



INVENTING NIGHTMARES

A Call in the Shadows

Human communication on the telephone is almost a lost art. The airways are filled with slick sales folk, not talking, but reading from a script. Working what little magic they have within them to try turning a fast buck. But there are others who work real magic. Practitioners whose spirits can use a telephone as well as any cold caller... but with far more effect.

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The curio shop was dim and crowded. Not with people, but with things. There where shelves of herbs, incense, and spices whose plodding fragrance hung in the air. The back corner was filled with odd, dried animal skins. Near the door was a glass display case filled with what appeared to be the skulls of shrunken heads. A spirit could become trapped in this room for centuries counting beads. The rest of the place looked like it was filled with rejects from a garage sale. The walls echoed the faintest mystical piano music. A melancholy soundtrack of distant dirges and haunting melodies.

The atmosphere was broken by a sharp timbre. Behind the counter, the phone rang. It wasn't the musical sounds of a smartphone, but the classic hollow ring of a real landline. The reverberating tone of a tiny bell-shaped cup and hammer. A tall, slender woman glided her way over to the sound. She wore a multi-colored summer dress which gave off a strong second-hand charity-shop vibe. Her eyes had an odd distant look to them. Minerva picked up the heavy receiver. "The Kiamfiti Emporium."

The sound on the other end of the phone was hollow, distant. The man rattled off words in an official voice with a speed capable of making a machine gun jealous. "Hi, Minerva, this is John from OmniVoid, do you have a minute? I'll be quick. I called because I think you should switch services to OmniVoid. Can we block off some time on Wednesday to further discuss this when you have more time?"

There was silence on the line. The only noise was some faint raspy breathing. "Minerva, are you there?"

Minerva's voice seemed centuries old. It had a crack to it and a bit of a hiss behind the heavy Jamaican accent. "I bind the spirit of Mabutu to you, both physically and emotionally. I bind him to you. I call on the dark powers and bind Mabutu to you. I call on them to withdraw all the forces protecting you and leave you desolate. I bind Mabutu to your soul." She returned the receiver to the cradle, setting up a fine echo reverberating across the shop.

John sighed and decided to shake the whole thing off. It was always the best thing to do. These rejections didn't help his chronic depression. He sat in the middle section of a row of tiny cubicles. John took off the headset connecting him to the robotic dialer, setting it on the narrow desk. Without the headset, reverberations of phone calls littered the cavernous room like the rattle of a bank of old typewriters gone rogue. He stood up from his battered and thinly covered office chair with the one caster missing; heading for the break room. At least the coffee was free.

Rising, John tripped over something. *Damn, who brought their dog to the office again?* Gazing down, the creature at his feet didn't have even a single tangle of fur on its body. It stretched as if waking from a deep sleep. John blinked his eyes twice. No, those defiantly are leathery wings the creature was unfolding. The flesh on its form had a tint making vomit appear handsome. The creature rose into the air, flapping its thin and pale primordial wings. "What the devil?"

The little thing had a voice you could describe as grating, but only if you were being polite. "Actually, I'm an Imp, if you want to get technical. Name's Mabutu bub."

John closed his eyes, but the creature was still there, flapping its wings inside the inky blackness of his closed eyes lids. He didn't go away when he opened his eyes again either. "I'm yours pal. We're bonded like two peas in a pod... if you can imagine two peas handcuffed together."

Assuming the best response was to ignore the hallucination, John resumed his heading for the break room. And fell flat on his face. Glancing down at his feet, he found his shoelaces tied together. "Better get used to such things," the little creature muttered, "It's going to happen a lot."

John grumbled and got back on his feet. Not to be undone by an oversized ferret with wings, he took off his shoes. He made a right turn at the cube row in his socks and headed for the Java machine. John barely had time to notice the carpet was moving in the opposite direction when his face hit the floor again. He landed with a loud crack which he soon discovered was his collarbone, now broken in two places.

No one else in the office even noticed. The clattering of voices continued unabated. Cautiously John got up to a sitting position. There was no use getting to his feet with this thing around. "Okay," John asked, spitting out blood from between his lips, "What do I have to do to get rid of you?"

"Straight to the point," the creature gurgled, "I like it. Well, I tell you. The only way out is suicide." He handed John a loaded revolver. "I'd put the barrel in my mouth if I were you. The temple thing is tricky. doesn't always work. The last thing you want is to wake up in the hospital with me hanging around, trust me."

John didn't hesitate. There was a sharp crack and a dull thud as the body hit the floor. Although when questioned by the police, no one in the room claimed they heard or saw anything. The only interesting thing to happen was a brief exchange between one of the officers and the supervisor.

"Did he have anyone out to get him?"

"Are you kidding? He made cold calls for a loving. Everyone was out to get him."

John found himself sitting in a half-rotting wooden boat which had more mold on it than paint. He was in the middle of a calm lake. At least he thought it was a lake. The water was a mixture of green slime and gray waste. He jumped when he saw hundreds of objects flailing in the water. It wasn't fish, but a sea of arms which appeared to be attached to a sticky mass of most gruesome grey bodies he could have imagined. The scene would be required to become much more pleasant to be described as merely horrible.

Turning in the boat, John noticed the imp Mabutú pushing the boat along by pressing a wooden punt against the heads of the dead bodies in the water. "Did I mention we're bonded for eternity?"