, I assure you, I have not seen your dog.” Years of fighting to keep his place in Chicago had left
Francesco difficult to fluster. It was a skill he hoped would one day lead to him moving past simple bootlegging,
and into the real money.

“We’re not looking for a dog,” said the woman. “We did bring liver, though. We like to share.”

Francesco narrowed his eyes and kept walking. He knew better than to argue with a gun at his back. Once he
had a target he could see, on the other hand...

The husband came into view up ahead, a slender man in a brown suit with spectacles and sandy brown hair. He
looked unassuming, the sort of man who’d never do anything illegal, either intentionally or by mistake. Francesco
could have broken him with one hand. Only the bucket of raw liver spoiled the impression, as out of place as a
Christmas tree in a synagogue.

“Can I help you folks?” asked Francesco, through gritted teeth.

“You intercepted a shipment of wine from Canada earlier this evening,” said the man. He reached up with his
free hand, adjusting his glasses. “We’d like it back, please. This doesn’t need to go any further than that.”

“Mister, I don’t know who you are, but the implication that I would have something to do with running illegal
beverages—”

“We found six cases of vodka,” said the woman amiably. “Oh, and some gin I don’t think I’d give to an elephant
with a toothache. That stuff could strip paint.”

“Ah.” Francesco straightened, abandoning the pretense of civility. “Am I to assume you’re a particularly strange
new variety of contract killer?”

“No,” said the man. “We’d just like the wine returned. It’s of great importance to some friends of ours.”

“I don’t think I can do that, friend,” said Francesco.

“Frannie?” The man looked past him, presumably to the woman with the gun. “These nice men don’t need
kneecaps to tell us where to look.”

“Seems like a waste of bullets,” said the woman—Frannie. Francesco flexed his fingers, thinking about how it
would feel to wring her neck. “I’ve got a better idea.”

“Ah, good thinking. Friends?” The man’s tone was mild.
And the monsters peeled away from the walls.

There were six of them, men and women with snakes where their hair should have been. Those snakes were coiling and hissing, mouths open, fangs gleaming. Francesco froze. One of his men yelped, and another started praying in sloppy church Latin. The woman with the gun finally stepped out from behind them, moving to stand next to the man in the glasses. She was a pretty thing, and she, at least, had hair instead of serpents.

“Don’t run,” said the man. “It never ends well, when you run.”

In no time, the four men were tied to chairs, and the man with the glasses was pouring out the bucket of liver in a rough semi-circle around them. Francesco struggled vainly. It did no good; the ropes were fast.

“I have money,” he said.

“We want the wine,” snapped one of the snake-women.

“It’s in the office, okay? Just don’t hurt us.”

“And where’s the office?” asked the man with the glasses.

“Back wall, nearest the water.”

“Fran?”

“On it,” said Fran, and turned, heading off into the warehouse with one of the snake-people at her side. The others stayed where they were, watching their captives with flat, inhuman eyes.

“How can you do this?” demanded Francesco, looking at the man in the glasses. “We’re human beings, man. How can you side with monsters?”

“Oh, is that what you are?” The man straightened, adjusting his glasses with one hand. “I thought you were the sort of fiends who would throw an innocent man to river hags. My mistake.”

Francesco’s mouth went dry. “Arturo sent you. That bastard.”

“Sent’ is a generous word.” The man with the glasses finished pouring out his livers. “He merely told us that you might know where to find the missing wine. I was very sad to see your abuse of the local ecosystem. River hags are not toys, Mr. Russo.”

“That’s what this is about? The frog bitches? Mister, you’re insane.”

“No, I don’t think so.” The man in the glasses straightened and smiled as Fran and the snake-man came walking back. She was carrying a case of wine bottles. He was carrying two. “I thought it was a single case of Medusa?”

“Now, Johnny. Don’t you think we should have something to drink on our honeymoon?”

“You have what you came for,” snapped Francesco. “Untie us.”

“Oh, no, I’m very sorry, but that isn’t going to happen.” The man in the glasses picked up his bucket and started
for the door. “You see, I feel very strongly about interference with the local ecosystem. Those river hags won’t be able to return to their customary feeding grounds for months, thanks to the salt your men used to contaminate the shoreline. You should be ashamed of yourself.”

He turned to walk away. The woman and the snake-people followed.

Francesco looked around the emptying warehouse, and the dark circle of viscera on the floor, and frowned. Something wasn’t right here... “So?” he demanded. “What does that have to do with you coming in here, messing up my place like this?”

“River hags have got to eat, Mr. Russo,” said the man.

“And they love liver,” added the woman.

They shut the front door behind them as they exited. But the rear door, the door to the waterfront, remained open. It wasn’t long before Francesco Russo and his loyal men heard the sound of wet, webbed feet against the boards.

The screaming started soon after that. But it, like most such unpleasant things, didn’t go on for very long.

The bodies of Francesco Russo and his three most trusted bodyguards were never found.

“You think Arturo will be able to meet the demand, now that he’s running liquor for the Carmichael?” Fran reclined in the pillows, holding a wine glass delicately with one hand as she watched Jonathan uncorking a bottle out of the cases they’d pillered from Russo’s warehouse.

“I think he’ll try very hard,” Jonathan said. He smiled. “More wine, Mrs. Healy?”

“I don’t mind if I do, Mr. Healy,” said Fran. “I really don’t mind at all.”

Jonathan refilled her glass, and his own, before joining her on the bed. “I’m truly sorry about all that unpleasantness.”

“I’m not.” Fran took a mouthful of wine before kissing him, and smiling. “It wouldn’t have been a honeymoon without a disaster to enjoy.”

“I suppose that’s true,” he said, and kissed her back, and for quite some time after that, there was no conversation in the room to speak of. It was their honeymoon, after all.