

IMAGINARY FRIENDS

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Sample

The Witch in the 'Hood

Whip-thin and tough as leather, old Mrs. Albert stretches lazily and steps outside, onto her wide front porch. The entity inside her has been sensing the approach of its old foe, making her bones itch night and day. Lately, it feels as if they're about to burst her flesh.

Her previous battle with the Healer was costly. It ended with both her sons dead and her husband infected with a cancer that took its own time killing him, as though he was a fancy buffet and it wanted to sample and savour every dish. It has been a year since his funeral. Now the enemy is returning to the neighbourhood, in search of another victim.

Mrs. Albert hasn't the power to destroy the darkness, any more than it can annihilate the lambency that dwells within her. Nonetheless, for as long as she has lived, she has been putting herself

in the Healer's way. They've been locked in a stalemate, this dance of yin and yang, life and death, for almost two thousand years.

Healer is what the enemy calls itself, as though evil can be transformed by simply giving it a virtuous name; for this 'healer' doesn't end pain—it feeds on human suffering. It prowls battlefields, whispering in soldiers' ears, reminding them of the innocence they lost forever the first time they stilled another beating human heart. It places images in their minds of the loving family left behind, and asks in a voice that rustles insidiously through their thoughts, Do you really deserve them, now that you have killed? Sometimes the Healer follows a soldier home, feasting on a trail of misery and self-loathing. All your friends are dead. Why are you still living? It drowns hopeful dreams in blood-soaked memories, suffocates happiness beneath a smothering blanket of guilt, until one day life itself is too much for the soldier to bear; and then sirens and flashing red lights converge in front of a house, marking another tragic loss for an already wounded family.

Now there's a soldier down the street, recently returned on crutches from the fighting far away, and Mrs. Albert's bones are itching more fiercely than ever before.



I woke up this morning with the worst headache yet, like a white hot spike being driven into the side of my skull. Popped four pain pills at once and they're not even making a dent. The Healer must already be in the 'hood, tracking down my brother.

My name is Dorene Gunn, and I'm sixteen years old. I'm recording this blog in case the witch woman's spell fails and everything goes sideways. The headaches are coming closer together now and stronger, like baby-birthing contractions, and it's getting really hard for me to think straight, but people need to understand what's been happening.

Before I knew what she really was, I thought she was just a crazy old woman who didn't like kids. Every day she would stand on her porch with her long bony arms crossed over her chest, scowling us past her scrubby front lawn as we walked to and from school.

One day as we were passing her house, she arched her back and sniffed the air, then turned her smoky eyes slowly over the

group of us and let her gaze settle on me. I shuddered a little, feeling her interest like the soft brush of a hand on my skin. Later, she had some words with my mother at our front door, and next thing I knew I was being asked to go down to the corner house two or three times a week to “visit with nice Mrs. Albert, who’s all alone.”

I was about to say no way. But then my mother made a point of telling me how Mr. Albert had passed away from cancer just last year, and how the Alberts had lost both their sons in a tragic accident three years before that, and how good it would make me feel to bring some companionship into that poor old woman’s life. When she put it that way, how could I refuse? Meanwhile, recalling conversations I’d overheard when I was younger between my brother and his friends about “that wack job on the corner”, I figured it would be a good idea to tuck a blade down my sock before going over there.

The inside of Mrs. Albert’s house is pretty much what you’d expect from a lonely old lady. It’s a maze of burrow-like hallways lined with tiny rooms. Every window is shaded, and every cubicle is cluttered with random furniture under heaps of junk, some of it spilling out of odd-shaped wicker containers. The whole place is dim and dusty and has an old-person smell to it, like a museum that’s been boarded up for a long time.

Except for the front room.

That’s where we sit whenever I visit her. It has a green and gold sofa and matching chair, with carved wooden feet and narrow wooden armrests, and a couple of small round tables with starched lace doilies on them, and pale green wallpaper with bouquets of yellow roses rising in staggered rows from floor to ceiling. There’s never a speck of dust in that room. Everything smells freshly cleaned.

Each time I arrive, the window blind is raised halfway; but she pulls it all the way down after we’ve had our tea. That’s when the lesson begins. She’s teaching me spells.

That’s my word for them, not hers. Mrs. Albert calls them ‘commands’. She also gets upset if she hears me use the word ‘witch’ to describe her, so I don’t call her that to her face, even though that’s what I think she is. She says that there are people like her all over the world, and none of them use magic. But they can still recognize one another just by looking, and that

was why she singled me out that day. She says I'm full of light, like her. When she saw that, she knew I would be her successor.

I'd been having the headaches for weeks at that point, and my parents were talking about taking me to a specialist to find out what was causing them. When I told Mrs. Albert about them, she nodded knowingly. She said it was no coincidence that they'd started up shortly after my brother Damian got back from Afghanistan. The headaches were a warning from the light inside me that the Healer had caught Damian's scent again and was on its way to finish what it had begun on the battlefield. The Healer was a kind of parasite, she told me, only it got into people's minds instead of their bodies. Sometimes it did that by infecting someone they might go to for help, like a social worker, or a medical doctor, or even a pastor, and making them give bad advice.

A lot of what she said made no sense to me at first. I thought she must be sick in the head, from loneliness or grief. I hoped that I was having the headaches because of an allergy, and that they were worsening because of something inside her house. I thought a hundred times about begging off from going to visit her. But then something strange happened.

One afternoon I was sitting with her, sipping ginger tea in her front room, and she was going on about how an alien life force was living inside me, keeping the darkness out, and I would soon have the power to protect my brother from the Healer's touch. All at once, everything went out of focus for just a second and then sprang back sharp and clear, and I could see something flowing out of her chest and entering mine, like a ribbon of light connecting the two of us. Its rich, warm glow filled the space between us. While I was wondering at that, an answering warmth kindled inside me. And then, as though a switch had been flipped, a wave seemed to break over me, drenching me with ease and contentment.

I know now that it was her life force, throwing a shield around me. At the time, all I could think was, *Damn! This magic stuff is real!* Since then, I've decided that I will do whatever it takes, learn whatever I need to learn, to make Damian feel as safe and complete as I felt at that moment...

...because there's an emptiness inside my brother, one that I can finally understand. He never smiles anymore, and rarely

speaks. Sometimes I catch him staring out the window with eyes I hardly recognize, they're so bleak and hollow, the eyes of someone who's already accepted death and is just marking time until his grave is ready. He's on the edge, about to fall. If the Healer touches him, Damian will be lost to us, gone forever. And I cannot—will not!—let that happen.



Candles

The offices of the Relocation Authority in the Urban District of Lakeshore Ontario had been purposely designed to intimidate visitors. Walls of steel, doors of glass, floors of polished marble. Rabbi Leon Goldman's heart thudded into his stomach as the elevator doors glided soundlessly apart, depositing him in a place that was cold and shiny and apparently devoid of humanity. Nothing moved or breathed in this sterile maze, including, at the moment, Leon Goldman.

He was a few minutes early for an eight o'clock appointment with his relocation officer. The tone of the summons had been disturbingly formal, even distant, coming as it did from someone he'd known since they were both five years old, and Goldman couldn't help imagining the worst.

"Leon!" Goldman spun at the sound of his name and saw Josh Weinstein striding toward him, his hand outstretched for shaking. "So good of you to come!"

As if he'd had a choice.

Weinstein's forced heartiness making him even more nervous, Goldman followed the relocation officer down a long narrow corridor to an enclosed cubicle. It was spartanly furnished, just as blank and barren as the rest of the space on this floor, with a monolithic glass door that closed and latched behind Goldman with an ominously loud click.

"So, Leon, how have you been?" Josh asked once they were seated across the featureless expanse of desk from each other.

Unsure how to respond, Goldman shrugged. How had he been? He'd been comfortable. He'd been happy. He'd been feeling secure, perhaps too secure.

Josh pulled a compupad from somewhere behind the desktop and called up Goldman's file. "You've been deferred for relocation seven times now, correct?"

Goldman nodded, an icy knot beginning to form in his stomach.

Weinstein leaned back in his chair with a regretful sigh. "I'm afraid I can't defer you again, Leon. There's a posting available, as chaplain aboard the *Vasco da Gama*, and you're going to have to take it. I'm sorry, but the rules have changed. Neither one of us has a choice in the matter."

"The *Vasco da Gama*. It's a ship?"

"A star cruiser, explorer class." Weinstein leaned forward again and read aloud from his screen. "It has a crew complement of two hundred men and women."

"And how many of them are Jewish?"

Weinstein paused, then shook his head sadly. "None of them. I hate to tell you how few practising Jews there are out in space, Rabbi."

"And yet you think it's a good idea to rip me away from my congregation at Beth Avraham and transplant me onto this star ship where I would be the only Jew aboard." Goldman felt the blood rush to his face and saw his anger reflected in Josh Weinstein's darkening expression.

"Leon, please, don't make this any more difficult for yourself."

"Those people are like my family! They helped me get through the loss of my wife. We have a bond."

"You think I don't realize that?" demanded Weinstein, now on his feet and leaning across the desktop toward him. "Sarah was my friend, Leon. I miss her too. But her funeral was four years ago. It's time for you to put the past behind you and move on. Leon, I'm sorry, but it is what it is. You're Eligible and you're going off-planet, end of discussion." Weinstein sank back into his chair and busied himself with his compupad, refusing to make any further eye contact. "Your replacement at Beth Avraham has already been selected and notified. A week from Monday you begin three Earth months of orientation. That gives you plenty of time to prepare

yourself for the transition.”

As though summoned telepathically, a woman appeared on the other side of the glass door. “Ms. Ellis will walk you to the elevator,” said Weinstein, in a voice as cold and impersonal as the decor.

And with that, the interview was over, along with a lifelong friendship. Goldman couldn’t honestly say that he was surprised. The Relocation Authority tended to have that effect on people.

By the time he stepped through the front door of his apartment, Goldman’s anger had mellowed. At his age, it was important to pick his battles, and this one was clearly unwinnable. At least they were letting him stay in the clergy. That option hadn’t always been offered. So, he would bow out gracefully and let the congregation throw him a bon voyage party. He would be a model student at orientation. Then, if *Adonai* hadn’t already struck him dead, he would go bravely out into the vacuum of space.



“Here it is, Chaplain, your home away from home.”

The young shuttle pilot who had walked Goldman from the landing bay of the *Vasco da Gama* to the ship’s small chapel was what Sarah would have called an ‘all of’. Lieutenant Greg Ostermeyer was all of 25 years old. He was also bright, earnest and respectful, with an air of smooth-skinned freshness that invited motherly kisses and grandmotherly pats on the cheek. Once, years ago, Leon Goldman had had a face like that. Now, however, he knew what the young officer was seeing—a man in his middle years, with thinning grey hair and large pores and a slight paunch, who ought to be reclining comfortably in an easy chair somewhere, not venturing out into the hostile vastness of space. And Leon would agree with him.

Orientation had prepared Goldman for the size and appearance of the multi-faith chapel. Still, as his gaze swept the interior of the tiny room, he couldn’t help letting out a disappointed sigh. Artificial flowers, faux windows made of imitation stained glass, and a modest wooden cross mounted on the bulkhead behind a draped altar that held a featureless

seven-branch *menorah* fitted with flame-shaped bulbs in place of candles. A podium sat beside the altar, looking down on just a dozen pews, six on each side of a narrow central aisle. Less than a quarter of the ship's crew would fit into this room. That was assuming any of them attended services at all. It was hardly what he would consider an auspicious beginning to this new chapter of his life.

Abruptly, he realized that he and Ostermeyer were not alone. Someone was sitting in the rearmost pew. Curious, Goldman stepped closer and saw a woman in an officer's uniform, wearing a gauzy white scarf over a tumble of short, fiery red hair. She looked up at him and smiled, and he felt his heart turn over. Sarah's eyes had been that same shade of green.

"I'm sorry," he said, his tongue stumbling over the words as though he were back in high school, asking the prettiest girl in the class for a date. "I didn't mean to interrupt you—I mean—"

What should he call it, Goldman wondered. Prayer? Worship? Meditation?

Seance?

Her smile never faltered. "It's all right," she assured him, and he heard its warmth in her voice. "I come here sometimes when I want to be alone with my thoughts. The chapel is usually empty."

That was what he'd figured. Goldman nodded philosophically.

After only a moment's hesitation, the woman extended her hand toward him. "I'm Luce Armendaro, of Stellar Cartography. I joined the crew about a standard year ago." Her grip was firm and welcoming, and Goldman had to remind himself that it was just an introductory handshake. A formality, nothing more.

"Lieutenant," Ostermeyer cut in, "would you mind seeing that Rabbi Goldman finds his quarters? I have to get back to the landing deck."

The green eyes twinkled. "Sure, no problem. So, the new chaplain is Jewish?"

"I'm afraid so," Goldman sighed, settling himself onto the pew across the aisle from her.

"My late husband was Jewish. Sephardic, from España. I

always wanted to learn more about the rituals and holidays, but we kept getting posted to different ships and somehow there was never any time. Let me know when you plan to conduct Sabbath services, and I'll be sure to attend."

In that moment Leon Goldman knew he was in love.



Doubling Back

Benny's text was short and to the point: *they're coming run*. I tried to call him back, but his phone was turned off.

That kid never could get a message right the first time. Which of the many "they"s in my life was coming for me now? The feds? The local cops? The research lab that had swallowed my father and tried to put me on the menu as well? Some rival crime lord wanting to send a message to Gus "Mr. Big" Bigelow? It couldn't be Bigelow himself—our arrangement was far too advantageous for him.

Besides, even though they used different last names, Benny was Gus's son, loyal to his family until his final breath. If Mr. Big wanted me taken out, the kid wouldn't have bothered to warn me about it.

Not that this cryptic text qualified as much of a warning. Were "they" on their way to the downtown bar where I was currently nursing a ginger ale and waiting for a potential client to show up for a meeting? Or were "they" about to storm my office over Papparelli's Pizza Parlour on Yonge Street, where I'd left Benny holding the fort?

At Gus's request, I'd been teaching the kid "private eye stuff". Trying to, anyway. Nine cases out of ten, investigating is tedious detail work, nothing like what they show you in the movies. Then that tenth case comes along, making you wish you had a stunt double and a director to yell "Cut!" Once Benny had realized we weren't going to be having shootouts and car chases every other day, all he wanted to do was sit around the office, talking tough on social media and filling his

face out of my petty cash. Until today. Today he'd earned his keep.

Benny wasn't the sharpest knife in the drawer. Still, I liked him. I hoped the reason his phone was off was that he was on his way to somewhere safe and didn't want to be traced. He was a big strong kid, a star athlete fresh out of high school, but he didn't have my special talent for avoiding trouble.

I checked my watch. It was 2:32 p.m. Half an hour earlier I'd been driving around the neighbourhood in my twelve-year-old blue Chevy, looking for a legal parking spot. There was still time for me to double back. The client was twenty minutes late. In fact, if someone was after me, there was a good chance he wouldn't show at all, that this meeting was just a ploy to draw me into the open.

Thirty seconds more and I would be out of here, I decided. I started counting. When I got to twenty-three, a man slid onto the stool beside mine. Late forties or early fifties, medium height and build, a full head of neatly trimmed salt-and-pepper hair. His royal blue sports coat fell open, and I caught a glimpse of a pistol tucked into a holster at his waist. He was right handed. I jotted a mental note. Then he turned and gave me a brief, thin-lipped smile.

"Margot Halvorsen?"

"That depends," I replied, staring straight ahead at our reflections in the mirror behind the bar. I was wearing my "plain Jane" persona, to ward off pick-up lines. He was looking at me the way an aging cat would look at a mouse. "Who are *you* supposed to be?"

"I'm your date. Sergeant Wells." He flashed a badge and ID past my eyes, so fast that all I saw was a blur. Real cop? I didn't think so.

Apparently, "they" had arrived.

I spun my stool a quarter-turn. "And what can I do for one of Toronto's finest?" I asked, batting my eyelashes at him.

He clamped his large hand on my elbow. "You can come with me. Now."

Reflexively I doubled back, my consciousness entering my former self just in time to brake at a stop sign two blocks away. I now knew that the meeting I was hurrying to make was a trap. But that was all I knew, and it wasn't enough. I still didn't know who "they" were, or whether they'd set other traps as insurance.

In any case, the second part of Benny's message had been quite clear: *run*. Fortunately, I had my go-bag in the trunk of the car and plenty of gas in the tank. Instead of turning the corner and parking on the side street, I chose to cruise through the intersection, headed toward the traffic light at Avenue Road.

Meanwhile, my mind was in overdrive. I'd really thought that those days of hiding out and looking over my shoulder were in the past. Gus had my back now. Everything was supposed to be good. So why was this happening to me? What had changed?

All at once it struck me that this might not be about me at all. Maybe Fake Cop just needed to keep me away from the office so someone else could move on Benny.

A man in Gus Bigelow's position had enemies to spare. He'd made it clear that as long as I was training his son I was also responsible for protecting him. It was gallant of Benny to try to protect me instead. (I'm short and girly-looking, and have often been mistaken for a damsel in distress.) But Mr. Big would not be impressed to learn that I'd been high-tailing it out of town in his kid's hour of need.

In about twenty minutes, Benny would be texting me his warning. As it happened, that was also how long it would take me to get to him from my current location. Swearing under my breath, I turned at the light and headed north, back to the office.



My father had always said that messing with time was both the best and the worst idea he'd ever come up with. His time machine had worked, but not in the way you would expect. It allowed people to send their consciousness into the past, with all their memories intact, into their own former body. They could relive events and, if they wanted to, remake earlier decisions, altering their personal timeline.

Dad had used the machine a lot at first, not to change the present for anyone else but rather to correct his own past errors. And, as he later found out, while he'd been tweaking his current reality, the machine had been doing the same thing to his genetic makeup.

That most of the scientific community refused to take his

theories about time travel seriously had actually turned out to be a blessing. Dad had known from the start how dangerous his invention could be in the wrong hands. He'd kept its existence a secret for years. Then someone tried to break into the storage locker where he'd been hiding the machine, forcing him to do something about it.

He could have used it to go back in time and change his mind about building it in the first place, but that would have undone all the improvements he'd made to his life, including meeting and marrying my mother. So, he opted to destroy the machine, burn all his notes, and keep his fingers crossed instead.

He also kept the changes that had been made to his genome, and he passed them along to me. For obvious reasons I was home-schooled, at least until I'd learned to control my special talent. By my late teens I'd given it a name: doubling back. It made a great safety net. If I found myself in dangerous or unpleasant circumstances, I could go back and change the decision that had put me there—most of the time.

As with anything that sounds that good, there was and is a catch. I can't double back more than thirty minutes at once, and I need to wait at least an hour after doubling back before doing it again. If I don't let the new timeline settle properly, it can loop back on itself, creating echoes and multiple realities and a hell of a lot of confusion.

That was why I was cursing as I turned the car around to go check up on Benny. If this was a mistake, if he was already somewhere else and "they" were waiting for me in the office, then I would have to deal with the situation the old-fashioned way. Fortunately, I had more in my defensive arsenal than just the time travel gene. Besides my wits and a well-honed survival instinct, I had two small-calibre handguns, one in the glove box of my car and the other one locked in a desk drawer in my office. I was trained to use them but couldn't remember the last time I'd needed to fire either weapon. With luck, things would remain that way.

As I approached the entrance to the private parking lot behind Papparelli's, I noticed a dark green GMC Savana. It had tinted windows and was sitting on the wrong side of the road, as though poised to roll forward and block any vehicle attempting to exit the lot. I drove past the entrance without

slowing down, mentally noting the van's licence plate number. Then I hung a couple of quick right turns and pulled over on the side road just north of the pizza joint, facing Yonge Street. I sent a quick text to my contact at Motor Vehicle Licences and Registrations. There was no point in checking the time of a decision I wouldn't be able to unmake, but I did it automatically: 2:29 p.m.

So, the parking lot was under surveillance. "They" were either lying in wait for someone who was arriving—me—or preparing to grab someone who was leaving—Benny. There were probably eyes on the front and back doors of the building as well. I was ready to take "them" on, but this only made sense if Benny was still in the office, needing to be rescued.

I tried calling him again. The line was busy. Great. A split second after I'd disconnected, his text came through: *they know run.*

All I could do was shake my head. This message was even more cryptic than his first one had been. Then I reminded myself that as far as the timeline was concerned, this *was* his first text. Fake Cop had arrived at the bar, realized that I'd blown off the meeting, and—alerted the rest of "them" to watch for me here? That didn't track. The timing was wrong. So was the time. The clock on the dashboard now read 2:26 p.m.

Consciously relaxing my neck and shoulders, I glanced in the side view mirror—and froze. A man was striding toward my car, coming up on it from behind. I recognized the sports coat. It was Fake Cop. Too late to duck down—he'd seen me. My next impulse was to turn the key in the ignition and get the hell away from there. Bad idea. There was wall-to-wall traffic blocking the way onto Yonge Street, and not enough road width on this side street to let me pull a fast U-turn.

A second later "Sergeant Wells" leaned over and tapped on my driver's side window a couple of times with the barrel of his snub-nosed revolver. I cast a longing look at the glove box, realized how slim my chances were of beating the bullet from his gun, and decided to go with plan D.

Lowering the window, I demanded in my most indignant voice, "Who are you really, and why are you waving that damned weapon in my face?"

He gave me a familiar reptilian smile. "Hello, Margot. I'm an old friend of your father's. I have something important to

tell you, and I need you to listen carefully to what I have to say.”

“Where’s Benny?”

“Wherever you left him, I imagine.”

“He was in the office. What have you done with him?”

“Not a thing. I haven’t even gone inside the building.”

“But how did he—?” A sudden chill went through me, raising gooseflesh on my arms. “Just a second.” Fake Cop waited patiently outside the car as I pulled up the texting history on my phone. It showed that no messages had been sent or received in the past two hours.

This was impossible. Swallowing hard, I tucked the phone into the pocket of my jacket.

“As I said, I’m an old friend of your father’s, and we have a lot to discuss, you and I.”

“We’ll do it in my office,” I told him. This was another decision I wouldn’t be able to unmake. I hoped it wouldn’t turn out to be a mistake. However, if it did, at least I would be able to defend myself. “After I’ve seen with my own eyes that Benny is all right.”

He nodded. “Agreed, but on one condition: you first let me remove the handgun currently sitting in your desk drawer.”

There was only one way he could know about that gun. “You’ve been in my office before.”

“Yes. Unfortunately, the last time I tried to speak to you there, things ended badly. So I rewound. I’m hoping this iteration will go much better.”

