

Rakshasa



by

Franscats

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Rakshasa

By Fran

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Dan Marsh looked up from where he was slumped down sitting against the locked bathroom door in Washington Park. In his hand he held his most prized possession, his crack pipe, while his lighter rested on the ground by his jean-clad leg. He had just finished smoking the rock cocaine and was enjoying the exhilarating high as he looked around the dark park, enjoying the cool night and the quiet area. Despite the fact that the trees were creating shadows, he wasn't worried. He was in an isolated place and liked the fact that no one would bother him here. And he could get high without worrying about cops, the homeless or other junkies.

Leaning his head back against the door, he took a deep breath and closed his eyes. Tomorrow he would have to find a way to get more money, for more drugs. Maybe he could hit up his grandma. Yeah, she wouldn't even know he had taken some money if he went in her bag. Thinking over the plan, he smiled. Yeah, tomorrow he would visit Granny.

He was still working out how to get hold of Granny's bag when he heard some rustling nearby. Peering through the dark, he tried to identify the figure in the distance. Reaching into his jacket pocket, he pulled out a switchblade as he watched the form lumber closer. As the figure cleared the trees, he blinked in surprise. "Grandma?" he said, noting she was walking towards him and holding her purse out. "What are you doing here?" he asked, putting away his switchblade and standing.

"Hi Danny, my boy. I heard you need some money," she came closer, opening her bag.

"Who told you?" he asked as she reached out to hug him and pull him close.

No one heard his scream or the squishing sound as blood and tissue were rendered or the crunch of teeth cracking bone.

When Danny Marsh's body was found, partially devoured two days later, no one realized it was just the start of a nightmare...

The city of Cascade was in an uproar. When the body of a young drug user was found in a secluded part of Washington Park, more than half-devoured by some animal or animals, the people shook their heads in dismay but pretty much ignored it. After all, such was the life of a fallen soul.

When a second body (that of a prostitute) was found two days later in an alley not far from the park, people started talking and complaining about whatever wild animals were running amok, not that any had been spotted. Many speculated that something might have escaped from the Cascade Zoo, but officials were very quick to state that all their animals were accounted for.

However, when an elderly couple was found two days later, in much the same condition, nervousness turned to real fear. People started to scream that the police needed to do something about the problem before more bodies were found.

Animal control, the department initially charged with the investigation, having found no wild animals and not having the manpower to patrol the entire region around the 900-acre park that bordered the affluent Cascade waterfront on one side, the less-savory and mostly-deserted warehouse area on a second side, and downtown Cascade with its small stores and diverse immigrant community on the third side, had turned to the police for help.

Police officers equipped with rifles and nets were stationed in and around the park at night, but still no animals were found. And yet, the killings were continuing. A fifth victim, this time a poor immigrant worker, turned up just three days later, his body (or what was left of it) hidden behind a dumpster two blocks from Washington Park's downtown area.

With an icy fear trickling down their backs, city officials began to wonder what was stalking the streets of Cascade at night as the newspapers dubbed the killer, whether human or otherwise, "The Wild Stalker."

All kinds of theories were being generated from a pack of wild wolves to smuggled exotic animals.

When a sixth victim was found, and it was reported that the young man had a gun that had been fired, the Mayor knew he was in trouble. Under extreme pressure to do something, he called Police Commissioner Wallace and demanded the case be turned over to the Captain of Major Crimes.

Simon Banks was going over his budget- his least favorite thing to do - when his secretary, Rhonda, interrupted him to tell him Commissioner Wallace was on the phone.

"The Commissioner?" Simon repeated in surprise. Police captains didn't get phone calls from the police commissioner unless there was a problem. Knowing this was not something he was going to be happy about, he nodded and picked up the phone.

"Hello, this is Captain Banks."

"Captain Banks, good morning. I have a meeting at eleven with the Mayor. I would like you in attendance."

"With the Mayor?" Simon repeated.

"Yes, it's about the Wild Stalker. I'm going to bump up the case to Major Crimes and there are some things we need to discuss."

"Yes, Sir," Simon answered, despite the fact that his department was already over-stretched with the volume of cases they were investigating.

"We'll have a quick meeting on the way to the Mayor's office," Wallace continued. "My car will pick you up in an hour." Before Simon could say anything else, Wallace hung up.

An hour later, Simon climbed into the back seat of a limo and glanced at Commissioner Wallace and Assistant Commissioner Steve O'Hara. "Gentlemen," he greeted.

"Simon," Wallace replied, as he reached over and closed the glass that divided the driver's seat from the backseat. "We're going to meet with the Mayor regarding the Wild Stalker and then we are going to drop this case in your lap."

Simon started to protest but Wallace held up a hand, stopping him. "I know your department is over-taxed and we are prepared to offset the cost with an additional budget line, but after you read this report you will understand why I want you to handle the case."

"Not just you," Assistant Commissioner O'Hara added, "but Detective Ellison and his police observer Mr. Sandburg."

Simon glanced at the two men as butterflies started in his stomach. If they were asking for Ellison and Sandburg this case, had some serious repercussions.

Blair Sandburg had come into the PD just short of two years ago. At the time, Simon's lead detective, Jim Ellison, was having trouble with his senses and Blair Sandburg, a graduate student at Rainier University, knew how to deal with the problems. Jim, it seemed, was some kind of sentinel, a guardian with five heightened senses. He was, to quote Sandburg, "a walking crime lab." The problem Simon faced was a sentinel required the help of a guide, and Sandburg was the only guide. So, for Jim to do his best work, Sandburg had to work with him.

That had been fine for the first three months but then, a year and a half ago, his observer's pass had run out and HR hadn't wanted to renew. Knowing that his detective needed Sandburg to be safe and successful in the field, and that the pair were solving cases no one else could, Simon decided to speak with the commissioner and deputy commissioner about Ellison and Sandburg.

Simon had never told Jim or Blair that he had revealed Jim's secret but, after his conversation with the top echelons at the PD, HR renewed Sandburg's observer's status every three months without problems.

Taking the folder that Deputy O'Hara held out to him, Simon glanced over the various reports, but stopped and reread the information when he reached the first of the autopsy reports. Afterwards, he scanned two more autopsy reports, all signed by Dan Wolf, and sat back with a dismal sigh. He really needed a cigar to digest what he had read.

He had no doubts that the reports were accurate. Dan Wolf, the medical examiner, was nothing if not professional, but the conclusions that were deliberately left out of the reports were scary.

Commissioner Wallace, seeing Simon had finished reading, took back the folder. "We are going to brief the Mayor and we are going to tell him we are putting Ellison and Sandburg on the case. We thought we could tell the Mayor that Ellison has shown sporadic precognitive abilities and so they are being added to the hunt for...for whatever this is."

"Precognitive abilities," Banks repeated, raising an eyebrow.

"If we tell him about the sentinel business," O'Hara added, "he'll want a sentinel as his personal bodyguard. We both know Ellison won't agree to that and I'd rather have the Mayor think Ellison has some uncontrollable gift."

Simon nodded his agreement. "After the meeting, get Ellison and Sandburg into your office and brief them. This thing has to be stopped before anyone else gets killed."

It was Thursday early afternoon when Simon, having returned from his meeting with the Mayor, opened the door to his office and, seeing Jim working out in the bullpen, called him into his office. "Jim where's Sandburg?" he asked solemnly as Jim walked in.

"He's got a class today," Jim answered, as Simon frowned before closing the blinds.

"Will he be coming here after?"

"I'm not sure, why?"

Simon sighed. "I've got a case for you and Sandburg and it might be just up the kid's alley." He paused and pulled off his glasses, rubbing his nose before reaching down and handing Jim a report. "This is not the official report and is not being seen by anyone beside you, Sandburg, Dan Wolf, and the Commissioner and his Deputy. It can't even leave this office." Jim had the distinct impression, as he took the folder from Simon's outstretched hand, that he was taking something Simon considered nasty. He suspected Simon handing over a cobra would have been more comfortable and warning bells started going off in his head.

"The Wild Stalker? I thought Homicide and Animal Control we're teamed up on this." Jim questioned looking at the first page of the report.

Simon nodded biting down on his unlit cigar, a sure sign that this case was upsetting him. "Read the autopsy reports and then you'll understand why we need you and Sandburg on this case. Hell, the Commissioner asked for you."

Jim nodded and sat down looking over the file as Simon put a cup of coffee down in front of him before stepping out of the office. Dan Wolf, the Medical Examiner, had written, "The radius of the bite marks are not those of any canine or feline on record. They are similar to those of a shark with a slightly smaller jaw radius. The accompanying fur, found on each victim, and claw marks across the vivisected abdomens suggests some bearlike creature but does not match any animal listed in the database. Its DNA has yet to be broken down but appears to belong to some species not on record..."

Jim read through the report and the other four autopsy reports that were available – twice – sitting and staring at it before leaning over Simon’s desk and picking up the phone. Dialing Rainier, he waited till he heard a friendly voice on the phone. “Hello, this is Blair Sandburg, can I help you?” the voice said cheerfully.

“Hey Sandburg,” Jim greeted trying to keep his voice neutral despite the unease he was feeling looking at the report, “I’ve got a case I’d like you to take a look at.”

“A case?” Blair answered and Jim could hear two people talking in the background and guessed the teaching assistant had students actually taking advantages of his office hours. “Sure, ah, what kind of case?”

“I’ll explain when you’re here. When can you come in?”

“My office hours end at two, so I can be there in an hour and a half.”

“See you then Chief.” Jim hung up and turned back to the report, looking it over one last time before placing it back down on Simon’s desk and heading down to see Dan Wolf.

The Chief Medical Examiner’s office was little more than a closet with a small metal desk, a computer, copy machine and printer. Much like Simon Banks’ office, it branched off from the main room where the other medical examiners did their own paperwork. Walking through the outer office, Jim took a quick look around. It wasn’t often he found himself at the coroner’s office door. Usually, he found Dan down in autopsy and Jim noted just how deserted the outer office was; five desks with no one behind them. He wondered if the room was empty because the MEs were all somewhere else doing autopsies. It wasn’t a pleasant thought, but nothing about this visit was pleasant. Jim headed over to Dan Wolf’s door and knocked before entering.

Dan sat behind his desk, looking at his computer thoughtfully. Of Native American descent, Dan proudly proclaimed his heritage with his dark ponytailed hair and reddish-brown complexion. Looking up at Jim in the door, he motioned Jim in and indicated a seat across from him. “I’ve been expecting you since the report on the Wild Stalker landed on the Commissioner’s desk.”

Jim nodded and ran a quick hand across his forehead to ease the tension from a slowly-building headache. “Want to tell me what the report doesn’t say?”

Dan Wolf sighed and looked down, shaking his head, knowing this conversation was going to go to places he didn’t really want to travel. Getting up, he walked over to the door, looking out to make sure no one was near before closing it and coming back to sit down, watching Jim thoughtfully. “Did you know there are a lot of legends about cannibalistic demons that devoured humans? Almost every culture has one.”

“Dan,” Jim started, disbelief crossing his features as he prepared to protest, but he was stopped when Dan Wolf raised a hand.

“Among my people such a creature was called a Wendigo. A Wendigo was the evil spirit of a person who had practiced cannibalism in life. But other cultures told tales of such creatures hunting and eating humans or drinking the blood of humans.” He paused, his eyes traveling over Jim thoughtfully. “As a guardian, you should know there are things that are beyond our understanding. You, more than most, must connect to the spirit world.”

“What?” Jim froze, hoping Dan meant a guardian in the police sense, but the medical examiner’s next words clearly dispelled that hope.

“My people have had guardians in the past. Our legends tell of them using their senses to guard against evil. A guardian with enhanced senses did more than find food and human enemies. They guarded against and hunted down demons, a medicine man or shaman at his or her side.” His eyes moved over Jim’s face. “I’ve known what you are from the time your senses came to life Jim. You are a guardian and Blair Sandburg is your companion. It is both of your jobs to guard the tribe.”

“Look Dan,” Jim cut in. “I don’t know what you think you know–,”

“In my culture,” Dan interrupted, “the tribe protects the guardian and companion so they can do what is necessary to protect the tribe. It is my job and my honor to protect what you are. I will not betray that.”

Jim took a deep breath, watching the examiner. He thought about denying what he was but looking into Dan’s face he could see certainty and realized he couldn’t change Dan’s mind with a simple denial. Jim didn’t call himself a guardian; Blair had used the term sentinel – a man with five enhanced senses. Those senses helped him do his job by allowing him to see, hear, taste, touch and smell things that others could not. *A guardian, a sentinel, it’s the same thing*, Jim decided before glancing over at Dan Wolf. “How did you find out?” he whispered at last, wondering if he had been too careless in using his senses.

Dan shrugged. “I am not a shaman, but I come from a line that had shamans. Their blood runs through my veins and I can recognize what you are, even if I cannot assist you. And I tell you there is a demon stalking the streets of Cascade.”

Jim’s cornflower blue eyes stared into Dan’s dark ones, challenging the ME’s conclusions. “There’s a big difference between having enhanced senses and battling demonic cannibals.”

“As a guardian,” Dan Wolf challenged, “you must have contact with spirit animals. Just because you have only seen animals doesn’t mean there are not other things in the spirit world. Things more harmful.” He stopped and eyed Jim. “You’ve read my report. It mentions an unknown creature. I did not state this in the report, but I recognize the marks of a demon. You have to recognize this as well if you want to stop the deaths.”

“Not that I am buying into this but, for arguments sake, how do I stop a demon?”

Dan Wolf looked off for a moment thoughtfully. "You must find out what kind of demon it is. Go back to the first killing with Blair, he has shaman blood within him; he will see what legend spawned the demon. In the legend there will be ways of stopping it. Then you must hunt it."

"No one has seen it," Jim answered, still not accepting that this was anything but flesh and blood.

"You are a guardian; you can see what others cannot and the shaman will know how to kill it." Jim stood to leave and, standing as well, Dan grabbed his arm. "Keep Blair close to your side. First and foremost, the demon will want to remove the guardian and companion. It will know you are both a danger to its existence; alone you are both in danger, together you stand a chance of stopping this thing."

Jim looked over at Dan and nodded, his jaw set, but at that last comment a frisson of fear took root in his stomach.

Office hours had finally ended and Blair Sandburg grabbed his ever-present backpack, tossing it over one shoulder as he locked his office door and headed out across the quad. Looking up into the afternoon sun filtering through the trees, he wondered what type of case Jim needed help with and hoped it wasn't something too gruesome. Sometimes he still had problems when he thought of the serial killer Lash.

Reaching the Volvo, he pulled out his keys, jingling them around as he found the door and engine keys and getting in the car, turned the engine over, willing it to start on the first try. It didn't. By the third try, he rested his head on the steering wheel and gave a sigh before digging through his bag for his phone and dialing Jim.

"Ellison," Jim answered his private line and Blair wondered, not for the first time, why Jim answered his cell, house and private line so succinctly. Wouldn't he expect that whoever was calling would know him?

"Hey Jim, office hours are out but I'm going to be a little late getting to the station. My car won't start so I'll have to catch a lift or a bus."

"You need to get rid of that hunk of junk," Jim answered.

"It's a classic, man," Blair answered imagining that Jim was mouthing the words with him. This particular conversation was repeated so often it was almost a comic routine with them.

"It's a classic piece of junk," Jim countered. "Don't bother trying to catch a ride or taking the bus, I'll pick you up."

"It's no problem; I can be there in an hour."

There was a pause on the other end of the line and then Jim stated, a bit more aggressively, "No, I'll come and get you. Just stay in your office." Another pause and then a bit more cautiously, "Chief, lock yourself in, okay?"

"Jim what's going on?" Blair answered nervously. Something was wrong and suddenly he felt exposed standing out in the open quad, as if hostile eyes might be on him.

"You're safe Blair, but stay put until I get there and then I'll try to explain."

Blair, noting the phrase "try to explain," nodded as he answered, "Sure," trying to sound a lot calmer than he was as he closed the phone and gathered his things. Turning, he consciously slowed his walk and casually strolled back to Hargrove Hall and down to the basement where he had his office. Watching the hall, his eyes darting back and forth nervously as he pushed back his hair, he looked for anyone who didn't belong, before entering his office and leaning against the door as he locked it. Taking a shaky breath, he moved over to a seat at his desk before glancing past his piles of files at the large window behind his desk. Nervously, he picked up a solid paperweight before moving to a seat in the corner of the room that gave a view of the room and kept his back to the wall.

Deep down Blair knew he was being overly cautious, Jim would be here already or would have sent a patrol to keep an eye on him if something was dangerously wrong, but he couldn't shake a feeling of imminent danger, and he realized an uneasy feeling had been building all day.

Closing his eyes, he consciously slowed his breathing, calming. But he was more than a little relieved when, twenty minutes later, there was a knock at the door and Jim called, "Sandburg, open the door."

Blair looked at the paperweight in his hand, feeling foolish as he put it down on a shelf behind him and walked over to the door. "Coming Jim," he answered and unlocked the door, opening it to reveal the detective.

"Hi Chief," Jim stepped into the office and took a quick look around and Blair was sure he was using all his senses.

"What's going on, Jim?" he asked quietly, his voice edgy with concern and watched the detective glance at him uncomfortably.

"Simon's got a case for us and," he paused. "I think you need to come into the PD and read the coroner's report and then talk to Dan."

"The coroner's report?" Blair questioned quietly and Jim nodded.

"It's not a normal case," Jim admitted with a sigh, his eyes roaming the office before finally settling back on Blair, resignation apparent in the hard set of his face. "It makes me feel like we're part of the X files."

Blair pushed back his hair, unconsciously looking for something to tie it back with as he nodded. "A cult thing?" he asked.

"The case the newspapers are calling the Wild Stalker," Jim admitted as he led Blair to the door.

Blair paused. "How does that remind you of the X files?"

"Let's go. I'll explain what I can on the way but for most of it, you're just going to have to read the report and talk to Dan Wolf."

After leaving the university, Jim had led Blair into Simon's office and sat him down with the coroner's report. Jim could tell that Blair had first scanned it and then read it through before looking up at the detective. Jim had forewarned Blair that there was some weird mystical stuff related to the case, but seeing the empirical evidence of it had still shocked Blair and he was more open to such things than Jim.

Jim waited until Blair finished reading and then asked, "What do you think?"

"I think we have a problem," Blair said quietly. "I mean, I have heard legends from countless cultures about monsters and demons that devour humans but to see evidence of it." He shook his head.

"Dan Wolf says it is a demon and I think you need to hear what else he has to say."

Blair put the folder down and turned to follow Jim. "If this is some kind of monster," he began, "then—"

"Then we have to do this very quietly," Jim answered. "Do I have to tell you the kind of panic the city would face if someone suggested this was anything but a wild animal."

"No; now that I know, I'm panicking," Blair admitted and Jim turned to look at Blair.

He thought about reassuring Blair, saying everything would be okay, but seeing Blair's face, he decided the truth would be better than false assurances. "Me too," he confessed. "But we still have to stop this thing before it kills again."

Blair agreed as they headed down to talk with Dan Wolf. The Medical Examiner once again checked they were alone in the office and then repeated for Blair much of what he had said to Jim, acknowledging that he knew Jim was a sentinel and Blair his guide. He had again talked about demons before turning to Blair.

"You must find out which demon is stalking Cascade," he announced, looking Blair over critically. "You must look for the signs so you can find a way to stop it."

“What signs? How do I do this?” Blair asked, trying to hold down a sense of panic. As an anthropologist he knew about cultural legends but, in practice, he had no idea how to hunt down demons. Jim, hearing Blair’s heartbeat, put a calming hand on his arm to keep him from a panic attack.

“Search the demon’s hunting grounds.” Dan Wolf answered, his dark eyes stern. “You can do this; I cannot. You have the power of a shaman within you and you are a guide to a sentinel. Put trust in yourself, Blair Sandburg, and in your sentinel. You will find the signs and the sentinel will hunt and fight the demon. Trust him to see what you can and will not. He can see beyond what we can see but only if you are there to ground him and support him.”

Having faith in Jim’s abilities, yeah, Blair could do that, probably more than Jim could, but he was unsure of his own abilities. He didn’t feel like he was much of a shaman. Years before, while visiting a tribe in the Amazon, he had been told by the tribe’s shaman that he would someday be a full practicing shaman and stand as a guide beside a guardian. The part about standing beside a guardian had come to pass but he didn’t believe himself a shaman. There was nothing that had ever happened in his life to make him think differently.

Swallowing nervously, Blair began mentally reviewing all he knew of cannibalistic demons as he followed Jim back up to the bullpen, where Jim began compiling and reviewing all the information on the recent killings. While Jim did this, Blair continued to process the information, all too aware of just how uncomfortable both he and Jim were with the information and investigation. But still, if Dan Wolf was right, they had to find what kind of demon was stalking the street, if they wanted to neutralize it.

“Jim where was the first body found?” Blair asked and Jim who had been organizing the data, looked up.

“Washington Memorial Park, near the downtown entrance.”

“I have a theory,” Blair said sentinel soft and watched his partner raise an eyebrow, acknowledging he had heard the barely whispered statement. “Demons come in all shapes and sizes depending on the culture that spawned them. Cultural anthropology is rife with stories of them. We need to investigate which culture is most prevalent in the area where the demon first appeared. That could tell us what kind of demon it is and how to fight it.”

Jim nodded with some resignation. “As plans go, it’s as good as any other I’ve heard,” he said, but Blair could hear the discomfort in the sentinel’s voice as the two prepared to head out. “We can get a look at the area and then talk to Community Affairs. They’ll know the community on that side of the park.”

The downtown side of Washington Memorial Park was near a culturally-diverse neighborhood with small, mostly well-tended, apartments. To Jim’s sensitive nose, it smelled of curry and

other Eastern spices, and he made a conscious effort to keep his sense of smell down so as not to be overwhelmed by the exotic scents as he looked around the neighborhood.

The area was truly multicultural with a recent influx of both Asians and Polynesians. Looking around speculatively, Blair deliberately went into the newer-looking shops, buying unusual spices and chatting with the owners.

Jim let Blair take the lead on this. He was, after all, an anthropologist, cultures his specialty, and he was definitely more of a people person. So he followed his partner from store to store as Blair worked the neighborhood.

When they reached a small store that sold spices and oils Blair paused, putting a hand on Jim's chest. "This is no place for you. It's going to be worse than sage." With a smile he added, "Why don't you stay in the truck."

"Sandburg," Jim growled, but had to step back as Blair opened the door and the smell hit him. Grumbling, he turned and walked back to stand by the truck as Blair watched him with a fond smile.

Going in, he looked around with interest. Blair loved stores like this one, filled with exotic oils. He noted as he made his way around the store that all of the items were organic and some would work well for Jim.

Walking over to the counter, he smiled at the young Indian woman standing there. She was wearing a colorful sari of blue and gold and her almond-colored skin was flawless. But it was her eyes that held Blair's attention. Lined with dark makeup that showed them to best effect, they were large, open, and intelligent.

"Hello," she inclined her head. "How can I help you?"

"I was looking around the store and I see a lot of oils that come from India." The woman nodded her agreement, watching him closely.

"We have some wonderful oils; my grandfather mixes them. Can I interest you in any of them?"

"Do you have any for calming nerves?"

"Many have been asking for this lately," she admitted. "I would recommend vetiver oil for a man, jasmine for a woman."

"I guess everyone around here must be nervous with the wild animal running around."

She gave a quick nod. "It is not safe at night," she admitted. As she said this, a beaded curtain that led to a back room opened behind the young woman. Through it, an old man hobbled out, leaning on a cane, and looked at Blair with eyes clouded with cataracts. Blair wondered if the

man could even see, they were so opaque. “So, you’ve come with a guardian at last to hunt the demon,” he said and the woman turned.

“Grandfather,” she began, but the old man shook his head, halting her speech; one old wrinkled and mottled hand reaching out to point at Blair.

“It is time for you to stop this creature. It is an ancient thing; kill it,” he said in a powerful voice, despite his age. Turning the old man started back to the beaded curtains.

“What is it?” Blair whispered and the man stopped and shook his head, turning back to look over his shoulder.

“A Rakshasa,” he called out and Blair felt a shiver run up and down his spine at the word. And then the old man was gone.

“You have to forgive my grandfather,” the girl said. “He is old and believes in legends from our past. This business has upset him.”

Blair waved away the old man with an indulgent smile, his mind elsewhere, reviewing what demons he could recall from Indian stories. He had really specialized in South and North American legends, not Indian, but he knew he had read of the Rakshasa before. Distracted, he barely noticed what he was doing as he bought some oil before exiting the store. In the back of his mind he knew he had found the link to whatever hunted the streets of Cascade.

An hour and a half after starting the tour of the area, Jim and Blair got in the truck and made their way to the PD, the word Rakshasa reverberating in Blair’s head. Vaguely, he remembered reading about an Indian demon called a Rakshasa. He needed to get to a computer and look it up. Not telling Jim his suspicions yet, he indicated the store he had just left. “I’m sure Community Affairs will say the newest population is Indian. While you confirm that, I’ll do some research on Indian demons. From what I can recall, some of them are very nasty man-eaters.”

“No three wishes and soul-stealing?” Jim asked.

“No, man. Those are sanitized Western demons. These are monsters.”

Jim didn’t comment on that but drove back to the station where he put in a call to the Community Liaison office as Blair, sitting at Jim’s computer, logged into Rainier. Forty minutes later, a much subdued Blair, turned off the computer.

“Got something Chief?” Jim asked and Blair nodded biting his lower lip as he pushed back his hair, a habit Jim knew indicated nervousness. Jim waited, his own sense of unease growing, as Blair glanced around before moving closer.

“Maybe we should move somewhere a bit more private?” he suggested softly.

Jim again glanced around, aware that Simon had sent the other detectives out and left them to do whatever they needed to do while keeping everyone else out of their hair. No one left in the bullpen looked particularly interested in what they were doing, but deciding Blair was right, he lifted his folder and led Blair out of the bullpen, entering conference room two and locking the door behind them. Putting down the file and taking a seat at the table, Jim watched as Blair dropped his back pack on the floor before unfolding some papers and pointing a finger at a particularly gruesome picture.

Jim glanced at the picture. It looked like something out of a nightmare.

Though it had a parody of some human features, it still didn't give the impression of something human. It was a creature that stood on two legs, clothed in armor like a warrior, but it had rows of sharp, pointed teeth like those of a shark and cold, staring eyes. It was covered in long fur and blood dripped from its talons and clawed feet.

"A Rakshasa," Blair said softly, "is a warrior demon that devours its victims and it hunts at night." Pulling out another paper with a definition Blair continued reading, "According to Hindu mythology, 'a Rakshasa is a type of demon or goblin. Rakshasas have the power to change their shape at will and appear as animals, as monsters, or in the case of the female demons, as beautiful women. They are most powerful at night, particularly during the dark period of the new moon...' I bet the first death took place during a new moon."

Jim looked at the picture. It was something out of a nightmare. "Chief," he protested, "if something that looked like that were running around Cascade someone would see it."

"No, no one would," Blair shook his head. "The Rakshasa is a shape shifter. It reaches into its victim's mind and makes the victim see the person he or she most trusts. So the person doesn't know this thing is approaching and is completely vulnerable and unprepared for the attack. It starts to eat people while they are still alive."

There was a long pause as Jim digested the information, trying to think of a way to refute the information. Finally, he sighed. "This is what you think we're looking for?" Jim asked, holding the paper, and trying to sound incredulous, but Blair could hear a note of alarm in his voice.

"Yeah, I think so. The old man at the shop told me he was waiting for me to come and hunt a Rakshasa."

"He told you," Jim repeated. "Why would he think you were hunting anything? I don't mean to suggest you're not, but you don't look like a demon hunter."

Blair actually smiled. "I agree and I can tell you the old man who told me we would have to hunt the demon, he was practically blind, so I doubt he even knew what I looked like," he paused and his voice turned serious, "but he knew I was looking for the demon and I'm sure he's right. Something clicked when he said Rakshasa and there's been an influx of Indians, specifically

from—" Jim held up a hand to stop the younger man who tended to talk a lot when he was nervous.

"How do we stop it?" Jim cut to the chase.

"You shoot it in the heart with blessed arrows," Blair glanced at Jim's face as he answered. He could see the tension building as his jaw muscles twitched and knew Jim was having a hard time with this whole scenario, despite the evidence. Faith and Jim were not two things that went together well and Blair wondered if he would have to fight with Jim to convince him that they needed to do this.

"I left my bow in Peru," Jim answered with disgust.

"We're going to need a crossbow," Blair answered. "It's fast and deadly. Do you know how to shoot one?" Jim nodded and Blair continued. "And we're going to need blessed arrows."

"Where do we get blessed arrows, Chief?"

Blair considered the question. "I'll handle the arrows. Can you get a crossbow before sundown?"

"Yeah, I can," Jim agreed.

"Okay, I'll meet you at the loft at 6:00 and we'll go on patrol."

"Blair," Jim paused, placing a hand on Blair's arm. Hearing his name, Blair looked at the sentinel, giving Jim his full attention. It wasn't often that Jim used his first name but when he did, Blair paid attention. "Make sure you're at the loft by sundown. Don't be out there alone after dark."

Blair nodded and Jim watched as Blair picked up his backpack and left the room. Part of him wanted to forget the arrows, take his gun, and hunt but some deeper, more primal part of him knew he had to do whatever was necessary to protect the tribe and that he needed to rely on Blair to guide him in this. As he would have listened to Incacha, the Chopec Shaman who had helped him in Peru, he knew he needed to listen to Blair. With a resigned sigh, he left the conference room and took a seat at his desk, picking up the phone. He had a crossbow to borrow.

At 5:00, Jim knocked on Simon's door and, not waiting for a reply, walked in. It was obvious to Jim that Simon had been sitting and staring at the autopsy report. He looked up, his dark brown eyes showing his concern, as he watched Jim take a seat. "You have something?" he asked.

"Yeah," Jim nodded, clearly unhappy. Unfolding the picture, he handed it to Simon. "That's what we are looking for."

"Jim—" Simon started to protest.

"It shape shifts. That's how it gets close to its victims."

"I know what I've read but are you sure?"

Jim looked down and sighed. "Blair's sure." He looked at Simon. "He's the one that knows about this stuff, Simon. If we want the killing to stop, we have to rely on him." He paused and then looked at his Captain. "It kills at night and we are going to hunt it tonight."

Despite the fear, Simon found something reassuring in Jim's words as Jim turned to leave. "Be careful," he whispered. "Both of you, be careful."

At 5:40, Jim walked into the loft, carrying a large knapsack, and glanced at Blair, who had four arrows laid out on the table.

Ignoring the relief he felt at having his guide in his territory before sunset, he walked over and lifted an arrow, examining it before glancing at Blair. "Are they blessed," he asked, not even believing he asked the question.

"They are," Blair confirmed. "I have a friend who is a Wiccan Priestess and she did the blessing."

"Wiccan," Jim repeatedly dryly, fingering the arrow, his sensitive fingers running over the wood speculatively. Jim had lived with the Chopec and had of necessity hunted with bows and arrows. So his fingers automatically moved down the shaft making sure the arrow was strong enough.

Blair nodded, watching him, the guide aware of what Jim was doing. "It was kind of funny. She had me help her with the blessing. She said it would give the arrows extra power."

Jim's light blue eyes moved to his partner and friend. "This is crazy," he stated, still holding the arrow between his fingers.

"But if it will do the job, we have to try it," Blair countered.

Setting his jaw, Jim nodded and opened the knapsack. He pulled out a crossbow and, making sure the safety was locked, fitted the arrow before returning the crossbow to the knapsack. "I'd feel a lot better if this were the jungle," he muttered, not really addressing Blair, but the anthropologist nodded his understanding as they gathered their things.

Finishing, unsure of what the future would hold, Blair turned to Jim and held up what looked to Jim like a swastika on a leather cord. "Wear this," Blair said, putting a matching one on his own neck.

"A Swastika?" Jim couldn't believe Blair, of Jewish decent, would wear such a thing.

"The Nazi's took the Hindu symbol of the revolving sun and used it as their symbol. In the Hindu culture, this represents magic, life, and purity. It's a symbol of good luck. If you look closely, the symbol is straight, not slanted, and the hands are turned to the left, not the right."

“A symbol of good luck,” Jim repeated and Blair nodded.

“Okay,” he slipped it on. He hoped he wouldn’t need a good luck charm, but somehow he was pretty sure he would. Gathering their things, their faces grim, Jim and Blair left for their patrol, heading to where the first body had been found.

The people who owned and worked in the shops on the downtown side of Washington Memorial Park were rushing to their homes, hurrying past Blair and Jim, and staying in brightly-lit areas as they headed away from the park area. Jim and Blair could feel the nervous energy and see the tension as those around them kept racing away from the area, most furtively glancing at the street around them as they rushed by. The area was quickly becoming deserted as sentinel and guide deliberately made their way towards less populated parts of the area where businesses were closing up for the night and streets darkening until only a few light posts shed light on the area. For the sentinel the area was bright enough but Blair carried a flashlight, using it to sweep up and down streets and alleys.

Finally, except for a few all-night grocery stores, the area was deserted. Once in a while, Jim and Blair would pass a patrol car or several officers walking a foot patrol and wave to the officers as they lingered near the park entrance where the first body was found. But nothing and no one seemed out of the ordinary, the park totally deserted, even the junkies who frequented the quiet, dark area had decided to avoid the park this night.

By 1:00 am Jim was getting impatient and frustrated; his answers to any question becoming monosyllabic as he made his way up and down the streets near the park, checking backyards and alleys.

He constantly had his senses on high alert and he was getting a bit of a headache from the tension. Afraid to stop for fear someone would end up dead as a result, he was grounding himself more and more using Blair’s heartbeat, as he pushed himself down another dark, deserted street.

He was near another alley, looking around when some internal warning system made him stop. What it was he had noticed was subliminal; he wasn’t sure what it was but Jim had been first a soldier and then a cop too long not to pay attention to a warning. Blinking and focusing down the alley, he noticed stacked crates and, as he looked further down, he felt a tingling of something along his spine. Something intangible about this alley felt different and Jim notched up sight, looking around as he unconsciously pushed Blair behind him.

He could see the boxes stacked along the wall, jutting out into the alley on one side, with a dumpster on the other side. Stepping closer, he grimaced at the smell emanating from the alley. He steeled himself to enter and guessed it was the smell that had attracted his attention.

Blair, just behind him, could smell the human waste and refuse and wrinkled his nose as he told Jim to dial down his sense of smell.

Jim, recognizing an underlying scent of decay beneath that of human waste did just that, and then walked over to the dumpster a few feet from the entrance, sentinel eyes noticing something strange near the bottom, even in the dimly-lit alley. Crouching down, he looked at scratches along the bottom of the dumpster. The scratches didn't look like the usual dents a dumpster would get, but rather like claw marks stretching across a wide expanse. Frowning, he slid a finger along the bottom, feeling the deep gouges, absently noting the width and deciding these were made by something with very large claws. Still crouched down, he angled around to examine the sides of the dumpster; a sixth sense tingling and raising the hairs at the back of his neck. All senses on alert, he began a careful examination of the ground and wall near the dumpster.

Blair, seeing Jim looking over the dumpster, started to move past him to glance around the alley, but froze in his tracks when Jim called out, loudly, "Blair, stay near me." It was a command said in a harsh voice but Blair could hear an undertone of fear and, for the first time since they had started the patrol, he noted Jim's calm demeanor breaking.

Not moving, Blair used his flashlight to create a circle of light and peered at the back end of the alley. Swinging the flashlight in a wide arc, his eyes followed the beam as it ran along the line of boxes and he realized there was a space back there. Moving, not so much closer to the back as at a different angle, he swung the flashlight, sure he had seen some movement there as the scent of decay increased. Drawing a breath through his mouth, he placed a hand to his nose as he continued peering into the back.

The flashlight moved along the back wall and then flashed across the face of his partner who stood at the back by the crates, smiling. Wondering how Jim had gotten past him without his hearing or seeing him move, Blair looked the detective over and then quickly lowered the beam to the ground so as not to blind his partner. "Jim did you find anything back there?" he asked softly, taking a hesitant step forward.

"Some strange scratches," Blair heard Jim's voice behind him and he spun in confusion, his flashlight beam bouncing off of Jim standing by the dumpster. The sentinel immediately put a hand up to protect his eyes from the sudden blinding light, blinking. Turning, Blair looked back down the alley, his flashlight swinging wildly back in that direction, but Jim wasn't there. Flashing the beam along the wall and shaking his head in confusion, he again noted movement, but it wasn't Jim that stepped into the light; it was Naomi.

"Naomi what are you doing here?" he asked in concern as his mother stepped away from the crates and started down the alley, walking slowly.

"Hello Sweetie, I thought I could come and be part of your work again. You remember I helped you before with that carjacking case."

“Mom, you shouldn’t be here, it’s dangerous and how did you find us?”

“Blair,” Jim moved beside him and grabbed the back of his jacket yanking him back and away from the slowly approaching figure as he reached for the knapsack. “That’s not your mother,” he said, his voice sounding strained as he watched the approaching figure, a shaking hand opening the knapsack.

“Of course it is, Jim. You know Naomi, she finds her way into things.”

“Blair, it’s not her,” he repeated in a growl and Blair glanced at his partner and realized Jim was pulling out the crossbow, his eyes on his target.

“Jim you can’t,” he demanded, turning to stop his partner. “That’s my mom,” Blair cried out, grabbing for the crossbow, his flashlight swinging around wildly as Naomi neared.

“Sandburg, it’s not Naomi,” Jim stated through clenched teeth as he used the arm not holding the crossbow to shove Blair back— hard— to get him out of the reach of the approaching figure. The push was powerful, designed to drop an opponent. Blair landed on the ground behind Jim with a gasp, the flashlight falling from his hand, as Naomi turned from Blair towards Jim, a hand reaching out for him. Even as Blair scrambled back up, preparing to tackle Jim and protect his mother, Jim, in one smooth movement, swung the crossbow up, aiming and firing as the thing reached out, a hand landing on Jim’s shoulder.

“NO,” Blair screamed, gaining his feet and trying to reach Naomi as the arrow met its mark, but Jim wouldn’t let him near. Dropping the crossbow, Jim spun and grabbed his partner, pulling him close and holding tight as Naomi staggered back and fell to the ground.

“It’s not her, Chief,” he whispered, “it’s not her,” over and over in a rasped voice, leaning against Blair, his own body trembling.

Blair looked down at the figure on the ground, horrified that his best friend had just killed his mother, and pulled himself free of Jim’s grasp, pushing the sentinel away. Stepping forward, as the flashlight on the ground behind him illuminated the dark shape stretched out before him, he realized it no longer bore any resemblance to his mother. In the flashlight beam Blair could see it had grown larger, with talons for feet, claws dripping with fluid, and dark fur. And its smell was that of a rotting corpse. He couldn’t see the face in the dark alley and stepped back to get the flashlight, his eyes never leaving the figure. “Jim,” he whispered softly, his voice shaking as he realized how close they had both come to the Rakshasa. “Is it dead?”

Before Jim could answer, the creature began to dissolve, falling in on itself, acrid smoke rising into the air as it melted into the ground. Holding his nose against the intense stench of decay, Jim nodded. The dissolving accelerated and, within moments, nothing was left on the ground, and a gust of wind swept down the alley, blowing the scent of decay and corruption away. In its place both men could smell the scent of lavender.

“Man,” Blair whispered in a shaky voice as Jim rested a hand against the dumpster, “that thing, it made me think it was you and then Naomi.” As Blair said this he turned to Jim, his eyes widening as he looked at Jim’s shoulder. “Jim,” he was at the sentinel’s side in a flash, “you’re bleeding!”

Using his flashlight, Blair could see Jim’s jacket and shirt were shredded and wet, blood spreading across the front of his chest. Immediately, Blair pulled off his own jacket and pushed it against the wound as he reached for Jim’s pocket to grab his cellphone and call for help. “It’s okay, Chief. I don’t need an ambulance. It needs a few stitches, that’s all. It caught my shoulder as I fired.”

Not wanting to consider how close that thing had come to Jim and why it had gotten that close, Blair shook his head. “The truck is a couple of blocks away and you can’t walk there. We’re going to have to get an ambulance.”

Jim sighed, “Too many questions to answer if we do. I’ll wait at the end of the alley. Go get the truck.” Blair considered this, still pressing his jacket to Jim’s shoulder and then, realizing Jim was still on his feet, nodded, pulling Jim’s good arm up to hold the jacket in place.

“I’ll be right back,” he agreed. “Just stay right here.” With that, Blair ran out of the alley and down the street. Bringing the truck back a few minutes later, he helped Jim in and then grabbed the knapsack and crossbow, tossing them onto the floor of the backseat as he headed for Cascade General. Once there, as Jim was taken into the emergency room, he called Simon.

It was 2:00 am and a groggy Simon Banks answered the phone in a snarl that would have impressed even Jim, but when Simon realized it was Blair calling, he came immediately alert. He hadn’t been sleeping well, knowing Jim and Blair were out hunting the thing, so he was dressed and out the door quickly and at Cascade General forty-five minutes later.

Walking into the waiting room, Simon checked at the desk, confirming Jim was being treated before sitting down in one of the plastic seats, noting Blair wasn’t there and willing to bet he was in with Jim.

Twenty minutes later the pair walked out. Jim looked pale but Blair was ghost-white as they made their way to Simon.

“Hi Simon,” Blair said softly as Jim nodded at his Captain.

“What’s going on? Is Jim alright?”

“He got twelve stitches in his shoulder,” Blair answered, his voice shaky.

“It got a bit too close for comfort,” Jim agreed. “But we got it, Sir; it’s gone.”

“Let’s get to the loft and then you can fill me in.”

Blair nodded and Simon followed the pair back to the loft. Helping Jim sit down on the couch, so his injured shoulder rested against a pillow and the arm of the couch, Blair turned to make some tea but Simon took the pot from his trembling hands and instead, poured two shots of Jack Daniels.

Simon could hear Jim tell Blair to stop fussing, he was fine as he walked over and handed out the glasses and took a seat. "Talk," he ordered.

"It was in an alley near the park," Jim answered.

"Do I need to send someone to pick up the carcass?"

"No," Blair answered, before sipping the drink and indicating Jim should as well. "It...it dissolved. But it almost got to us and that was...my fault. I almost got Jim killed," he whispered, his body trembling, as the events of the night settled.

"Sandburg," Jim answered in frustration, "it wasn't your fault. You said it yourself, it reaches into a person's head and appears as the person you most trust."

"It appeared as Jim," Blair whispered looking down and wiping at his eyes, "and then when Jim spoke and I realized he was next to me, it turned into Naomi. I tried to stop Jim from killing it," he took a shaky breath.

Jim carefully reached out and put his arm around Blair's shoulders, pulling him close, his guide's head coming to rest on his good shoulder as Blair's arms reached around Jim to hold on tight. "It's okay, Blair," he said as Blair shook his head. "Unlike you, I could see it."

"What did it look like?" Simon asked and Jim looked over Blair's head to stare at Simon. "It was the stuff of nightmares, Simon. Not something I ever saw before or ever want to see again. In some ways it looked like the picture Blair found but in others," he paused shaking his head and looked at his guide. "Blair knew how to find it and how to destroy it," he said. "That's the shaman's role, and then I destroyed it; that's my role."

"If I hadn't been with you-," Blair answered and slowly pulled back.

"I wouldn't have found it," Jim answered. "And it would have killed someone else. Blair do you remember what Dan Wolf said? You'll find the signs and I'll hunt the demon. It worked out right."

"But--"

"This worked out because despite the fact that you thought that thing was your mother, you weren't willing to hurt me. Somewhere deep inside, even as you questioned me, you trusted me and I'm glad you did both. And," Jim paused and then pulled the luck symbol from around his neck. "The claws started to go in my arm. I was sure it was going to rip apart my shoulder but

just as it did break the skin, that thing touched this and I could feel it flinch back.” Blair looked up in surprise. “This necklace saved my life, Chief. Thank you.”

Blair looked amazed, then gave a tentative smile through eyes bright with unshed tears. He knew he hadn’t resolved the evening’s issues; he would have to meditate long and hard about what had happened and he would need to learn a lot more about being a shaman. But somehow, knowing the necklace had saved Jim made things a little easier to bear. He offered up a silent prayer that he and Jim would never have to do this kind of hunt again but, if there was a next time, Blair was determined Jim would stand beside a full shaman.

“Well, I’m going to have to find a way to put a spin on this so the city relaxes,” Simon said, breaking in on both men’s thoughts as he rose. “I’ll want a very edited report tomorrow,” Simon stood. “I’ll talk to you both tomorrow.” He glanced at his detective and observer. “Good job.” Simon left, still thinking about how he would put a spin on the story.

Finally, deciding to keep the story as close to the truth as possible, he decided he would state that a Cascade Officer shot a large predatory animal and it was confirmed that this animal had been stalking the streets of Cascade. The animal’s carcass had been shipped to a lab for evaluation. That would be the only comments made by the PD. Knowing Jim and Blair would go along with the official line, he made his way to work and, despite the fact that it was now four in the morning, called the Commissioner.

Epilogue

Captain Simon Banks of Major Crimes, Commissioner of Police Jack Wallace and Deputy Commissioner, Steve O’Hara sat together in Simon Banks’ office staring at one another. It was very early – 6:00 am – and the three men were sipping coffee, each lost in his own thoughts, and dreading the conversation that was to follow. Simon had filled the two men in on the evening’s events, ending with Jim’s visit to the hospital.

Finally, putting down his cup, Chief Wallace looked at the other men, his face stern. “We cannot tell the city that a man-eating Hindu demon was running around.” O’Hara and Banks winced at the statement, but both nodded their agreement.

“Jim and Blair will keep quiet,” Simon assured the Commissioner. “And if anyone says anything, Jim can honestly say he took down the animal. His getting clawed lends credence to the statement. We can work in that the officer involved in the hunt was wounded but managed to kill the predator. And Dan Wolf can be trusted. His ‘official’ autopsy report does not state anything about an unknown species.”

Wallace nodded wearily. “Close the file. I’ll have a press release ready in an hour.” He rose, signaling the end of the meeting, and O’Hara stood as well. “Tell Ellison and Sandburg–,” he paused. He had been about to say, “to keep their mouths shut,” but instead he glanced at

Simon and gave a small, almost rueful, smile. "Tell them good job and that I'm glad they work for our city."

Simon nodded as he walked the Commissioner to the door and leaned against it wearily. Jim and Blair had done a good job; Dan Wolf as well. Cascade was safe from this threat and Simon looked forward to going back to dealing with regular criminals. But in the back of his mind, Simon wondered what other cities did; cities that didn't have a sentinel and guide.

