

THE MAIDENS OF BABYLON

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picked a dark corner next to the front door and the window so that I could watch everything in front of me. I always had a thing about sitting with my back exposed to people, and purposely preferred to sit in dark corners with a wall behind me. Sometimes I could not avoid sitting “out in the open,” as I called it, but that night I was lucky enough to find exactly what I wanted. Celia was performing on Stage II, which was a few feet down from where I sat. Although she gave a good performance, I could tell that her mind was somewhere else, as she mechanically smiled at the admiring customers. The dip-shit men were too drunk and too stupid to really notice or care that Celia wasn’t really paying any attention to them.

I sipped my Drambue, bobbing my head absently to the dark sounds of the band Type O Negative blaring gloomily out of the jukebox.

After about ten minutes, the front door opened, and a thin, elderly gentleman with white hair walked in. Unlike most of the men who frequented the club, this gentleman had an air of quiet dignity about him. He wore simple gray slacks and a long-sleeved, white dress shirt, without a tie. His white hair and beard were trimmed neatly. He slowly scanned the room, probably trying to get his eyes adjusted to the darkness. Finally, his eyes met mine. It was Benjamin. I sighed. Even though I agreed with Celia that he was one of the “cool” customers, I still felt leery about talking to him. I’d vowed that once I got out of the exotic dancing profession, I would have nothing else to do with the business, “cool customers” or not. But Celia was a good friend of mine, and I’d never seen her so fearful. And then again, my curiosity was at an all-time high.

Benjamin walked gracefully over to my table.

“Nikki?” he asked in a clipped British accent.

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“Please, sit down,” I said, gesturing with one hand. I sipped my Drambuie, lit a cigarette and stared at Benjamin. He lowered his eyes, obviously embarrassed by my bold scrutiny. When Benjamin sat down, the waitress, Pamela, slinked over and asked him if he wanted a drink. Benjamin ordered a Heineken and another Drambuie for me, and a red wine for Celia.

Just then, the door opened, and a tall, attractive red-haired woman walked into the room. I looked at her closely; she was very familiar. I suddenly realized that it was Sonny, my AA sponsor and teacher of the S & M arts from Albuquerque. I vaguely wondered what she would say if she saw me drinking, but in the end, I didn’t really give a damn. I had tried to kill myself after all, (unbeknownst to everyone else). I was overcome with joy when I saw her.

“Sonny!” I yelled across the room. I stood up abruptly, nearly upsetting the drinks on the table. “Sonny, over here!” Sonny scanned the room for the source of the yell directed at her. She saw me. A broad smile spread across her pretty face, and she came over to the table. We embraced tightly, and I was crying again, but this time my tears were joyful.

“Oh, Sonny, I’ve missed you so much!” I sobbed.

“I’ve missed you too, Nikki,” she said softly. After we disengaged our embrace, Sonny looked down at Benjamin and smiled.

“Oh good,” said Benjamin, “Now I see we’re all here. I thought you’d never make it Sonny!”

I looked from Benjamin to Sonny and then back again in complete bewilderment. Just what in pure perfect hell was going on here?

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“You two know each other?” I asked, bewildered. Sonny sat down just as Celia exited Stage II and made her way to our table.

“Yes, I’ve gotten to know Sonny quite well,” said Benjamin, taking a sip of the Heineken, “A remarkable woman, if I may say so myself.” As I continued to stare blankly in utter confusion, Sonny flagged over the waitress, Pamela, and ordered a coke.

“Let me explain, Nikki,” she said. She pulled a pack of Newport’s from her purse, and lit a cigarette.

“You remember your client, Max?”

“How could I forget,” I said, shuddering in spite of myself.

“Well, that night that you’d left him there on the rack in that dungeon, I immediately knew, of course, that something wasn’t right. When I saw him, I left briefly and went out to the car, where my boyfriend, Frank, sat waiting. As you know, he often acts as my bodyguard during sessions. Anyway, I told him that Max was still chained to the rack, and that you were nowhere in sight. So Frank pulls out his pistol, and follows me back into the dungeon. Max is screaming his fucking head off, saying that he was going to get you, and that you’d pay for what you did to him. Anyway, Frank gave me the gun, and told me point it at Max, while he released him from the rack. That way, he wouldn’t have time to grab me and hold me hostage or something, which could have happened had Frank held the gun instead.”

“Good thinking,” I thought, admiring their strategy. Sonny continued, “Anyway, Max kept screaming that you’d pay. We warned him that we’d call the cops if he didn’t leave us immediately, so he just cursed and ran out of the dungeon like a madman. I didn’t think to ask him at the time, what had happened between you and him. So, when you called me and told me you were going back

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home, I still didn't think to ask you, Nikki, because I figured you'd tell me if you wanted to. I didn't want to pry into your personal business. But then, after you left for DC, it dawned on me that you could possibly be in danger. So, I called your folks with the number you gave me." She paused, taking a puff on her cigarette as the rest of us waited for her to continue. She ran a hand through her auburn hair, "Your folks are really worried about you, Nikki. Your mom told me what happened between you and them when you got back home. She was crying, and she told me you'd run out of the house, threatening never to return. In the end, I told her that I was going to make arrangements to come to DC, and that I'd try to find you. I figured you'd probably end up dancing at some club in the Nation's Capitol, so I started going to all of them, one at a time, and asked if you were working. I gave them a description of you, but no one knew you until I came to the Babylon. I started up a conversation with Benjamin here. He bought me a coke, and I started asking whether he knew you. He told me that of course, he knew you, and that you were one of his favorite performers." I looked over at Benjamin and smiled in spite of myself. "Thanks for the compliment," I said. Benjamin only smiled back and nodded. Sonny went on to say that she told Benjamin that she was a good friend of mine, and that I could possibly be in danger. She had described how she and Frank had released Max, and how he had sworn revenge on me.

Celia spoke up for the first time. She had been sitting quietly, counting the tips she'd pulled from her garter belt.

"So here's what happens next, Nikki," she said. "I started noticing, as I've already told you, that one by one certain dancers had disappeared from the club. When I met Sonny through Benjamin, and I discovered that she knew you, I listened to her story, and I immediately started suspecting the worst." She paused, gesturing at Sonny and Benjamin, "We all think that Max could be here in DC, looking for you."

Sonny interrupted, "I know Max is some sort of defense attorney, and I know his personal fantasies are a bit whacked, but why would he try to hurt you, Nikki?" Seeing that all eyes were focused on me, I cleared my throat and decided to finally speak up. But how much should I tell them? I certainly wasn't about to disclose my shape-shifting ability; they'd think that *I* was the one off my rocker! As it

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was, I had been keeping a very tight reign on my emotions since I first stepped foot inside the club. So far, so good, I didn't feel a single muscle twitch all evening. But I *did* go so far as to explain what had happened to me on that cold, October night in Albuquerque with Max; how I'd gotten bitten by a snake, how I came back to DC after I'd decided I'd had enough of the lifestyle, only to abruptly leave my parent's house after I'd gotten in a fight with them. I told them that I'd met a new friend, Brian, and that so far, he had been taking very good care of me. Now it was time for *me* to ask questions. How did Benjamin figure that I was somehow special in the case of the missing go-go girls?

As Benjamin started to speak, Celia cut in, "Well, Ben was also very concerned about the girls, you know. When I met Sonny, and she told me what had happened to you, I figured maybe we could all work together to get to the bottom of everything. We could try to protect you, and try to locate the girls at the same time. Ben told me that he would like to do an astrological chart on you, perhaps that would shed some light on your situation. He wanted to ask you directly if it was OK, but to be frank, Nick, you're really good at hiding from the world when you don't want to be bothered. So Ben asked me if I knew your date of birth and the time you were born; that was all the info he needed to do a chart on you. I told him that I knew your birthday was March 5, 1965, and that I thought you'd told me in the past that you were born sometime between 4:00 and 4:05 p.m." I nodded, smiling. I was amazed that Celia could remember such frivolous information as that. Celia continued, "Anyway, after he'd completed your chart, he told me that you are the key to solving this whole mess." Benjamin cut in, "There is something very special about you, Nikki. I don't claim to know what it is. I'm only an occultist, not a psychic. But I strongly believe that somehow, you are the one to bring justice to everyone involved. I know Celia's told you that she's already filed a missing person's report on each of the dancers. I think that's a good place to start, but I also know that DC's finest aren't too swift when it comes to any possible foul play directed at you wonderful girls. So, we thought that for what it's worth, we should try to investigate any leads we may have on our own. At least, I feel that our spirits will rest better at night knowing that at least *something* is being done to solve the mystery, since we can't depend too much on the cops."

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“Let me get this straight,” I said, taking another sip of my Drambuie, “You all have reason to believe that Max may be here in DC, and that he’s trying to kill me, and that he has something to do with the missing girls,” I paused as they all nodded in agreement, “And you somehow think that this little homegrown Justice League of ours will fix everything?”

“In a manner of speaking, yes,” Sonny said, “Maybe we could bring your friend Brian in on this as well. He seems to have a pretty good head for helping us out.”

“This all sounds so crazy,” I said. But then, I grew quiet, slowly tracing the tip of my index finger around the rim of my drinking glass. I thought could it possibly be any crazier than my life as a shape-shifter has already been? Maybe there was a link between my snake-woman alter ego, Lilith, and the possibility of solving the mystery of the missing girls. Perhaps Lilith could be of some good use, after all. For the first time, in a very long time, I felt serene. After a while, I finally spoke.

“OK,” I sighed, “I’m in. Anybody got any leads as to how to start this thing?” Celia reached in her purse, and gave me a card. It was from the Third District Police Station. A detective’s name was printed on it: Jay Danzano, along with his phone, fax, email and work addresses. Celia pulled out another card from the City’s Medical Examiner, Doctor Adrian Bagg. I looked at the card, and laughed outright. It read:

Adrian Bagg, MD
Forensic Medical Examiner
“We Bag ‘em and Tag ‘em”

“Yeah, isn’t that sweet?” Celia asked, “Anyways, Detective Danzano is pretty cool. At least he seems better than the other cops. He promised to contact me as soon as they found anything on the girls. Meanwhile, it might be a good idea for somebody to contact all of the airports, train and bus stations in the Albuquerque area to see if Max may have purchased a ticket to DC. We can follow up from our end and check any passenger arrival lists in this area to see if he came here.

“Yeah, and we could contact all of the hotels and motels in the

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area to see if he's staying here in town," Sonny said. Benjamin asked, "What about weapons? Are any of us physically prepared to deal with any possible violence, should we confront him?" Sonny and I told him that we both were packing handguns, and even though mine was illegal, I was prepared to use it if I had to.

"But don't worry," I said, sounding pretty sure of myself at that moment, "I don't think it will be necessary."

* * *

Later that night, after I'd gone back home, I called Brian and told him about my meeting at the Babylon Nightclub. In the end, we had all decided that Sonny and I would research the Albuquerque area for records of any travel departures by Max to DC beginning December 1992 to present. Celia and Benjamin would work on the DC area, with Celia checking out passenger lists for Max's arrival, and Benjamin questioning the staff at various hotels and motels in the area to see where Max could be lodging himself. Brian was stunned.

"Wow Nick!" he exclaimed, "This is some wild shit!" He whistled.

"Yeah, I'm definitely in. You know I'll be your backup for anything, Nick. By the way, how is Lilith doing? Did you tell everybody about her?"

"She's under wraps, for the moment, and to answer your next question, no fucking way," I responded, "She will be our little secret. But judging from what happened in that diner back there in San Antonio, I'm sure Lilith can handle herself." I asked Brian if he'd heard of any news that possibly two homicide victims had been found in that diner. But, like me, he hadn't heard anything. It's almost as if the incident never took place.

"I think luck is with us on that one, Nick. I wouldn't be surprised if the rest of those truckers just buried the bodies themselves and try to keep the whole thing hush-hush. Like I told you before, ain't nobody in the world gonna believe their story."

"Yeah, I hope you're right," I answered. Brian and I said goodnight and hung up. Everybody would start on the big project tomorrow. By 2:30 a.m., I finally settled down to sleep. This time, the animal noises coming from the couple next door were barely noticed. I closed my eyes and thought, for the very first time in my life, that I was very, very happy to be alive.



*Seven stabs of the knife, seven stabs of the dagger,
Lend me the basin, so I can vomit my blood,
Lend me the basin, so I can vomit my blood,
My blood is pouring down.*

**HAITIAN CREOLE CHANT TO THE GODDESS,
ERZULIE DANTOR**