

TIMOTHY CARTER

THE



WORLD

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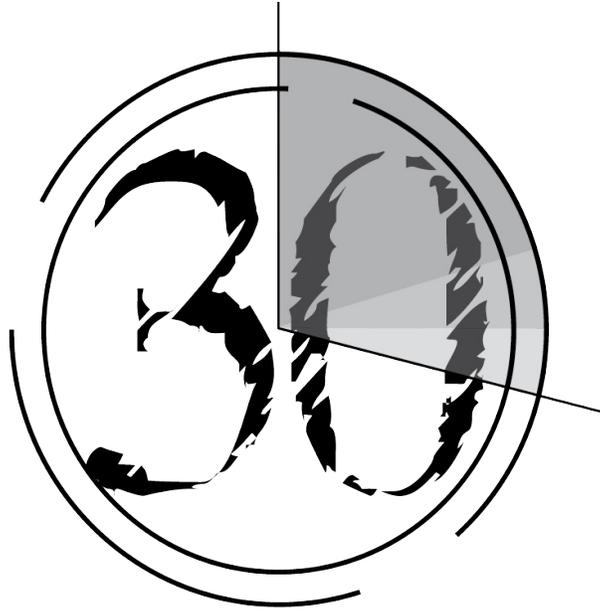
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“The rogue planet will come,” said the tall girl in the white turtleneck. “And when it does, it will destroy us all!”

The girl stood behind a table, upon which was a basketball painted to look like an alien world. Next to it stood a globe, with several natural disasters drawn in magic marker all over its surface.

Behind her on the wall was a large piece of bristol board, upon which was a detailed drawing of the alien planet’s orbit. Above the drawing, in big red letters, were the words, “Rogue Planet.”

Her name was Sandra. She was not Vincent.

“They already have agents in the White House and the Pentagon,” said a Japanese boy in a T-shirt that featured a giant, gun-toting robot. “And soon, when the bulk of their fleet arrives in orbit, they’ll take us down in seconds!”

On the table in front of him, he had displayed several alien action figures and a few plastic UFOs. He’d also placed pieces of human action figures around the display, just for effect. On the wall behind him were several imaginatively drawn pictures of aliens wiping out humanity.

His name was Pat. He was not Vincent, either.

“The world will end in ice!” said a thin Indian boy. “Weather patterns will change, and a new ice age will consume the planet.”

He stood before a table littered with drawings of dangerous weather, with explanations written in note form. On the wall behind him, his bristol board poster read “The Next Ice Age” in blue lettering.

His name was Vijay. He also was not Vincent.

In fact, most of the kids presenting their projects at Woodlaw Middle School’s 10th annual science fair were not Vincent. There were two Michaels, four Johns, and quite a few Jennifers, but only one of them was Vincent.

Vincent Drear stood behind his display in the far corner of the school’s gymnasium, right next to the big orange drink dispenser. He wore a faded, worn pair of jeans, the same pair his mother had tried to throw out twice before. His sneakers were old and grubby, not the polished dress shoes his parents had wanted him to wear, and his T-shirt was loose and baggy. His clothes did not look very spectacular, but they were comfortable. Vincent liked comfortable clothes. They helped him to deal with situations he found uncomfortable, like the snickers he got when people saw his display.

On the table in front of Vincent, he had many leaflets and tracts from his parents’ church. He also had small statues of Jesus Christ, Moses, and Abraham, the Holy Triumvirate. Vincent had placed them around a small globe, next to a stand-up sign that read, “The Act of Cleansing.”

While the other students stood and shouted out their prophecies of doom, Vincent slouched in his chair and hoped he wouldn’t be noticed.

“You’re hoping nobody will notice you, right?” said Big Tom, the smallest person in the entire school. He wore a white shirt buttoned right up to his neck, and red corduroy pants that were hideous to look at. Big Tom sat on a couple of textbooks on top of a stool, and even then he could barely see over his table.

“You know the judges will be here eventually,” Big Tom told his friend.

Vincent nodded but said nothing. His eyes were fixed on his older brother Max, who handed out leaflets from Vincent’s table to anyone who would take one. Max was a large boy, dressed sharply in a red shirt and tie. His hair was immaculately cut and combed, and his blue eyes could only be described as piercing.

As Max stuffed pamphlets into hands, he preached for all he was worth, determined to save at least one soul at the science fair.

Vincent's family were Triumvirites, a new branch of Christianity that had popped up fairly recently on the spiritual marketplace. Triumvirites believed that three characters from the Bible—Jesus, Moses, and Abraham—had banded together to produce a text that spelled out the definitive version of God's divine plan for the universe.

That text was the *Book of the Triumvirate*, discovered thirty years ago inside a cave outside Jerusalem. It spoke of dire times ahead, when demons would roam the earth spreading lies and deception. Only the Triumvirate could show people the true path, and save them from an eternity in fire.

Vincent hadn't asked for—or wanted—his brother's help. And he really hadn't wanted to do a display for his family's religion. He thought the whole Triumvirate thing was bunk, though he was smart enough to keep those feelings to himself.

Vincent turned his head and looked at the volcano display on Big Tom's table. The two friends had spent a week making it out of papier-mâché, and to Vincent's eye it looked great. Of course, he'd been the one who'd painted it. It was gray, the universal color of plain old rock, with red lava streaks and brown for trees from the mid-point on down. The cone at the top was ten centimeters wide, and filled with baking soda. On the table beside the volcano was a bottle of vinegar, which would react with the baking soda to produce a volcanic effect.

On the wall behind Big Tom was a sign that read "Volcanic Calamity." Vincent had come up with the title, which to his ear sounded much better than "Volcanoes Will End The World Someday With Their Thick Ash."

In Vincent's opinion, volcanoes were not going to wipe out the world. They could change the weather, sure—he remembered the extra-long winter they'd had a few years back when a volcano in Peru dumped three mountains worth of ash into the atmosphere. However, the idea that a volcano could put enough ash into the sky to end all life across the planet wasn't very likely.

A volcanic apocalypse was more likely, however, than the Holy Triumvirate coming down from the sky and announcing the end. Unfortunately for Vincent, that was exactly what he was supposed to be saying.

"Don't you think it's weird," Big Tom said suddenly, "that everyone's doing end-of-the-world stuff this year?"

“That’s what the school decided the theme should be,” Vincent said, his eyes fixed once more on his brother. “We had to do what they said.”

“Well, yeah,” Big Tom said. “But don’t you think it’s weird they chose that as a theme? I mean, that’s kind of morbid.”

Vincent nodded. He didn’t think it was weird at all, however. The school was simply going along with the latest fad.

Everyone was talking about the end-times these days. It seemed to have come from nowhere, as most fads did, but after two years it had achieved a kind of permanence. Not a week went by without the discovery of some new asteroid that might hit us, or a new terrorist group that might have the Bomb appearing on the world scene. Weathermen pointed to strange weather patterns and declared them the onset of something far more sinister.

And then, there were the religious cults. None of them called themselves cults, of course. They preferred the term “The One True Faith.” Every day, it seemed, a One True Faith member got his or her name in the paper by leading some kind of march, rally, or protest. Sometimes they assembled outside a doctor’s office, or the home of a politician who was pro-choice. Often they would rally at a bookstore, movie theater, or anywhere else where sinful deeds or images were on display.

And of course, all the cults preached that the end of the world was nigh. However, none preached that message more enthusiastically than the Triumvirites. Vincent’s family had dragged him to three End-Of-Day rallies since the start of the school term, and he hadn’t enjoyed them at all.

Vincent hadn’t had to do much work for his project—all the pamphlets and posters he used had been lying around the house. For that, and that alone, Vincent was glad of his family’s religion. With everyone at home willing to prepare his project for him, he’d had plenty of time to help out Big Tom with his volcano.

“Vincent, the judges are coming!” Big Tom hissed. “What do I do?”

Vincent rolled his eyes. A good friend Tom most certainly was. A smart boy he most certainly was not.

“Use the notes I gave you when they ask questions,” Vincent said, tapping one of the papers on Big Tom’s table. “Then, when they want a demonstration, pour

some vinegar on the baking soda.”

“I remember that part,” Big Tom said, grabbing the bottle of vinegar. “It’s just ... you’ll help me out, won’t you?”

“You bet,” Vincent said. “Just relax. It’s only a science fair.”

“Yeah,” Big Tom said, “but I want to win!”

“You won’t,” Vincent said. “And neither will I. Barnaby Wilkins will win. He always does.”

Big Tom had nothing to say to that. They both looked over at the table in the center of the gymnasium, which stood before a big billboard poster that read, “Government Conspiracy” in big red letters. Behind that table stood a tall, wiry boy, dressed in khakis, a collared shirt, and a V-necked sweater. He did not fit the typical image of the school bully, but Vincent and Big Tom knew only too well that his outward appearance was deceiving.

On the table in front of Barnaby, two laptops ran a slide show of images, complete with sound effects and narration from two large speakers on either side. The thumping musical accompaniment was, in Vincent’s opinion, a bit much.

But that wasn’t the best of it. Barnaby’s two bodyguards, Bruno and Boots, stood on either side of Barnaby, glaring at passersby. Dressed in black suits and dark glasses, they waved official-looking badges and snapped dialogue like, “That’s classified information!” or “You’ve seen too much!” at anyone who cared to listen.

“You’ve got to admit,” Vincent sighed, “he knows how to put on a show.”

Barnaby’s father, Francis Wilkins, was rich. He was not Let’s-Buy-the-Statue-of-Liberty-for-Barnaby’s-Birthday kind of rich, but he had more than enough and a bit more besides. He was a top executive at Alphega Corp., one of the largest and most profitable corporations in the world, and his position paid very, very well. Every year he spared no expense to make sure his son’s projects were the best they could be. It made all the other kids jealous, and it always made the judges swoon.

“Well, what have we here?” said one of the judges as they arrived at Big Tom’s table. He was short, sweaty, and bald, and smelled vaguely of cheese.

“This is ... well, my project is on volcanoes,” Big Tom said.

“Is that what this is supposed to be?” said another judge, tapping the volcano’s side. “I thought it was a smokestack or something.” He was tall, thin, and balding, with glasses so thick they made his eyes comically huge.

“It’s a volcano,” Vincent said, glaring at the thoughtless adults who had dared to put down his creation.

“We’ll be right with you, son,” the cheesy judge said.

“So,” the third judge asked Tom, “you think volcanoes are going to take over the world, eh?” She was pear-shaped, with a tiny chest above her huge thighs and enormous bottom. She had way too much makeup on her face, and her long and spindly fingers resembled spider legs.

“Um, er ... well, yes! That’s my project,” Big Tom said, looking frantically at Vincent for help.

Vincent sighed, then mimed with his hands the idea of volcanoes erupting and spewing out so much ash into the atmosphere that the sun would be blocked and the planet would freeze. He really did. You can mime anything with your hands if you try.

“Um ... so, all these volcanoes will erupt,” Big Tom said, “and cover the entire planet in ash ...”

Vincent put his hands in his face and moaned.

“You should be concerned with your own project, brother.”

Vincent looked up and saw Max standing in front of his table, staring pure disapproval into his face. Vincent sighed again; he’d only taken his eyes off his brother for thirty seconds, a minute at most.

“Why are you not preaching the Good Word?” Max went on, perfectly pronouncing the capital letters on Good and Word. “I’m out there distributing pamphlets for you, spreading the Message of the Triumvirate, and you sit and do nothing.”

“I’m pacing myself,” Vincent said. “I want to save my energy for when it really matters.”

“It always matters!” Max snapped. “Every moment of life must be spent spreading the Joyous Love of the Triumvirate.”

Whereas Vincent had more or less given up the faith, Max had embraced it wholeheartedly. For a while Vincent thought his brother’s belief was just a way

of sucking up to their parents. And maybe that had been Max's intention in the beginning. Now, however, it was clear to Vincent his brother was a True Believer.

Max often said the Triumvirate gave his life Direction and Meaning. Vincent thought it made his brother a major pain in the rear. Especially when that Direction and Meaning were shoveled into Vincent's face.

"Why don't you go save someone?" Vincent suggested.

"You mean Save?"

"Yeah, that."

"I want to see how well you do with the judges," Max said. "If they are not impressed, Mother and Father will be most unhappy."

Vincent made a face at his brother, then returned his attention to Big Tom's vain attempt to please the judges. He was trying to pour some vinegar into the volcano to set off the baking soda, but he couldn't quite reach the top and vinegar was slopping all over the side.

Vincent moaned, then got up and took the vinegar from his friend. He poured it into the volcano's cone, and absolutely nothing happened.

"Well, that's not very good," the bug-eyed judge said.

"That should have worked," Vincent said, confused. "Big Tom, more baking soda."

Big Tom grabbed his half-full bag of baking powder and tried to spoon some more in. As he did so, Vincent got a good look at the bag and made an unpleasant discovery.

"This," he snatched the bag away from his friend, "is flour."

"It is?" Big Tom said. "It looked the same as baking soda, so I just figured it was the same thing."

"It is not," Vincent said, "the same thing. I told you so many times ..."

"Did you help him with this project?" the spider-finger judge asked.

"That's against the rules," said bug-eyes.

"I'm afraid you two will have to be disqualified," said the cheesy judge, making a mark on his clipboard.

"But ... but ..." Big Tom said, but the judges were already walking away.

"Don't you want to see mine?" Vincent called after them.

“Why bother?” the cheesy judge called back. “You’re disqualified.”

Vincent sat down heavily and glared at Big Tom. Max leaned down on his table and glared at him.

“Mother and Father will be very disappointed,” Max said.

“Oh, go away,” Vincent replied, standing back up and shoving some more pamphlets into his brother’s hands.

“Very disappointed,” Max repeated, in case the first time hadn’t sunk in. When Vincent didn’t respond, Max assumed it had.

However, it hadn’t. At that moment, Vincent saw something a lot more interesting under one of the other tables. It was smaller than Big Tom, brown-skinned and pointy-eared, and it wore clothing that seemed to have been fashioned from leaves. Vincent thought for a moment that it was a toy or something, but then it turned its head and its big, deep eyes locked with his. Its big eyes grew wider, possibly in surprise, and then it seemed to grin.

Max turned and left. The movement distracted Vincent, and he lost sight of the creature. When he looked under the table again, it was gone.

“What,” he asked no one, “was that?”

“I don’t know,” Big Tom said, thinking Vincent was talking to him.

Vincent could have said something silly, like, “Did you just see that?” but it was clear that Big Tom had not. Vincent sat back down, and stared at the spot where the thing had been. A shiver went through him. There was only one thing he could think of that the creature might have been. Something his parents, brother, and priest had warned him about all of his life.

A demon.

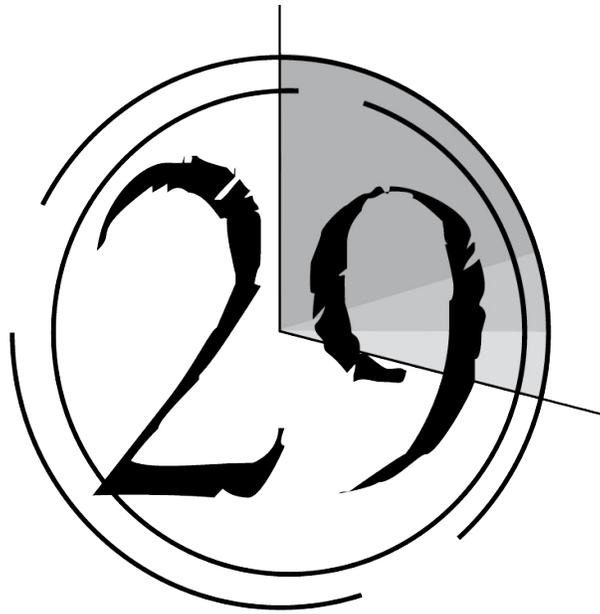
Only last Sunday, he’d been subjected to a sermon on demons.

“They are everywhere,” Pastor Impwell had preached to their congregation of forty-two people. “They seek to do harm to our souls, lead us away from the Truth, and into a Web of Sin. That is why we must be ever Vigilant. Listen not to those who would accuse you of paranoia or fear mongering, my friends. Demons are real, and we must educate the world of their existence.”

The sermon had bored Vincent to tears at the time, but now it didn’t seem quite so stupid. That creature he’d seen might have been a demon, a possibility that held terrible implications. If demons were real, did that also mean the

Triumvirate was real as well?

Because if they were, he was in some major spiritual trouble.



The drive home was torture, but Vincent had expected no less. His parents had listened very carefully while Max gave his report of Vincent's shortcomings, then they expressed their own grave disappointment.

"You'd better have a good explanation for not preaching the Message with all your Strength," his father said.

"Indeed," added Max, who didn't want to be left out.

Vincent had heard it all before. "You're letting the Triumvirate down, Vincent." "I don't know what Pastor Impwell will say, Vincent." "Don't you feel the Fire in your soul, Vincent?" "You know how important the Message is, Vincent!"

Vincent said, "Yes, Mom," and "Yes, Dad," when expected, responding on autopilot. His mind, however, was on greater issues.

He'd seen a demon. That, at least, was what he feared the creature to be. He'd considered telling his brother about it, but Max would have thought he was making it up to get himself out of trouble.

Of course, if Max had seen it, he would have declared it a demon immediately. There would have been no doubt at all in his mind. Vincent's mind was more open, and he hated to pass judgment without first knowing all the facts. He'd never seen a demon before, and didn't know what one was supposed to look like.

That creature could have been anything.

But what if it was a demon? The thought terrified Vincent, but his open mind forced him to consider it. He'd dismissed his family's religion as a stupid waste of time, but what if they'd been right on the money? What if demons really were trying to lead his soul away from the Triumvirate and into the fiery clutches of Hell?

To get his mind off his impending eternal damnation, Vincent gave his attention back to his parents.

"There will be no supper tonight for you, my son," said his mother. "For your own good. You've got to learn ... Oh. It's that girl." Her voice, already harsh, had grown a shade darker.

Vincent had a look out the right side of the car and saw a teen girl sitting on the front lawn of a small bungalow. She had long, dark hair that had been dyed purple below her shoulders, and she wore a dress of the same color. She sat with her eyes closed on a small blanket, her hands turned upward in her lap.

"Chanteuse Sloam," Max said with distaste.

"What is she doing?" his mother wanted to know.

"Probably communing with evil spirits," their father replied knowledgeably.

"She's meditating," Vincent said, leaning to get a better look. He remembered she was pretty, but he'd forgotten how pretty.

Chanteuse had babysat Vincent and Max, back when they were kids. Max hadn't liked her much, but Vincent took to her immediately. She'd played with him and told him about mystic energies, astral travel, and worlds beyond our own, and Vincent had sat listening to her for hours.

He missed those days.

"I don't care what that witch is doing," his mother said. "Why can't she do it somewhere else where we can't see her?"

"Maybe she likes the front lawn," Vincent said.

"You will go down to the chapel as soon as we get home," his father said. "You will pray for better Guidance, that you might preach the Message more competently in the future. Friday in particular."

"Yes, father," Vincent said, turning away from the Sloam house.

"Are we still going to the movie?" Max asked.

“Yes, dear,” his mother replied. “As soon as we drop your brother off. Would you get the picket signs out of the garage?”

“Yes, Mother, I will,” Max said, beaming a bright smile.

“You guys are actually protesting a movie tonight?” Vincent asked.

“If we get there quickly enough,” his mother said.

It wasn't often that the Drear family, or indeed any Triumvirite, got to protest outside a movie theater or book launch or any other media-related event. They wanted to, but those opportunities were usually gobbled up by the other True-Faith groups. Such groups, being the One True Faith, refused to share when it came to their outrage, so the Triumvirites were often forced to picket other things.

Like acne. The sin they hide shall rise to the surface, the Book of the Triumvirate said, so Triumvirites often staked out drug stores. Exercise gyms were another no-no, for attempting to change one's body was to reject the form God had given you. Protests at such locations caused little more than quizzical glances, but for Triumvirites it was the thought, and the effort, that counted.

Tonight, however, the local Triumvirite congregation had a chance to picket an actual, honest-to-gosh motion picture. Assuming, of course, they beat the other One True Faiths to the cinema.

The Drear home was a large two-level house, made with red bricks. Max leapt out of the car the moment they arrived, and he ran to the garage and unlocked it. Inside were all their picket signs, ready for every occasion. Max shuffled through the anti-acne signs and the say-no-to-the-devil's-gym sandwich boards until he found the ones for tonight's event. He chose the three best ones, and had them loaded into the trunk before Vincent and his father reached the front door.

“So what movie is it?” Vincent asked as they entered the house.

“It's the latest one with that boy wizard,” his father replied as he steered him down the stairs.

“Ah,” Vincent said. “You've got a good chance, then. The other groups gave up after part four.”

“We could have used your help,” his father went on, “but you clearly aren't in the Spirit. I just pray the Light finds you again in time for the event on Friday.”

Vincent said nothing. He already had a plan in mind, and he didn't want his

father to ruin it by not locking him in the chapel.

“Can I have a snack, at least?” he asked.

“No,” his father said. “Fasting will do your spirit good.”

“Won’t do my tummy any good,” Vincent muttered as his father shoved him inside.

“That’s enough!” his father bellowed as he slammed the two chapel doors together. “Start praying, and may the Triumvirate have mercy upon you.”

The chapel was a small room with no windows, with an altar set up at the far end. The walls were bare and the floor was cold concrete, and the door had a thick padlock on the outside. Pastor Impwell had encouraged all in his congregation to construct one in their homes. They will be needed during the End Times, he’d said, when it will be too dangerous to venture out of doors even for Church. And until those End Times, they would serve as excellent discipline for wicked children.

Vincent knelt on the cold concrete floor and pretended to pray. His father snapped the padlock shut and stormed back upstairs.

Vincent waited until he heard the car tear off down the road. When he was sure they were gone, he escaped.

Vincent had learned a lot from his many hours locked in the chapel. He’d learned to entertain himself with his mind, and he’d learned to stop fearing the dark. He’d learned how to sleep on a hard surface, and he’d learned to rely on himself.

Most of all, he’d learned that while the padlock was nigh indestructible, the hinges holding up the doors were not. They were loose; one good upward shove would dislocate them from the wall.

Vincent grabbed one of the doors by its handle and bottom, then pushed up. He’d also learned he didn’t need to pop both doors; when one was free, he could push the whole thing open like a regular door. Vincent lifted slowly, carefully, until the right hand door was free. Then he swung the door out, stepped out into the basement, and closed the door again.

Perfect. Now he had more than four hours to himself. There were an infinite number of things he could have done with the time, and on any other day he would have hung out at Big Tom’s house.

Tonight, however, he needed to talk to someone about the creature he'd seen at the science fair. He could talk to Big Tom, but his friend would have no answers for him. He couldn't talk to his parents or brother, either. They would only confirm his fears. Besides, they were gone for the night.

That left one person. Vincent hurried up the stairs, grabbed his jacket, and left the house. Five minutes later, he reached the house of Chanteuse Sloam.

As he'd expected, Chanteuse was still meditating on her front lawn. He'd often seen her meditating on her front lawn when he passed her house going to and from school. People in cars would honk their horns and call her nasty things, and Vincent was always impressed how she never let it affect her. He'd never seen her lose concentration, and he'd only seen her upset once...

...

When he'd been ten, Chanteuse had told Vincent about performing simple magic spells, unaware that Max was listening. Max had rushed off to call their parents, who in turn rushed home and fired Chanteuse on the spot.

"How despicable!" his mother said. "Trying to teach my boys the ways of the Devil."

"You are a horrible creature, less than human," his father added. "You will suffer an eternity of torment for your sins."

"I'm sorry you feel that way," Chanteuse said, calm and pleasant. "I meant you and your family no harm ..."

"Deceiver!" Mr. Drear shouted. "You mean nothing but harm for all of God's Children."

"I understand now," said Vincent's mother, "why your mother never shows herself in public."

"That isn't her mother," Mr. Drear said. "This girl was adopted. Probably abandoned on that horrible Sloam woman's doorstep when your real parents discovered how evil you are."

Vincent felt the air around him change, as if it were getting thick and heavy. Chanteuse's face contorted into a visage of rage, and it was a terrifying thing to see.

"Miss Sloam is my mother," she said, "and you will never speak that way about her! Ever!"

“This is my house, I’ll say what I like,” Mr. Drear said, but he was visibly shaken. “Now get out of here and never come back.”

Chanteuse left then, tears streaming from her eyes. Vincent would have protested, but a slap in the face from his brother stopped him.

“You should have known better,” Max said.

“Your brother is right,” his father agreed, taking Vincent’s arm and yanking him down to the basement. “You will spend tonight in the chapel to contemplate your sin.”

“For how long?” Vincent replied as he rubbed his cheek.

“Until you are cleansed of her evil,” his father said as he shoved Vincent inside the chapel. “Kneel, and pray for cleansing and forgiveness.”

“I don’t understand!” Vincent protested. “What did she do?”

“She is a witch,” his father said as he locked the door. “‘Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live.’ It’s in the Text of the Triumvirate. So she is lucky I let her go. Kneel and pray, Vincent.”

Vincent knelt on the cold concrete floor and began to pray. It was not the first time he’d been locked in there, nor would it be the last.

It was, however, the time that Vincent started asking himself some serious questions. What kind of a God, he’d wondered, would think Chanteuse was evil? If the Triumvirate preached Love, why did they insist their followers practiced so much hate? And if demons really are everywhere, spreading their lies and wickedness, why hasn’t anyone ever seen one?

Vincent had prayed all night for answers to his questions, but none came. And the more he’d thought about the Triumvirate, the less any of it made sense. Vincent hadn’t realized it then—realization would come in the weeks and months that followed—but his days of being a Triumvirite were over.

...

Vincent didn’t want to disturb Chanteuse, so he sat on the ground in front of her and patiently waited. It had been a long time since he’d talked to her, not since the incident with his parents. Would she still be willing to talk to him?

“Hello, Vincent,” Chanteuse said, her eyes still closed.

“Oh. Hi,” Vincent replied, amazed but not really surprised. “How did you know it was me?”

“I sensed your energy,” she said. “Everyone has a unique presence. I told you that.”

“Yeah, I remember now,” Vincent said. “Look, if you’re not done ...”

“I was just finishing,” Chanteuse said, opening her eyes. They were emerald green, and Vincent could have sworn they glowed. “The Earth is restless, troubled. And so are you.”

“I’m okay,” Vincent said as she stood and picked up her rug. “But I need to talk to you about something.”

“Come inside,” she said. “We’ll have tea and talk on the back porch.”

Vincent followed her into the bungalow. It was a small home, with only two bedrooms, a living room, a kitchen and a tiny little basement. Chanteuse’s adoptive mother, Miss Sloam, sat on the living room couch across from the front door, snoozing. Miss Sloam was a big woman; big boned, not fat.

Vincent had never been inside Chanteuse’s house before, and he wondered briefly if she’d been embarrassed to have him over. His mother once told him that poor people were ashamed of their poverty. Vincent dismissed the thought straight away. He couldn’t imagine Chanteuse being embarrassed about anything.

“Will you put the kettle on?” Chanteuse asked. “I need to get a fresh box of tea from the pantry in the basement.”

“Sure, no problem,” Vincent said. He filled up the kettle and plugged it in, then went in search of milk, sugar, and two cups. The milk was easy, right in the fridge where it should’ve been. The cups were in a cupboard, also an easy find.

The sugar was harder to find, and when Vincent did find it he lost interest in it immediately. He opened a cupboard and saw a bag of sugar on the first shelf, but his attention was immediately grabbed by the creature.

It was short and spindly, with almond-shaped eyes and big floppy wiener-dog ears. In fact, it looked exactly like the creature he’d seen at school.

And it was looking at him.

“Do you mind?” the thing said. “I’m trying to eat!”

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