

The Middle Man

By Mya

I had chosen the Indian restaurant for the richness of its scents. There I could get drunk off of curry powder, saffron, garlic and jasmine. The smell of red peppers and cardamom, basil and bay leaves sent shudders through me as I sat at a table with only a copper cup of chilled water. I hadn't been waiting long, but the other patrons and the way they stared at me, made me feel as if I were a permanent fixture. I suppose that if I had stuck my tongue out, I could have done a pretty good impression of the Kali painting right beside the more serene portrait of Vishnu.

There were three dark Indians in the restaurant, an African American couple and one Hispanic, whose skin was dark. Perhaps none of them shared the purple hue to their skin as mine, but my shade existed in all of their cultures. There was nothing too odd about my hair. The blue streaks could be explained away along with all of the leather I wore as an expression of individuality in an age where everyone strived to be noticed and different. There was a woman with orange streaks in her hair at one of the tables, much more shocking than mine, yet there were several flickering glances directed at me.

The contrast of silver eyes on one so dark could have had something to do with their unease but surely they had to think of my oddity as being nothing more than colored contacts. It was the twenty-first century after all. Freaks were all over the fashion magazines, upon the television and on film. I could blend... Couldn't I?

My waitress returned to the table for the third time with her copper pitcher, asking sheepishly if I was ready to order. I accepted more water only, wanting to retain my clarity for what was to come. Just looking at the other tables with their lamb Vindaloo, Tandoori chicken, curry shrimp and spiced vegetables threatened to undo me. A solitary bite would bring me to orgasm, the spices would infect my blood like a narcotic, and I would be in no condition to negotiate. My head would swim with clouds so thick that I wouldn't be able to mutter my own name, let alone be able to complete a deal.

The waitress stepped away, clearing my line of sight to the entrance and validating my decision to abstain from divine heights. My thief had arrived!

Yuri was everything that a professional criminal should be. He was five-six, compact and strong, as if he had been a gymnast before he settled on the profession of attaining items without permission or payment. His dark brown hair and succinctly hazel eyes could have been found on any continent or blended into any crowd. While he hadn't proven to me that he could

disguise his thick Western European accent, I had impeccable references from his former clients and I trusted that the mission that I had sent him on had been a successful one.

His eyes met mine as the hostess attempted her inquiries, offering him a place at either the bar or a table. He declined and wove his way through the room, directly to my table. I saw no satchel on his shoulder, but reigned in my doubts as he took the seat across from me. He didn't have the look of failure, showing me crooked but white teeth behind a wry smile.

"Do you have it?"

Yuri was about to speak but before he could get a word out, my diligent waitress had returned to take his drink order. He too opted for water and a moment to review the menu at least. Once she left our table, he nodded to me. "I do. It is secure."

"Good. But it isn't in front of me."

He held up a hand and waved for me to calm. His smile weakened and died within seconds. "Easy Bacchi. I have it. There is nothing to worry about."

I wanted to believe him but my gut was not so gullible.

"First. What is it may I ask?"

I didn't like his question. He was supposed to be an unbiased, uninterested party. I was assured that he would be and yet the way his eyes narrowed told me that he was far more curious after the assignment, as opposed to before. "I told you. It's a reliquary from a time long past. The church stole it from my kind a very long time ago, so if it's your morality that is worrying you – Don't let it. Just tell me that you have my jar and that the seal is intact."

"I have it. And yes, it is still sealed. It is in my car outside."

I scooted back in my chair prepared to go, but my thief didn't move an inch.

He sighed, actually picking up the menu again and rummaging through the leather bound listing as if he meant to order. "I was just saying that I had to go through a great deal to get it and morality only had a small part to play. The bigger hindrance was suspicion. Why would the church want a sealed jar?"

I could barely suppress the animalist growl brewing at the back of my throat. I imagined his paltry ordinary flesh, with onions and peppers, a spicy Korma sauce and some garlic naan. "You came highly recommend, Yuri. Would you have me believe otherwise?"

"No. No. No," he insisted. "I am an utter professional which is why I suspect that our agreed upon price may be a little low. A Ming vase went for 1.6 million last year at Sotheby's. And I just think that this may be worth more."

“You think, eh? You think?”

“What are the marks around the jar? Is it writing, some kind of warning or language?”

I had promised myself that I would behave, that I would respect the deal that I had set forth. For five years, I had been on a mission. I was required to work with thieves all too often. Sometimes they called themselves antiquities dealers, sometimes they were called cutpurses and occasionally there was no subterfuge and they simply named themselves thieves. All of them were negotiators. “You bother with details, when you don’t have to. Unnecessary ones. We had a deal, a generous one at that. There is no need for questions.” To solidify my point, I reached down to my sleek, engineer boots and grabbed the heavy satchel that I had braced between them. I placed the bag upon the table so he could feel the weight jostle the structure.

Before my eyes, I could see his suspicion waning. He put the menu back down on the table and straightened up. “Okay. Come with me.” He gave a nod and stood.

My pulse quickened at the thought of leaving the restaurant. I didn’t want to be out in the street, amongst a million distractions and faulty witnesses. Inside of The Jasmine Palace, I was safe, enclosed. The advantage was mine. As much as I loved the night, I had learned long ago that love simply wasn’t enough. My home had been destroyed at night. Hundreds of my kin had perished beneath deep purple skies. “Bring it inside. I will wait for you.”

“Paranoid, Bacchi? My car is right out front. If you look you can see it from here.”

The restaurant had a large bay window in the front, through which a good portion of the street could be seen. The front of a dark blue Ford sedan could be seen parked across the street. How the fucker had managed to get such a good spot, when I had scoped the street two hours in advance and discovered nothing was disappointing.

“It is out in the open. We could just do the transfer and be done.”

I looked up at him. “It *could* have already been done.”

“You think I mean to cheat you, but the truth is something much simpler. I just don’t wish to put my hands on it again. There is something wrong with that thing,” he said, nose wrinkled.

“Something like what?”

He wouldn’t meet my eyes then, but I could smell fear on him all the same at the mention of my prize. The scent was subtle, a bit of salt and a twinge of warm sweetness like kettle corn. I chalked it up to intuition which thieves had to have in spades, either way the realization that he hadn’t opened the jar was encouraging. For that I would have smelled terror, a sharper scent entirely. “The reliquary?”

“Yes. It...it just feels wrong. I’ll be glad to get it out of my sight.”

I gripped the handle of my satchel. “Again. You simply had to bring it inside.” I got up from the chair, going against my better judgment. The waitress that had been tending our table, came out of the kitchen with two steaming entrees for the table just across from ours. I smelled Saag Paneer and goat curry, both dishes heady with spice. I began to salivate. A trap could have been laid, but at least I would be free and alert enough to defend myself. Inside of the restaurant, Yuri would have been much safer. But then he had no idea of that and I hoped he never did.

I left behind far too much money to cover only water, before I carried my satchel behind the thief to the exit. Every acquisition I made represented hope. Every piece of the puzzle was a step closer to salvation of my people, every jar.

The risk if there was any, would always be worth it.

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I looked in the trunk of the sedan and gasped, not because I cared for the antique gold casing, so old that it looked like rusted bronze. I didn’t give a damn for the wards and warnings written in Hebrew along the side of the jar, as the shell didn’t matter. If the jar had been a fake, my soul would have known it before my fingers even touched the surface. But it was genuine. My soul was certain of it. I shuddered in my recognition. Yuri had been successful.

“It is a magnificent piece. It’s creepy, but impressive nonetheless,” he said.

I handed the satchel to him without taking my eyes off of the jar. As soon as the money left my grasp, I moved forward and took the treasure into my hands. I cradled it against the crook of my arm, fingering the seal of the lid to ensure that it was intact. The resin was still sound. “Yes it is...a treasure. I am indebted to you as I’m sure my people will be.”

With the money secure beside his spare tire, Yuri reached into his pants pocket for his pack of cigarettes. He shook a single loose and lit it. “I think I should tell you that someone discovered me.”

“And?” I was anxious to get out of the street and back home, choosing to disregard his statement. I looked upon the symbol of the great tree, just barely visible, etched into the gold of the jar and surrounded by *their* language. The tree showed two sides: the tribes of the moon seated upon branches to the left and the tribes of the sun to the right. Every jar had the same symbol and the same language, the language of the victorious. Just seven more reliquaries and the Breed, my breed would know success. It had been foretold. “Really Yuri, you did it and you got your cash. That’s all that is important. In fact, I may have other work for you in the future.”

With my prize tucked into the crook of my arm, I turned to go like a child with a Christmas present. I longed to return to my car, to break the seal and gaze at the delight I knew to be inside. There had been those who doubted my ability to hunt. I wondered if they ever figured in my negotiating skills as I chalked up another successful acquisition to my tally.

Yuri sighed loudly before I could get more than two steps away. “The priest told me about that jar. He told me about you too.”

I froze, nearly two feet from the road and an oncoming Scion.

“He spoke of the end of civilization, the downfall of man— demons basking in the sun. He went on about the rebirth of Baphomet and the welcome of all that is evil and vile in the world. That is what the priest warned me of as he begged me to return it to the vault. Father told me that all of the money in the world was not worth the security of that thing.”

I watched the cars move up and down the street. There wasn’t a lot of traffic and I could have easily continued across the road and onto my car. Yet I couldn’t move. The thief had uttered the name of the revered one. It was never a word to fall freely from human lips and I certainly hadn’t mentioned it. My chest heaved with anger. My nails grew longer and sharper against the golden jar in my hand. Yuri had informed me when I first queried him that he was not a religious man and yet there was something in his voice that spoke of fear. *What else did the priest say, I wondered. What did he show you?* “It’s a reliquary. That is all.”

“Liar. I know who you are. What you are.”

I growled, nostrils flaring. I had no time for Yuri’s knowledge, where as if he truly knew what I was, then he wouldn’t have pressed me so boldly. I was death and destruction, appetite and wasting, all in one. The jar, the jar, I reminded myself. It was too important for me to take such provocation. “If you knew half of what you say you do, then you will take the money and leave me be,” was my suggestion until a dark blue van came to a stop before me. From the passenger side, a young western European man with strawberry blonde hair, watery blue eyes and horribly crooked teeth grinned down at me.

It *was* a trap! I rounded back to Yuri, who was surely gasping at the sight of my skin cracking open in stripes and whorls to reveal the silver flesh beneath. His eyes were wide, the whites so clear.

I showed my fangs and snarled, saw him jump slightly. “What have you done?”

“Don’t make a scene.” The passenger in the van gestured down to the twin barrels resting on the window frame.

My heart beat louder than the sounds of a busy street. I turned slowly, facing my thief. “Yuri. You don’t want to do this. I can get you more money, enough for you and your friends.”

"I can get much more money for you. And I'm gonna." He recovered quicker from his shock than I thought he would, showing off a handgun held low to his hip, yet aimed at my chest. I noted a couple passing along the side walk, just behind Yuri. So enamored they were with each other, that they wouldn't have had a clue if he had shot me down. Would they even care if they knew what I was?

Probably not.

I heard a latch being thrown, doors swinging outward on their hinges. A swarthy dark haired man, clean-shaven, with a long pointed nose and keen brown eyes, emerged from the back of the van. He too showed a poorly concealed gun at his waist. His hand rested lightly upon the handle as he gestured for me to approach him. "Come, abomination."

I took a step back. "I am not getting in there."

"I think you are." Yuri was at my side, pressing the barrel of his gun to the left of my spine as the passenger in the van opened the door and stepped down. He moved to the driver's side of Yuri's car, the shotgun making an obvious impression beneath his long coat.

Livid, I looked around, frantically weighing my options. I could have let the jar drop to the ground, I could have ripped Yuri's throat open. I could have run. Bullets were almost harmless against me, but exposure was not. Too many bullets would slow me down and in the middle of the street, others would see the real me. The aroma of spilled blood would madden me, kill my rational thought. Unlike the scents of cooked food and herbs inside of the restaurant, I would be a thing rampant rather than ensnared. I wouldn't be able to think clearly as the scent of chaos would turn me upon not just my would-be kidnappers but any onlookers too unfortunate to flee.

Worse. I could lose my prize.

I walked with Yuri, close behind to the back of the van, glaring at the bearded man as I passed. He wore a chain with a three inch silver cross pendant with a gold circle surrounding the junction. It was the symbol of the Tribes of the Sun. Up close I could also make out the stark white strip of his cassock, peeking out from his collar. Something told me that he had been the begging priest.

They both stood unyielding as I looked into the open cave of the vehicle, noting two benches on each side, an industrial tool box in the front, parallel to the front seats. There were no lights inside, and it stank like cigarettes and deer.

Mr. Shotgun had opened the door to Yuri's car and slide inside. They had the money, the treasure and me.

"Get in," Yuri commanded.

Torture. Beating. Worse, undoubtedly awaited and only because I had experienced it so many times for nothing did I raise my foot to get inside. My treasure was worth the ominous feeling in my gut. It was worth whatever I was to come.

The second I stepped up, Yuri and the priest came behind me, rushing me forward. The doors were slammed and latched shut, sealing me in with my captors.

The priest made to grab for my treasure. "I'll take that back, thank you," he said, reaching for my jar and nearly pulling it from my hand. I held tight and for a while we struggled. I only feigned, snatching the jar from him completely. I hooked a nail just below the latch that secured the seal and pulled it free before dropping it to the floor.

"No," the priest cried out, his eyes going wide.

I would have chuckled, if the butt of Yuri's gun hadn't come crashing down against my temple. My consciousness froze for only an instant, as I slumped to the floor.

I crawled forward, pretending to cover the bubbling silver fluid, leaking from the cracked seal. The toe of the priest's boots struck me in the back, lacking any hint of piety. "Demon! You filthy demon spawn!" His fury resounded inside of the van, as one blow connected with the back of my head, sending me face first into the essence of a God.

I clung to the rubber matting on the floor of the van as the vehicle began to move. The pain of his shoe striking me, was nothing compared to the searing burn of Baphomet's blood beneath my hands and chest, seeping into my skin, cracking the outer crust in order to get into muscle, my veins.

"Easy, Father Pike. They'll be time for that later," promised the driver.

Pike the priest would not be swayed although his balance was suspect. He bent down and grabbed a hold of the rim of the jug and let loose a howl. His fingers had surely come into contact with some of the blood. I looked up and saw him nursing swollen, red lengths of scalded flesh.

I laughed before Pike's heel came crashing down upon my head again.

The right side of my face drank the remainder of the lava as I shook with spasms from the intensity of the burn. I felt something move beneath underneath my chin, felt it slither into the collar of my shirt and further down. Like a swift slug, the silken substance travelled beneath my clothing and latched onto my thigh like a brand. I ground my teeth to stop the scream that wanted to spring forth but my body jerked violently nonetheless. Perhaps it was the pain that caused the reality surrounding me to dissolve. For a moment, there were no men, no van, I was not lying prone but standing upright and surrounded by a sea of white. I could see back through the centuries and onto happier days of long before, when the nights had been long and

the days serene. I saw skin of all colors, a multitude of unique beings with wondrous features, horns, tentacles, spikes and tusks that would give rise to wonder and fear...and they were all thriving. They had true homes above ground, gardens, pools to bathe in and animals to care for.

There had been days when my ancestors ruled more than just the night and for just a moment I saw a glimpse of moon children playing in the sun!

When I returned to myself, I discovered Yuri taking a more cautious approach than the priest. He was using a crow bar to tilt the jar towards him. "What the fuck? What was supposed to be in the jar?"

Pike ignored the panic in his partner's voice, choosing to pose a question to me. He gripped at my scalp and yanked my head back. There was no fear at the sight of my face, which still felt raw and open. His only expression was rage. "Where is it? Where is it, demon?"

"Where is what? Can't it wait?"

"The flesh," Pike snapped at their driver.

Didn't tell them, eh Father?

He slammed my face down into the floor of the van, several times. I couldn't keep track of how many, specifically after the rich sulfur of my own blood began to fill my nostrils.

"Don't make me ask you again, heathen."

Yuri, more than anyone else, seemed the most alarmed by the revelation. "Father! What are you talking about? Flesh? You said it was a relic. Do you mean skin?"

"There was a piece of their so-called God inside of that jar." He tried to use his boot, pushing it under my belly, to get me to turn, but failed. He then grabbed me by my jacket and turned me upon my side. I couldn't resist grinning, as his eyes swept over me suspiciously.

It earned me a fist to the mouth as I listened to a tale that I had been told when I was young.

"Centuries ago, their God was torn apart, gifted to the church and spread across the world. Undoubtedly she is amongst those who would see him restored."

"There are more of them?"

"Of course there are. They're very good at hiding, these things. But I won't have it. I won't." He crouched down over me and grabbed me by the throat. Where the knife came from, I couldn't have said. Up until that point, I had been fairly unafraid, but the tip of the hunting knife worrying my stomach, ceased my mirth.

"She swallowed it. I know she did," he told Yuri while glaring at me. "I will tear you apart in order to get it and I will enjoy every minute. Do you understand me?"

Not very priest-like at all. I understood... It had been the reason I chose a middle man in the first place. Boone, my leader, my priest had warned me that duty would not be easy. He himself had nearly been killed in his pilgrimage to retrieve one piece. But he who had done so much, alone, he who had not been born to the breed, yet fought just as fiercely as if he was deserved support. He had found four on his own, returning to us weary and wounded every time. One bout with an abomination named Decker, had cost Boone an arm and almost his life.

Surely, I could be as brave. "I understand," I said.

The steel slide too easily into my belly; swift and cold, I felt no pain at first. The air within my lungs, my awareness fled from me in a heartbeat, but the twist of the blade broke me. I screamed, surging forward to return the attack with the only weapons I possessed, my claws.

I managed to score gashes over the flesh of the priest's face, deep, bloody gouges from his temples to his chin. His screams were louder than mine, but not by much and not for as long as I would have liked, before Yuri began to wail upon me with the crow bar.

There were so many sounds then. Yuri commanding me to stop, the driver of the van questioning and swearing in the same breath, the sound of the van's engine accelerating as surely they must have broken onto the turnpike and out of the city.

The hammer blow of the crowbar finding my skull, took the last of my energy, all that was not flowing out of my belly. Again and again, the metal connected, shattering my nose, bursting my eye. Pike's blade delved deep, before he began to saw upward and my innards began to spill forth.

I told myself that death would not be so bad, but the truth of the matter was that I didn't know what secrets the true sleep held. The only thing that I had ever known was pain.

A curious child, born far beneath the earth, I had once thought to make friends with the berserkers, hulking Nightbreed wild with madness, more beasts than sentient beings. For that folly, I had had both arms yanked from their sockets and a sizable chunk torn from my leg. When I was ten, I had fallen into a pool of vicious lampreys, kept by a neighboring cove. They had stripped the skin off my back and legs within a minute. Once our home had been destroyed, I had thought to join the human world. I could pass and thought to travel the earth; India, the Sudan, Paris and Brazil...and I had learned a great deal about gunshots, poisons, diseases and violence...but death was something that I had never faced.

And then the numbness began as the knife pushed upwards to my rib cage and onto shier organs.

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It was the sound of birds chirping that caused me to wake, not the crisp wet dew or industrious insects scurrying over my face looking for nourishment or some useful bit of salvage to take beneath the ground to bolster their colonies. The night sky was lifting her skirt like a shy girl, showing a wondrous glow upon the horizon and it was a truly beautiful sight. I thanked Baphomet that I had been born without sensitivity to the sun's brilliance as it threatened to reveal itself.

My broken body lay at the bottom of a gorge, from which I could easily see the guard rail of the highway that I was surely thrown from. For the most part, my limbs were connected but I was far from whole. With shaking fingers, I moved my hand over my splayed belly, over the bars of my cracked rib cage....Well at least Pike had been diligent, him and possibly Yuri as well. They had taken every organ of mine that they could. Heart, lungs, stomach, intestines, kidneys—I would have laughed, but they had punctured my throat as well in their search.

It wasn't a question. I knew that they hadn't found what they were looking for the second that I had opened my eyes. I could feel it upon the back of left thigh.

My skin was dark, the color of a plum. When enraged, my skin would open in the lines and swirls, revealing the silvery glow of my blood, so much like Baphomet's.

Boone had not wished me to help with his mission, his duty as he often put it. I was too valuable to the Breed, he had told me, but as I crushed the first of many skittering bugs to come, drawing out the rich protein from its carapace, I regretted nothing. The priest, the thief and none of their cohorts would have looked for or noticed the patch of skin that was darker than even mine, the piece that did not crack and that one that I could not command. That skin was not mine, but that of my great, direct ancestor.

It would take some time for me to return to the Boone and the others with my prize, but return I would. Whether I would use a middle man again, was up in the air. Whether I would repay Yuri, was certain and in no place public.

