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I knew better than to be preoccupied when Tambuku Tiki Lounge was overcapacity. Crowds are ugly; it doesn't matter if they're human or demon.

Our bar held a maximum of sixty-five people per California fire code. My business partner treated this rule as more of a suggestion on Thursday nights, when *Paranormal Patrol* made us a midtown hot spot. Easy for her; all she had to do was sweet-talk the county inspector out of a citation. She wasn't the one being expected to break up drunken, demonic brawls.

"Hey!" My eyes zeroed in on a college kid stealing a drink off the bar. "Did you pay for that? No, you didn't. Get your grubby paws off."

"That woman left it," he argued. "Possession's two-thirds of the law."

"Nine-tenths, jackass," I corrected, snatching the ceramic Suffering Bastard mug out of his hand. An anguished face was molded into the side of the classic black tiki mug, half filled with a potent cocktail bearing the same name. When I dumped the contents in a small bar sink, the kid acted like I'd just thrown gold in the trash. He glared at me before stomping across the room to rejoin his broke buddies.

If I were a bartender in any other small bar in the city, I might be encouraged on occasion to double as a bouncer. As the only trained magician on staff at Tambuku, I didn't have a choice; it was my responsibility. After two years of sweeping up broken glass and trying to avoid projectile vomit, I'd seen enough demons-gone-wild behavior that would make a boring, corporate desk job appear attractive to any normal person. Good thing I wasn't normal.

"Arcadia? Cady? Hello?"

Amanda leaned across an empty bar stool, waving her hand in front of my face.

"Sorry, what?"

"I said that I need another Scorpion Bowl for booth three. Jeez, you're distracted tonight," she complained, unloading two empty wooden snack dishes from her tray before circling around the L-shaped bar top to join me.

"How wasted are they?" I craned my neck to see the booth while scooping up Japanese rice crackers from a large bin.

"They've passed over the halfway mark, but they aren't there yet. No singing or fighting." She wiped sweat from her forehead with a dirty bar towel. Amanda was one of three full-time waitresses we employed at Tambuku. Tall, blond, tan, and permanently outfitted with a stack of worn, braided hemp bracelets circling her wrist, she looked like the stereotypical California girl.

Her family had lived on the central coast for several generations in La Sirena, a small beach community thirty minutes away from the city; it captured its bewitching namesake with photo-worthy vistas of the rocky coastline and the blue Pacific that bordered it. Her parents had a ceramics studio there, and we'd commissioned them to make most of our tiki mugs and

bowls, which now sat in neat rows on bamboo shelves behind the bar.

"I'm more concerned about the couple at hightop three." Amanda peered into the cracked mirror over the cash register that allowed me to watch the bar when I had my back turned; she poked a few stray wisps of hair back into her braid.

Keeping our specialized clientele happy without sending them into a drunken frenzy was difficult at times. I strained to get a look at Amanda's hightop couple, two women who were red-faced with laughter. One of them had dropped something under the table and, after retrieving it, was having trouble getting her ass back up onto her chair. They were verging on sloppy drunk, so I made a mental note to cut them off. Still, my money was on the obnoxiously loud group at booth three.

Amanda waited while I constructed the four-person Scorpion Bowl from brandy, two kinds of rum, and fresh juices. When no one was looking, I smuggled in a few drops of a tincture derived from damiana leaf, one of my medicinals that I kept stashed away in a hidden compartment behind the bar. Most of these were brewed from basic folk recipes, steeped herbs and macerated roots. They soothed nerves, calmed anger, or sobered the mind. Nothing earth-shattering. Well, mostly . . .

A few were intensified with magick. Spells in liquid form, I guess you might say. Just as perfume smells different in the bottle than on a person's skin, magical medicinals react with body chemistry and produce unique results; the same medicinal that creates a mildly lethargic feeling in one person might put someone else in deep sleep. Sometimes I had to experiment to find the right one for the job. The one I was using now, the damianatha, has a calming effect that usually wears off pretty fast; I often use it to quell potential bar fights.

I didn't feel guilty about dosing people without their permission. I had a business to protect, and the sign at the entrance—marked with the two interlocking circles that formed a Nox symbol, identifying us as a demon-friendly establishment—*did* clearly say ENTER AT YOUR OWN RISK.

After putting away the damianatha, I strained the enhanced concoction into a serving bowl. Inside the ceramic volcano that rose up from the center, I floated a sugar cube soaked in 151-proof rum on top of an orange slice. When we first opened Tambuku, I'd light the Scorpion Bowls right there at the bar, until Amanda once caught her hair on fire during the trek to the table. Now I make her light it herself once she gets there. Not as dramatic, but much safer.

"Almost time for the show," Amanda noted as she searched her pockets for a lighter. "I think there's only that one table of savages to get rid of before it starts. Can you check?"

Savages. Slang for humans who didn't believe in anything paranormal . . . which would be *most* humans. Savages didn't believe in magick, and they certainly didn't believe that a small but growing group of the population was made up of demons.

I double-checked to make sure Amanda was right about the lone table of savages, and she was. Just a group of women dressed in corporate-gray suits, probably trying out the "wacky" tiki bar down the street from their office. "They'll leave. Shouldn't be an issue." And apart from them, Amanda and I were the only nonsavage humans in the bar. I tossed four extra-long straws into the Scorpion Bowl, and she whisked it away on her tray.

Now, when I say demons, I don't mean big, bad evil creatures with horns and tails and rows of bloodstained teeth.

Don't get me wrong, those kinds of demons exist, safely tucked away on another plane; Æthyric demons can be summoned by talented magicians, such as myself, with the proper rituals and seals. Nevertheless, the Earthbounds that patronized my bar were much lower down on the supernatural food chain.

Apart from their minor demonic abilities, which vary from demon to demon, the only distinguishing feature of an Earthbound demon is a glowing arc of light around the head: a halo.

Yep, that's right. Demons have halos. Everything preternatural does. Not a static, detached ring like you see in religious paintings, but more of a diffused, colorful cloud. Surprised? I might have been, the first time I saw an Earthbound, back in Florida, when I was a kid . . . that is, if I hadn't already seen my own halo in the mirror. I'm not demon. Just different. My conception was kinda weird. Okay, it was *really* weird, but the point is that my parents weren't all that surprised to discover I had a halo; they were just surprised that I could actually *see* it. They couldn't, but that's because humans can't see halos. They are basically color-blind when it comes to detecting preternatural visual markers. But just because you can't see ultraviolet light doesn't mean it's not there.

My small, silver halo didn't *quite* look like the nebulous green and blue halos on the demons who frequented our bar, but it still came in handy; most demons wouldn't normally come near a practicing magician with a ten-foot pole, much less frequent a bar owned by one, but my strange halo granted me a wary trust.

I checked the clock. Almost time for our weekly TV addiction.

After I made a couple of Fog Cutters for another order,

I wound my hair into a twist on top of my head and pinned it in place with a plastic swizzle stick. Then I turned off the tropical exotica bar music—classic Martin Denny—stood on a stool at the end of the bar, and tugged down my snug 1982 Iron Maiden concert T-shirt, a triumphant two-dollar score from the Goodwill down the block.

“Listen up,” I yelled across the room as eighty-plus pairs of eyes turned toward me. “It’s eleven o’clock. Most of you know what that means here on Thursdays at Tambuku.”

“PATROL TIME!” The group reply echoed around the bar, followed by a series of cheers and whoops.

“That’s right,” I said with a grin after they’d calmed down. “It’s *Paranormal Patrol* time. For those of you who aren’t familiar with Tambuku’s weekly TV ritual, you might want to get out while the gettin’s good. Because it’s about to be *really* loud in here—” Two whistles and a couple of indistinct shouts interrupted me. “Yeah, like that, only worse, and with lots more profanity. If you want a quiet drink, go across the street to the Sunset Bar. You have now been officially warned.”

A respectable round of applause ended my speech. The lone table of savages began gathering their purses and left a tip on their table. Worked every time. As they headed out the door, I climbed down from the bar stool, readied the DVR, and started the show.

When the *Paranormal Patrol* logo moved across the screen, Tambuku’s regulars began singing along with the theme music, substituting an alternate, rude set of lyrics. I spotted Amanda and the table busser gleefully joining in and smiled as I cleared away a couple of empty tiki mugs and wiped down the bar. Amanda’s laughing couple at the hightop were getting a bit rowdy. Maybe she was right after all; I kept my eye on them.

This week’s episode of *Patrol* took place in Charleston, where the intrepid crew of professional hunters—all savages—were investigating the hundred-year-old ghost of a nun. After they set up their equipment, the so-called expert began his introductions to the so-called ghost: “Hello? I’m trying to speak to the ghost of Mary—can you hear me? Give me a sign if you can. I come in peace.”

So funny that humans waste money on ion counters, night vision cameras, and all the rest of the junk that purports to “detect” the paranormal. Because halos and other supernatural markers show up plain as day on most modern cameras if you have the right eyes . . . and Tambuku’s patrons did. So when a small glowing head poked up over the shoulder of the ghost hunter, our customers began their call-and-response game and all yelled in unison, “*Look behind you, asshole!*” Around the bar, everyone downed a drink in tribute to the first on-screen imp appearance.

Rocky Horror fans had nothing on us.

The ghost seeker’s eyes watered as he sat down on an old bed where the ghostly nun was murdered years ago. “Oh, God . . . I think I feel something,” he whimpered into the camera. He felt something all right; it was the same imp they filmed the week before in Chicago. Looks like they had themselves a hitchhiker.

Even savages who dismiss most paranormal phenomenon love to entertain the possibility that ghosts exist; too bad they don’t. Sorry to burst your bubble, but if you think your house is haunted, it’s most likely just everyday, run-of-the-mill imps: small transparent demons that humans can’t see. Imps are pretty much harmless, but they’re fond of creating minor havoc. Moaning, turning the lights on and off, lowering the temperature of a room, and this was exactly why imps

had made the Earthbounds who produced *Paranormal Patrol* very, very rich. Sending a group of unsuspecting and gullible humans down in buildings known to be infested with imps? Damn fine TV.

Everyone in Tambuku was enjoying the imp in this week's episode until the second commercial break; that's when I heard breaking glass. Amanda's laughing couple at the hightop was now kissing. Not them, then. My eyes flicked to the table with the dosed Scorpion Bowl, but they were all staring at the booth behind them. Amanda and I had both been wrong.

"Oh, holy Whore of Babylon." I muted the TV and reached for my caduceus, a carved wooden staff entwined with two snakes and wings at the top. It wasn't some mystical ceremonial object; it was made in China, like, last year. Despite this, it *does* have a real graphite core that conducts energy, and that was the important part. The only ritual objects I use are practical ones. Robes and candles and sacred temple spaces? Forget it. Just useless, bullshit trappings.

Caduceus in hand, I abandoned my post behind the bar and strode in the direction of the offenders. But before I could make it there, a low gasp spread through the crowd and everyone in front of me began backing up.

"Move it." I pushed people out of my way until I made it to the problem table. Broken glass crunched beneath my low-top sneakers as I approached.

There were three Earthbounds at the booth: Kara and her boyfriend, both regulars, and some other guy I didn't know in a red flannel shirt . . . whom Kara was choking. Well, not choking so much as freezing the skin around his neck. Beneath her hands, a network of blue lines formed on his skin as she screamed, "Motherfucking liar!"

"Did you sleep with him, Kara?" her boyfriend asked, sitting at her side. His face was stroke-red. *For crying out loud, no ambulances tonight*, I thought to myself as the choking victim knocked a ceramic coconut-shaped mug off the table with his flailing arm. It shattered into ragged snow as it hit the floor. The crowd behind me jumped back as an errant ceramic shard ricocheted and pegged me on the arm. It stung like hell.

"Hey!" I yelled, rubbing my injury. "That's handmade. We've only got a few of those mugs left in stock. You're paying for that."

Kara's victim paid no attention to me as two other mugs, the rice cracker bowl, and all the napkins began rising off the table. I'd heard that her boyfriend was telekinetic, and apparently he had a hard time controlling it when he got upset. Awesome.

I double-checked that the bar was still savage free. It was. "Tell him that I didn't sleep with you! Tell him!" Kara spoke in a frantic, high-pitched voice as the blue lines erupting on his neck began spreading up into his face.

Enough. I gripped my caduceus and struck the floor in front of the booth, right on the triangle point that was painted on the hardwood. It was a binding triangle. There was one under every table in the bar. Risk management.

Eyes closed, I tapped into electrical energy from the bar, reeling it into me with care and precision. Amanda once asked me how magick like this worked. Different spells called for different kinds of magick, but the energy I needed to power a binding like this had to be amplified, or "kindled." The easiest way to think of magical energy—Heka—was to picture it as a wood log in a fireplace. Just as wood burns when you put a match to it, Heka transforms into a more intense energy when

it's been kindled by an outside source; electricity was just one of several ways to do that.

As I pulled, the garish tropical-themed lights inside the bar wavered and dimmed. I mumbled a short binding spell and, in one massive push, released the kindled Heka through the caduceus, into the binding triangle.

My stomach lurched like I was riding a roller coaster. Depending on the spell, the accompanying nausea could last for a couple of seconds, or it could make me so sick and exhausted that I'd have trouble standing. Fortunately, this time, it wasn't bad.

When I reopened my eyes, a low moan rose from the crowd behind me. They were impressed, as usual, but I wasn't; the binding triangle glowed with kindled Heka, but it wasn't bright like it should be—it was dull and popped with static. It must've been because of my mood. Whatever. It was working, and that was what mattered. The objects crashed back down on the table, rice crackers scattering everywhere, as the three drunken demons in the booth finally looked up.

"Shit." Kara released the man across the table and dropped her fading blue hands to her side. He fell back into his seat and coughed, reaching for his wounded neck.

"Seriously, Kara, this is the second time this month. I told you last time that if it happened again, I'd ban you from the bar."

A lock of dyed orange hair fell across her cheek. "I didn't mean to get so out of control. Give me another chance. I promise—"

"Please unbind us," her boyfriend pleaded. "It raises my blood pressure and I don't feel so good right now."

Amanda pushed her way through the crowd. "Wait! They started a tab. They owe us, hold on." She fumbled in her

pocket, then flipped through several scraps of wrinkled paper until she found the right one. "Sixty-three dollars and forty cents. Oh, and Kara didn't tip me last week when she came in." She clicked her tongue at Kara and winked. "Don't think I didn't notice."

"There's also the broken barware," I noted.

"Here!" Kara's boyfriend pulled out a hundred-dollar bill. "Please, unbind us now."

As Amanda snatched up the money, her foot crossed the triangle and inadvertently broke the binding spell. Kara's boyfriend slumped to the table, heaving, as the other two gasped in relief.

"Oops, sorry, Cady." Amanda winced at the dead triangle as she pocketed the money.

A table busser appeared with a broom. I scanned the crowd for one of our regulars and quickly spotted him. Bob was a short Earthbound in his thirties with dark, slicked-back hair and a lazy eye. He was dressed in his usual attire, a Hawaiian printed shirt with repeating hula girls. Unlike half the people in the bar, Bob's demonic ability was useful. He was a healer. Not a miraculous one, but good in a pinch. He also had a thing for me and would probably set himself on fire if asked.

"Hey Bob," I called out. "Will you take a look at that guy's neck? Make sure he's okay."

"No problem." Bob trotted off behind the wounded man, who was making a beeline toward the door along with Kara's boyfriend.

"Am I banned?" Kara asked as she scooted out of the booth.

"You're banned on Thursday nights for the next month. No *Paranormal Patrol*."

Her face fell, but she nodded in acceptance and made a drunken attempt at a short curtsy as she left, her blue hands now fully reverted to their normal color.

Low whispers hummed around the bar as the crowd dispersed and people returned to their seats. Someone asked if I could rewind *Patrol*; we'd missed several minutes during the ruckus.

After I made my way back behind the bar, I picked up the remote and started to hit rewind when I noticed what was on the screen and froze. A special news report had interrupted the program. I took it off mute and ignored the murmured complaints about another delay in the evening's festivities. A petite Latina reporter spoke into a microphone beneath a red umbrella.

"I repeat, local authorities here in Dallas are trying to confirm whether the couple in the parking garage are indeed the notorious serial killers, Enola and Alexander Duval, who made international headlines when they were charged with the deaths of three rival occultists seven years ago, known collectively as the Black Lodge slayings. The footage we're about to show you was just released to us, taken this morning from a gas station near the airport."

A clip from the surveillance video played. Clear as day, there were my parents getting into an SUV. What the hell were they thinking? They weren't supposed to be in the States; they hadn't been here in years.

Right after we faked our deaths and went into hiding, I saw them every few months. Then a few months turned into a year, and a year into three. I didn't think about them much, unless I heard their names mentioned in some true-crime-exposé rerun on basic cable.

The reporter continued. "The fact that the killers are still

alive and in Texas after all these years is astonishing. There's speculation that their daughter, also a member of their former occult order, could still be alive too. Now, back to the studio for Tom's commentary. Tom?"

I stood stiff as a soldier and stared at the screen. I was dimly aware that my hands were trembling. My vision tunneled, then everything went black.

