

THE PRICE
OF DEMONS

Also by Stefon Mears

Ars Portlandia

The Patron Saint of Necromancers

The Price of Demons

The Rise of Magic

Magician's Choice

Sleight of Mind

Lunar Alchemy

The Telepath Trilogy

Surviving Telepathy

Immoral Telepathy

Targeting Telepathy

Edge of Humanity

Caught Between Monsters

Half a Wizard

Stealing from Pirates

Fade to Gold

With a Broken Sword

Twice Against the Dragon

Sudden Death

On the Edge of Faerie

Confronting Legends (Spells & Swords Vol. 1)

Uncle Stone Teeth and Other Macabre Poems

THE PRICE OF DEMONS

Stefon Mears

Thousand Faces Publishing

The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

Copyright © 2017 by Stefon Mears
Published by Thousand Faces Publishing, Portland, Oregon
<http://1kfaces.com>

All rights reserved. Except as permitted under the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, no part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, or stored in a database or retrieval system, without the prior written permission of the author.

Cover images
Candle On Skull 7 - © Photowitch | Dreamstime.com

ISBN: 0-9977924-2-6
ISBN-13: 978-0-9977924-2-3

For Melissa, as always

*Many thanks to
Bill, Melissa and Wendy
for catching what needed to be caught.*

Authors Note

Ars Portlandia stories take place in a world that is very like our own, but is not our own.

Thus, you might be able to visit some of the locations described in this book, such as the downtown food carts. Others, however, have been fictionalized or invented whole cloth, like Gripper. Where I have fictionalized or invented, I have tried to maintain that unique Portland vibe.

In much the same way, religions such as Vodou, Candomblé and Shugendō exist in this world, as do other practices such as Hoodoo. I have done substantial research in my attempts to keep my portrayals true to the spirit of those beliefs and practices. I have, however, taken liberties for dramatic purposes. I hope that devotees of those religions and practices will forgive any mistakes I have made.

1

ONLY IN PORTLAND, Oregon, could Heath Cyr find a taste of home off the back of a cart. Today that taste was shrimp étouffée, from a food cart called Ahnvee that specialized in Cajun cooking. Two or three of Portland's famous food carts served Cajun food, but Ahnvee was his favorite. They captured the flavors just right.

The lady who did the cooking for Ahnvee, Shawna, had a big, down-home smile too. Mind you, she was so white even her hair barely managed any yellow, but she had a touch of that Cajun drawl like she was from Louisiana herself. If a few years removed.

Not that Heath had any stones to throw about that. He barely remembered Louisiana from his own childhood and had only been back a few times. His mom and dad had moved their little family to New York before Heath was four years old, which meant he hadn't lived around New Orleans in over twenty years himself.

But the bits he remembered always made him smile. Wrought iron fences, blues and jazz everywhere like they were part of the air he breathed, and especially the food.

And this lunchtime meal under the bright blue August sky, it tasted just like his grandmother's shrimp étouffée. Shrimp and a little crab meat, a blond roux, and no tomatoes messing up the spices.

Tomatoes in cooking were like dragon's blood incense in conjuring — used right they were perfect, but used wrong they muddied up everything else. Both were best left out of étouffée altogether.

And this shrimp étouffée was the perfect thing to wash down with unsweetened iced tea on a hot Thursday afternoon, when the air had that just-right touch of humid cling to let you know it's there. New Orleans, Manhattan, Portland, everywhere Heath had lived, humid cling was always part of the summer air.

Altogether, the food and the day were almost enough to make Heath forget someone was trying to kill him.

Almost.

The threat had come only last night, in Gripper, the only bar worth going to for people walking one of the paths of magic. Heath had been drinking with a couple of *curanderos* who worked over on the east side of the Willamette River, comparing notes about the way they used High John the Conqueror in combination with Devil's Shoestring, when that saggy couch potato of a "Western Ceremonial Magician" who called himself Mandrake — Drake for short — stood and made his pronouncement.

Heath Cyr, for interfering in my business I condemn to you die. My demons will come for you.

Heath laughed of course. One of the few good things Heath had learned from his Uncle Andre was that the best public response to a death threat was laughter.

Long as you're calling up demons, Heath had answered, you might want to have one see about that hairline of yours.

That got people laughing, but not Maggie, of course. She was the Gripper's owner and a pretty major hand with Western Ceremonial Magic herself. And she did not abide death threats in her bar.

She hustled Drake out her red front door so fast he was almost flying. But then, Maggie was built like a boxer and could probably have hefted Drake over her head in a dead lift. Which meant she could have bench pressed a modestly built guy like Heath for twenty reps.

For violating the Gripper's death-threat policy — yes, it was common enough that they had an official policy — Drake wouldn't be allowed back in for at least a season. More likely a year and a day, because Maggie had a soft spot for Heath. Didn't matter, though. Drake'd accomplished what he wanted. The threat was made, and everyone who mattered in the Portland area had either heard it or would hear about it soon enough.

The entire occult community would be watching them both.

That was why the first thing Heath did on getting up late the next morning — after a couple of petitions for some protection — was make sure he was seen eating downtown, smiling like he didn't have a care in the world.

Heath made his living selling spells. Couldn't risk letting potential customers think he was afraid of someone else's magic. Be bad for business.

The lunchtime crowd bustled around Heath on the busy sidewalk. Most of them stuck in suits or business casual even in this heat, but scattered in among them were what Heath thought of as the Portlanders. The natives.

Some of the Portlanders were hipsters, of course, in baggy this or that and ironic tee shirts. Some had long hair, but even the ones who kept their hair short managed to get it in their eyes. Others were the flannel shirt crowd, in shorts instead of jeans, but the men kept thick beards even in this heat.

Fortunately many of the women wore sundresses, a sight for which Heath was always grateful.

Heath himself was dressed to almost blend in. Cream-colored cargo shorts with plenty of pockets for hiding a mojo bag or two, plus a number of little extras in case he needed them. Featherweight white, button-up shirt with short sleeves and no collar. Couple of breast pockets, though, for more of those extras.

Heath's black canvas backpack rested at his feet, against his suede boat shoes. Even when he wasn't under a death threat, Heath didn't go anywhere without that backpack and the arsenal he filled it with.

Heath wasn't thinking about spells just then though. He was just enjoying the sight of a young Japanese woman's shapely calves and reminding himself to call Nariko — his on-again-off-again girlfriend — and see how her trip to Japan was going. That was when someone interrupted his train of thought.

“You. You're the one they call Twilight, right?”

Heath sighed. He hated that nickname, and he hated that he hated it. Twilight was a magical time of day. Each dawn and dusk, a great time for conjuring or spelling or working with spirits. By all rights, Twilight should have been a great nickname for him.

But then those damned vampire books came out and ruined the whole thing. Heath knew a thing or two about vampires, and “romantic” was not a word he associated with them. “Dangerous,” “deadly,” and in most cases “ugly.” Those were more the words he would have chosen.

Worst of all, some people — like Maggie's own grandmother — made the Twilight thing about Heath's skin tone. Not pale like his Irish mother, though he had her brown curls, but nowhere near as black as his father, though he had his daddy's dark brown eyes. Just somewhere in between, like so many things in Heath's life.

Heath took a long sip from his glass bottle of unsweetened iced tea before he turned to see who was asking.

Hipster kid. Baggy blue jeans, and a faded Madonna tour shirt that — if it were real — would be older than he was. Dishwater blond hair, just long enough to be in his eyes. Either a smooth shave or he didn't have to shave yet, though he held a paper bag like it had a can of beer in it. Probably Pabst Blue Ribbon or something.

Heath forced himself to smile. Kid could be a potential customer.

“Some people call me Twilight, yes. Something I can do for you?”

The kid pointed to the asphalt in the street. “They say you can read the future in the tar.”

Heath looked where the kid was pointing, waited while a Prius chased an ancient LeMans up the street. Swirling black tar lines decorated the asphalt, leftover from some kind of street repair.

He looked back at the kid. “Yeah. Why?”

“I've been staring at that swirl for the last half-hour, trying to figure out what it means. What does it tell you?”

“Right now?” Heath looked again, as though considering it a serious question, then back at the kid. “Mostly that you don't know how divination works.” Heath smirked as the kid flushed a bright red, but didn't leave him hanging. “Still, because there are people like me, you don't *have* to know how it works. If you have some money and a question you need an answer to, I could help you out.”

“No need.” The kid smiled, and it was a mean kind of smile. “I'll tell *your* future. Death will come for you on the third day, during the hour of Mars.”

The kid turned and ran then. Shoelaces tied tight, which didn't fit the look. Unless, of course, the kid knew enough to be afraid, should Heath decide to punish the messenger for

carrying a threat on his master's behalf.

Heath shook his head and sipped his tea, but his joy in the afternoon was gone. Drake had known Heath would make a public appearance. Had a response ready. Not good.

Heath felt as though he couldn't even quite taste the *étouffée* anymore. He thought about getting some beignets to try to recapture that moment, but someone behind him cleared their throat.

"Have I come at a bad time, Mr. Cyr?" A woman's voice, high and clear.

Heath stifled the sigh this time, and turned.

The woman standing in front of him practically had "money" stamped on her forehead.

It wasn't anything obvious. No jewelry except a simple gold circlet around her left wrist. No fancy watch, no designer purse. It was just ... an air about her. Like a perfume. The way she carried herself, maybe.

Her lustrous blond hair hung just long enough to curl at her shoulders, without a single split end. Understated makeup, just enough to bring out the lighter shades of blue in her eyes. Pale green sheath dress that looked like breathable silk, cut just below the collar and just tight enough to leave no doubt that she kept her admirable body trim. Simple flats that matched the dress.

And even Heath's clever nose could barely pick up the honeysuckle of her actual perfume.

No, there was no one thing about this woman Heath could point to that made her look like she had money. But evaluating people was a big part of what Heath did, and he was certain this woman was loaded.

"That all depends," Heath said, "on why you've come."

"If you're in the middle of something..." She let the words hang. Her enunciation was letter perfect. Heath would have bet that if this woman said "bottle" he could hear both t's.

“Not at all,” he said, with his best professional smile. “True, I did just finish my lunch break, and there are a few projects I really ought to get back to, but I could take a meeting right now, if it’s convenient.”

“Not here,” she said, eyes darting back and forth among the crowd. “Could you accompany me to my office?”

“Certainly,” said Heath. Something about this woman’s speech or manner was bringing out the South in his manners. He’d have to watch that.

“Excellent.” She gestured to a black Mercedes S-Class, pulling up to the curb. “Hershel will have us there in only a few minutes, and afterwards he can drop you wherever you like.”

Yep. Definitely money.

THERE’S AN ART TO POLITE CONVERSATION THAT KEEPS MOVING, but never really says anything. And this woman was a past master of that art. She and Heath sat side-by-side in the rear, leather bucket seats of her black Mercedes, and though they talked the whole drive to her office, she didn’t give away so much as her name, and she didn’t ask Heath so much as the time.

Later Heath would try to remember just what they *did* talk about, but he was never quite sure. Maybe city history? Something about the bridges? But it didn’t feel like tour-guide talk either.

It was just a non-discussion that continued as they crossed the Willamette via the low Burnside Bridge, and all the way until they were parked in a reserved space in an underground lot beneath an eight-story office building. Heath wouldn’t have been surprised to find the lot empty, but it looked busy as any parking lot on a weekday.

The moment the car was parked, the woman opened her own door and got out. Another surprise. Heath had expected the middle-aged Jewish guy, Hershel, to get out and open the

doors. Escort them to the office. He had the big-guy-with-a-buzz-cut look of someone whose driving duties included personal protection. Probably had a Glock in a shoulder holster or something.

But Hershel sat in the car as though he expected to wait there for some time. Got out his phone and started playing a war game.

Heath shook his head and got out of the car. He started toward the closest elevator, set into the center of a broad, poured concrete pillar.

“Not that one,” the woman said, pointing down along a clean red brick wall. “This way.”

Tucked away behind another pillar was a second elevator. Dark green doors in the red brick, instead of that typical beige of parking lot elevators. Single button in its panel, but the woman didn’t push it. Instead she ran her finger around its rim and whispered something.

Power. Heath felt a flicker of power when she did that. Seemed this woman was a practitioner after all, and one who had more than a little skill at hiding what she did. Normally Heath could spot another practitioner at fifty paces, but even now that he knew she had some skill, he could barely spot a flicker in the air about her.

“So that’s how you knew to look for me,” Heath said.

“Please,” she said as the elevator door opened. “Wait until we’re in the office.”

The elevator had brown granite floor tiles that gleamed and brown wood-paneled walls. A button for each floor, but no posted permit, no special fire button, or any of the things Heath thought of as elevator safety measures.

“Not sure this is up to code,” Heath said.

The woman only smiled and pushed the button for the eighth floor.

One office took up the whole eighth floor. The law firm

of Benson and Benson. Antique-style desks, plush cream carpeting, phones with cords and the scent of old tobacco. This elevator dropped them off along a back wall near a row of closed-door offices that all had the word “partner” on their nameplates.

Heath could see clear across the open middle of the office, past the desks of paralegals and legal secretaries to where the other, public elevator let off on the other side of a glass door.

Here was the emptiness Heath was expecting. The other partners were all off today, it seemed, and had extended their largess to include their paralegals, legal secretaries, receptionists and others. Only the message lights flashing on the desk phones, the chilly air conditioning, and the motion-activated fluorescent tube lights in the acoustic ceiling above gave any hint that this was an active law firm.

“Boy,” Heath said, “when you want privacy, you don’t fool around.”

Another smile, but no other answer. She led him along the row of partner offices. Six in all, each with a mahogany door and brass handle. Not knobs on these doors. Handles. A little latch at the top to be pushed down with the thumb, right under the key lock.

She stopped at the last office, as Heath knew she would. This one, unlike the others, was warded. She didn’t try to hide how she opened it though. She just ran her finger down the lock as she whispered a little power at it, then opened the door as though it had never been locked in the first place.

More thick cream, spotless carpeting. More mahogany for the main desk and the bookshelves, which were filled with law books. Painting of a ship at sea in a storm alongside the requisite diplomas and Bar Association membership, but no photographs anywhere. High-end executive chair, royal blue, behind the big desk, currently facing a computer desk to one side, on which sat a great big honking monitor. No fluorescent bulbs in here. Old school yellow incandescent bulbs already

burning in an elegant overhead lamp.

Oh, and huge, tinted windows overlooking the Willamette River.

She closed the door behind them before she took the big blue chair. Heath slipped his backpack off his shoulders and plopped himself on one of the two big, comfy, brown leather chairs set for clients, in front of the desk.

The smell of tobacco was stronger in here, even over the leather of Heath's chair. Strong enough that Heath could tell it was cigar tobacco, not cigarette or pipe.

"I presume you read the name on the door," she said.

"Yep." Heath shook his head. "But you're not Monica Benson."

"Perhaps you are less perceptive than I've been told, Mr. Cyr. Did you fail to notice—"

"The wards? Yeah, I saw them. Anti-screaming mostly, plus a couple of filigrees to keep out nosy spirits, I think?" Heath smiled. "Yes, they're your work. Have the same feel as that little breath of power you used to get us in here without tripping any of the alarms but without using a key, either."

"Ah, so you think I've led you in here illegally?" Confidence in that smile of hers, not conceit. Made her a little prettier, not that she needed the help.

"No. That'd be a stupid risk, and you don't strike me as the stupid type."

"So what *do* you think?"

"I think it's not every day another practitioner wants to hire me, so I'm curious about what exactly you want."

"You don't have any guesses?"

Heath smiled. "Sorry. *My* guesses have value, and you've gotten all I'm going to give you for free."

"That's fair," she said with a slight nod, then a small frown creased her forehead. "I suppose you'll need another

name then.”

“Nope.” He shook his head and folded his hands across his stomach, wondering when she’d get to the point. “I give every one of my clients a personal nickname, just in case I need it.” He smiled. “Works just as well as the name your momma gave you. At least, for my purposes.”

Her sculpted eyebrows raised just a little.

“Is that a threat, Mr. Cyr?”

“It’s nothing more than the answer to an implied question. Some clients don’t want me to know their names because they think they can cheat me and I’ll have no recourse.” He shook his head. “Just not how the world works.”

He let those words hang for a moment, but started up again before she could speak.

“Not saying that’s why you don’t want me to know your name. You have your own reasons, and your privacy is your business. I’m just saying, in my head, you’re Goldilocks.”

Goldilocks blinked, then smiled, then laughed, and it was nowhere near as smooth a sound as her cultivated speech. More like she was a street girl who made good.

“Goldilocks. I like that. I shall take it as a compliment.”

Heath chose not to correct her. He smiled again, and said, “So, what can I do for you, Goldilocks?”

“I need you to kill a bear who thinks I’ve been sleeping in her bed.”

MONICA BENSON’S OFFICE WAS BIG, as offices go, but it wasn’t big enough for the belly laugh Heath let out. Loud and long, both hands still folded across his stomach. Man, he hadn’t laughed this hard since he hit that improv show with Colin last month.

Goldilocks didn’t say anything through the whole gale of laughter. She didn’t join in either. She just sat there with a long-suffering look in those blue eyes.

“I’m sorry,” Heath managed at last. “It’s just...” He had to chuckle a little more. “It’s just, I mean, after all this clandestine crap. You bring me here, away from witnesses, behind your little anti-scry wards—”

“My wards are not—”

“I know, I know,” Heath said, waving his hand. “Didn’t mean to offend your work. They’re good, fine wards. It’s just that you were coming across as a smart woman, very together, with all your research done well ahead of time.”

Laughter started bubbling out of him again. He clamped it down.

“But ... but I’m afraid you’ve mistaken me for my uncle. Understandable. We’re both named Cyr. Mind you, he’s more than a few years older, and he’s got that Wesley Snipes dark skin, which I do not.”

“I in no way mistook you for Andre Cyr.” All business in those blue eyes now, and her tone was flat, like Heath had pissed her off. He wasn’t sorry though. Might bring an earlier end to a meeting that was looking more and more like a waste of his time. She continued nonetheless. “If I wished to speak with Andre Cyr, I would have arranged a meeting when he was in town last month, or simply flown to New York to meet him there. I assure you, I know exactly to whom I am speaking.”

To whom she is speaking. Apparently Goldilocks got formal when she was angry.

“Then you should have known in advance that you were wasting your time and mine. I do not commit murder. Not for love or money. You want to hire someone to do your killing for you, you might try the Lammergeyer. Italian fellow. Lives over in Vancouver.”

“I know who the Lammergeyer is.”

“Then you’re better off asking him.” Heath held up his hands. “Not saying he’d do it, mind you. Got no way of knowing that myself. Just strikes me as the type. Gives off a real *Cosa*

Nostra vibe.”

Goldilocks flared her nostrils in a slow sigh. “Have you quite finished with your merriment at my expense?”

“Not sure yet,” Heath said with a shrug. “No way to know what you’ll say next.”

That got him a raised eyebrow. “Is this how you treat all your prospective clients?”

“Only the ones who ask me to commit murder.”

“There’s that phrase again, Mr. Cyr.” She folded her hands in the center of the desk like she owned it. Almost like she really was this Monica Benson. Maybe Goldilocks was an attorney after all. Make sense if she were, and Monica were a rival...

But Goldilocks was still talking.

“What it seems you do not understand is that murder is a *legal* distinction. For a killing to be murder, it must be accomplished by means that are provable in court beyond a reasonable doubt. Considering the percentage of the populace who believe that magic is fiction—”

“Just stop,” Heath said, holding up a hand. “This isn’t a college dorm, and this isn’t some internet forum. I’m not interested in listening to you play games with definitions so you can try to make *murder* sound palatable.”

“I’m not trying to make it sound palatable.” She blinked in actual confusion, as though Heath had missed the point entirely. “I’m pointing out that I’m not asking you to commit murder. If I were, I’d be asking you to commit a crime. To risk jail time, and everything that comes with it. I would never ask that of you. I’m only asking you to take a life.”

Heath had a rejoinder ready for that, but Goldilocks got louder.

“*Everyone dies, Mr. Cyr.* It’s part of the definition of being human. Hastening the end of a life is no more wrong or unnatural than ending someone’s cold or helping them find

love, both of which have helped you achieve a level of notoriety in this city.”

“So do it yourself.”

“I have compelling reasons why I cannot, and they are not yours for the asking.”

“Fair enough,” Heath said. He crossed his feet up on the desk and regarded Goldilocks between the toes of his suede boat shoes. “Well I, too, have compelling reasons why I cannot. And I’ll give you one for free — I don’t kill for money.”

“You may change your mind when you hear the name of the target.”

“Not likely.”

“Vizinha.”

Heath started laughing again.

“Mr. Cyr,” Goldilocks said in exasperated tones, “please. I assure you I’m quite serious.”

“No,” Heath said, getting his laughter under control. “You’re not. You’re either pranking me or you’re stupid. Because if you know anything about the lay of the land in this town, you know that I tangled with Vizinha just last year and got my ass handed to me.”

“I assure you, that is entirely my point. This is an opportunity for you to—”

Heath pulled his feet off the desk and sat forward in the big, comfy chair. He stabbed the desk with his finger as he interrupted her, just in case his own business tones weren’t getting the point across.

“Now you listen here. It’s only recently I’ve been able to come back from that beating, and only more recently still that she and I have buried the hatchet.”

“Yes,” Goldilocks said, leaning forward in her seat, excitement in those blue eyes now. “Exactly. When you two toasted each other at Gripper last week it was the talk of the town. Which makes this the perfect time. She won’t be ready for you.”

Heath sighed and rubbed the bridge of his nose before he tried one last time to explain.

“Look. Maybe among you ceremonial types, this is how things work. Me, I’m a root worker. A conjure man. I do Hoodoo and a little more besides, and I play along the edges of Vodou. Vizinha, she’s what they call a *mãe-de-santo* in Quimbanda. Or maybe it’s Umbanda. I’ve never been quite sure with her. Anyway, we don’t exactly do the same kind of thing, but it’s like we’re ... spiritual cousins. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

Heath waited to continue until Goldilocks nodded. Took a moment, but she did, wariness all through her eyes.

“Vizinha and I understand each other in a way you and I never will. Even during our war, we didn’t have to discuss terms, because they were just understood. There’s a way things are done between people like us, and a way they’re not. We know it. The spirits, they know it too. If one of us started playing fast and loose with the unwritten rules, we’d end up with more trouble than I think you understand.”

Goldilocks furrowed her brow with a slight frown on those pouty lips. “So ... what I’m asking would violate pacts with the spirit world?”

Heath stifled a chuckle. No sense in insulting the woman when she was coming close to understanding.

“Not quite,” he said. “But kind of like that. The point is, even if I were the sort of person who’d kill for money, I’d still have a bunch of other reasons to tell you no. And to be honest, I can think of a few good reasons to give Vizinha a call when we’re done here.”

Power flared around Goldilocks. Apparently she didn’t like to hide herself when she felt threatened. Heath’s fingers itched to pull a little ammunition from one of his pockets, but he held that urge in check.

“Mr. Cyr, I have trouble believing you would wish it

known that you violated the sanctity of a client's privacy."

"There you go, calling yourself a client again when I've told you about a half-dozen times now that I'm not taking your job. I have no special love for Vizinha, but I have no special love for people who waste my time either."

Without taking her eyes from his, Goldilocks opened a desk drawer, took out a plain white envelope, and set it on the desk in front of him.

"For your time," she said.

Heath smiled. "Don't take this wrong, but why don't you just upend that envelope on the desk for me."

She matched his smile, but hers looked a little more serpentine. Still, she did as he asked. No symbols, sigils, runes, or odd little curlicues. No powder, oils or roots. Only crinkly old American cash. Two Franklins, a Hamilton, a Lincoln, and a couple of Washingtons. And not one of them showed so much as a hint of spell work. Two hundred seventeen dollars in clean cash.

"Sufficient for a consultation?" she asked in the confident tones of one who knew the answer.

"Yep," Heath said, scooping up the cash and slipping it into his shirt pocket. While his hand was in there, he palmed a small packet of a certain blend of powders. Just in case. "And since you're paying for it, here's your advice: steer clear of Vizinha. She's tough, she's smart, and she deals with the kind of spirits I personally like to forget exist. If she thinks you're banging someone she considers hers, either make it clear you're not or — if you are — stop right now and apologize."

"It's not that simple, Mr. Cyr."

"It never is. Except when that's how it's got to be." When that got him a puzzled look, Heath added, "Something my dad likes to say, and I think he's got the right of it."

"Well," Goldilocks said, in the deep-breathed style of someone coming to a conclusion, "if I cannot hire you to do the

deed, I suppose I cannot hire you to consult with me while I — how did you put it? — *tangle* with her?”

The word *no* almost made it past Heath’s lips, but he chewed on it a moment as he thought. Going up against Vizinha himself was one thing. Advising someone else, though...

“As long as you pay cash in advance for every consultation, same fee you just gave me, I’ll be happy to point out your mistakes for you.”

“I’ll require you to meet with me at dawn, every Tuesday, Friday and Saturday until this matter is resolved.”

Heath couldn’t have heard that right. “At *dawn*?”

“Hershel shall pick you up fifteen minutes before the sun rises, and we shall meet here for thirty minutes each time, to discuss strategy.”

Heath worked his mouth around while he thought about that. On the one hand, this woman wanted her meetings at dawn. Great time for certain kinds of workings, but not a time Heath’s eyes were open if he could help it.

On the other hand, six hundred fifty-one dollars a week for just under two hours work, including travel time. Might get as much as two weeks pay before Goldilocks got beat too badly to continue.

“Got yourself a deal,” he said.

“Hershel will see you home then,” she said. “I trust you can show yourself out? There’s more I must do before I leave.”

Something about the way she said that. Maybe it was her choice of words, maybe it was her tone, or maybe it was the distance in those blue eyes. Or maybe it was just that she didn’t offer to shake hands to seal the agreement. Whatever it was made the hairs on the back of Heath’s neck stand up, and little hints of discomfort crawl up his back.

As Heath made his quick way out of the office, he began to suspect he’d undercharged for this job. Even if it *was* just a consultancy.

2

“YOU UNDERCHARGED AGAIN.”

Nariko had the kind of willowy beauty and long, glittering black hair that made American Japanophiles fall to their knees — sometimes literally — but her expression as she said those words was as ugly as her tone. Probably didn’t help that her expressive jade-green eyes were hidden behind sunglasses. Which was weird, because it had to be close to midnight where she was.

And it definitely didn’t help that she spoke loudly into the phone as she and Heath had their daily video chat.

As far as Heath could tell, she was on a subway of some kind, and she was packed in tight among the citizens of Yokohama, at least a third of whom were also on the phone and speaking in loud, fast Japanese.

A little irritating that this was where she was for their call. Yes, she was in Japan “visiting relatives,” which was the part she would admit to of a trip that Heath suspected of being something much bigger. Something she didn’t want to tell him about because she didn’t want to worry him.

Nariko held back a lot on family matters. Heath's own family was messed up enough that he tried to give her plenty of space on that front, but he couldn't help feeling frustrated that she cut him out that way.

No doubt whatever she was doing kept her busy, and maybe kept her from planning much about her days. But still, just once it would have been nice if she'd found someplace quiet and private for their talk.

Heath, for his part, always made sure he was home when it was time to call.

Home was a backyard apartment in Northwest Portland, near gigantic Forest Park. Heath lived there rent-and-utility-free, thanks to a little misadventure on behalf of his landlord. Hadn't provided the outcome the landlord wanted, but that wasn't Heath's fault, and the man was smart enough to hold up his end of the deal.

Heath sat on his front porch in one of the two matching white plastic chairs — the kind that were designed to mimic their wooden cousins — surrounded by the native plants of the backyard: Corsican mint for ground cover, ferns, roses, rhododendrons, Oregon grapes, and a half-dozen tall, mighty Douglas fir trees.

Nariko was yelling her words at Heath from a subway car. Heath was practically sitting in a forest, complete with birdsong and chattering squirrels.

And the birds and the squirrels were on his side, Heath was certain. Not that telling her that would do any good.

The sounds and smells of summer air and nature helped Heath keep hold of his temper as Nariko continued.

"I don't know how many times I have to tell you. *Value your work. Value your time.* And in this case, value your risks. How is Vizinha going to take it when she finds out you're acting as war counselor for her enemy?"

"Do I get to talk now?" Heath said.

“I don’t know,” Nariko said. “Are you going to say something stupid?”

“I do love our little chats, Nari. But I’ve obviously caught you at the wrong time, so—”

“No, no, Heath. Tell me what you’ve got to say. Because I won’t forgive you if you get yourself killed while I’m out of the country.”

“Well, you know I can’t promise that. Not any more than you can promise not to get killed while you’re doing ... whatever it is you’re about over there that you aren’t sharing with me.”

Nariko’s face went blank so fast it was like someone switched her off.

“Yeah,” Heath said. “You like to tell me I’m dumb in all the wrong ways, but no one does what I do for a living without understanding *when* one plus one equals three.”

“We were talking about you and your recent business mistake.” All the anger was gone from her voice now. She sounded ... guarded. And that hurt enough to twist Heath’s stomach.

“Yeah,” Heath said with a sigh, settling back into his chair and wondering just how long Colin would need to find the beers in Heath’s fridge. A drink just sounded entirely too good. “By all means, let’s stick to my problems so you can feel righteous.”

“Heath, I—”

“No, no, you asked a question and I haven’t answered it.” Heath’s heart was pounding now, and he had to work to keep his tone even, so he worked a little harder to push it past even to light. As though everything was just as fine as Nariko wanted to pretend it was on her end. “You wanted to know how Vizinha would respond? Well I’ll tell you. She’d laugh, and ask me how much I got out of Goldilocks for the effort.”

Nariko’s mouth pursed. Heath couldn’t see her eyes, but he was betting he’d have seen confusion in them, if he could.

“Yeah, I know. Not how you’d react. But she doesn’t think like you, Nari. Doesn’t think like me either, but she comes closer.” Heath pursed his lips, then said, “Look at it this way. Say you’re coaching a football team, and you find out the other side has hired as a consultant the guy who lost to you in last year’s big game. Are you going to be afraid of what he has to say?”

“No,” Nariko said, sounding more relaxed and at least a little abashed. “Because that consultant doesn’t know how to beat you.” Her lips quirked in a little smirk. A hopeful sign, but it vanished quickly. “Vizinha will see this as you undermining her enemy’s confidence, won’t she? Doing her a favor and getting paid for it.”

“Now you’re coming closer. In that sense, it’s a win-win.”

“True.” Nariko nodded. “But Heath, it’s never going to go that simply and you know it.”

Heath tried to interject, but Nariko was building up steam again.

“You don’t know anything about this Goldilocks or what her reasons are. You don’t even know what her plan really is, except that it might, *might* involve killing Vizinha. And you’ve agreed to consult with her anyway.”

“For—”

“For entirely too little money, all things considered.”

“Hey, the amount—”

“Was exactly what she offered you for hush-money level consultation services. For a wartime consultation, you could have doubled that for each meeting and she’d have paid it. Hell, if you’d show half as much interest in negotiation as you do in grinding your herbs, you could have gotten triple.”

“Nari, I—”

“Never listen to anything I say about business?” She sighed. “No. I know. You are beautiful, Heath. So beautiful it hurts sometimes. And you have a good heart, despite everything you’ve been through. But—”

“Let me guess. I’m dumb in all the wrong ways?”

That got the first smile out of Nariko he’d seen on the call. Then some suited jackass ruined it by bumping into her. She slammed an elbow into the guy’s back, knocking him forward.

Heath could see him turn to say something. Nariko turned away from the phone’s camera, her mouth tightening into a line as she did.

The guy held up surrendering hands, bowed from the neck up, and backed away.

Heath didn’t blame him. Her hair was down, but she was dressed for business. Black leather biker jacket, high-cut tight mauve shirt. If she’d had her hair up, Heath would have demanded to know just how much trouble she was in.

As it was, he knew just what expression she must have had when she faced that guy, and Heath was sure it promised violence. One of the ways Nariko had kept the Japanophiles at bay here in Portland was by establishing a resting bitch face that could melt steel. And that was without trying. When she *tried*...

Just thinking about it, Heath shuddered.

She turned back to the camera. “My stop’s coming up. I better go. Tell you what, I’ll give you a wake-up call tomorrow from someplace quiet. Maybe we can talk without getting at each other’s throats.”

“It’s a lovely thought,” Heath said. “Shame you’re so far away. We’re always at our best when whatever we’re doing can be followed by getting naked.”

“Well,” Nariko said with a sly smile, “be a good boy and promise not to get yourself killed, and maybe I’ll give you a wake-up treat.”

“I can promise to try,” Heath said.

“*He’ll be good*,” Colin said, quickly coming through the white front door behind Heath, which meant Nariko could see

him as well as hear him. "I'll see to it myself."

"Thank you, Colin," Nariko called, then blew Heath a kiss and disconnected.

"*Dude*," Colin said, closing the door behind him and handing Heath a sweating bottle of Deschutes Hefeweizen, "she's offering you *video* phone sex and you can't make a promise? What is *wrong* with you?"

Colin dropped onto the other plastic chair, which somehow creaked in protest even under his skinny ass. Colin was dressed for the summer afternoon heat: camo cargo shorts, Birkenstocks, and a Halestorm tee shirt with the sleeves ripped off. Smelled a bit of sunscreen, which was a change from his usual scent of baked goods, but not a shock. He had the kind of white skin that might burn under a full moon, and his long blond hair was so fine it didn't offer his scalp or neck all that much protection.

On the other hand, a black tee shirt, even with the sleeves ripped off, would never be as cool as Heath's plain white, button-up, collarless shirt. And Heath was glad his own cargo shorts were cream-colored. His matching clothes with Colin would never have sat well with either of them.

As Colin took his first sip of the Hef, Heath said, "bout time you got back with the beers."

"Hey, I knew how Nariko would take the news of your latest job and death threat. No need for me to listen in on *that*." He held up the beer in toast. "But stand by and let you pass up a dirty video call? I couldn't do that and still call myself your friend."

Heath clinked the beers, then said, "I didn't tell her about the death threat."

Heath took a long swig of the crisp Hef, while Colin's blue-gray eyes got so wide they could have swallowed his beer bottle.

"She. Will. Kill. You." Colin shook his head. "Figuratively,

I mean. Assuming you don't get literally killed." He swallowed, then blinked. "Then she'd kill me. And maybe literally, in that case."

Heath chuckled. "She has no right to bitch. I called her out on the fact that she's doing something big and dangerous over there, and she still wouldn't tell me what."

"I'm sorry, did you just attempt to apply logic to an emotional situation?" Colin snorted. "If Drake manages to put you in the ground before Nariko gets back, she will kill him. She may not even bother with magic to do it. Then, the next morning, I'll wake up with the tip of that steel hair spike of hers hovering just below my nostril."

"You have spirits and wards to keep that from happening."

"So does Mandrake. So do you. Think they'd keep Nariko out when she's up for vengeance?"

Heath took a swig of his beer. No point in answering that. But then something else occurred to him.

"That's why you came over, isn't it? To check on my defenses and lend me a hand if I need it."

"Nariko scares me," Colin said with a shrug. "Mandrake doesn't."

A horn sounded. Not a car horn, or a semi's horn, or even a train horn. Heck, even far away as the Willamette river was from Heath's place, a boat horn would have sounded more at home than this noise.

This horn sounded like something out of a *Lord of the Rings* movie. The kind of thing ... an old army ... would use...

Something was at the border of Heath's outer wards.

