

## "A Touch of Fear"

By Paul "PVC" Van Camp



Dusk was ending yet another day of perfect California weather. On a grassy knoll overlooking the ocean, two workmen in dirty dungarees scanned the suburbia below. With shovels across their shoulders and worried expressions across their faces they engaged in a solemn survey. Around them close packed homes lay nestled among rolling hills and crisscrossing little streets. Busy lanes overflowed as evening commuters escaped from daytime toils.

The shorter of the two, a pudgy Mexican in a red checkered shirt, smiled at his elderly companion. "Don't worry amigo. These people -- they no care," he assured. With a broad sweep of his hand he dismissed the figures below but the sinewy old man did not respond. He continued a hawkish inspection while twisting the shaft of his shovel.

Suddenly a loud bang rifled through the air.

Both men lunged for the grassy earth below -- their heads twisting and turning in a frantic search. But no adversary was in sight. Commuters on all sides continued their daily routine. None displayed interest, much less malice, toward the frightened workmen.

Then came a second loud bang. The Mexican laughed loudly as he spotted the source. A battered old motorcycle struggling up a nearby hill backfired as it chugged ahead. Puffs of blue smoke spewed behind as the antiquated rig battled the ancient power of gravity. Steadily it persisted, impervious to the cars streaming past.

As the workmen watched, the vehicle crested the hill and, infused with renewed vigor, descended toward a sandy beach and a picturesque sunset. In its wake uncurled wisps of the bluish contaminants which make California sunsets so stunning.

The Mexican chortled quietly as he rose to his feet while jabbing his shovel's blade into the ground. The cold steel made little headway against hard-packed earth. Around him a gathering of tombstones lay cracked and worn from ages of undisturbed slumber, their still forms unperturbed by this violation.

The older man took longer to recover. His thin form rose unsteadily, his face now more weary than worried. Wisps of smoke encircled his head as he lit up a crooked cigarette.

The Mexican is right, he reflected. Why should these people care? Everything of material value was removed from these sacred sites many years ago. Such is often the practice among aging cemeteries as it eliminates the need for security. Thus with only withered bones and crumbling teeth to be found in the rotting pine boxes below, no one will suspect the true purpose of the dig. Nor will they suspect a connection to a few missing locals. He and the Mexican will appear only as caretakers planting trees.

Still -- to commit this crime in front of so many witnesses.

"This is total insanity," he muttered quietly.

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The old motorcycle continued down the beach. At the end of the road it pulled off to one side, its engine dying with spasms of metallic clanking. Its shadow stretched toward infinity as a figure rose from its mount. It was a towering form with a muscular girth packed into a tattered leather jacket. Huge hands at the end of massive arms removed the dented helmet -- uncovering the weathered face of Garth Mjolnir. It was a harsh face with an overly large Nordic nose, thick down-turned lips, and a framing mane of black hair peppered gray.

He scanned the area with a scowl. On each side stood a small building, each with storefronts seeking patronage from the pedestrians which on summer days flow by in an endless stream. But this was a cool winter eve and visitors were few.

The building to one side was an uninteresting brick structure housing a take-out-pizza window offering up an even less interesting culinary fare. In fact, the only thing interesting about the pizza was its price -- it was fascinatingly high.

On the other side lay an old wooden house that had been painted white a long time ago. It lay comfortably between the green of drooping Eucalyptus trees and a bronze skirt of Witch Hazel shrubs. Jutting from its front stood a sheltered porch overgrown with vines and potted plants.

This stretch of concrete separating tar from sand was the lair of Black Jerry: a saxophonist and a damn fine one at that. There, sitting upon cold concrete, the lonely musician would belt out a sad tune to sweep away the worldly cares of any that lingered to listen.

It was exactly what Garth sought -- a tonic to quell the beast within. But Black Jerry was

nowhere to be seen. In his spot, a long-haired blonde kid with freckles and a pug nose strummed a guitar while wailing a country tune. The singing wasn't bad, but this was wrong -- very wrong. Black Jerry would never let some kid capitalize his position on the strip. He rarely missed a day, defending his territory with a vengeance. Yet for over a week now Garth had neither seen nor heard from the gifted musician.

As the boy finished his song, Garth stepped squarely in front of him -- just inches away. The youngster craned his neck back uncomfortably to view the towering dark form, noting broad shoulders silhouetted with the autumn pastels of a dying sun.

"You'all want for someth'n," he drawled, his right hand slipping beneath a tattered corduroy jacket.

"Where's Black Jerry?"

"Never done heard of him."

Garth bent forward until his nose was just inches from the kid's. "This is Jerry's spot. Your ass don't belong here."

"I don't know no Black Jerry. Now I don't want no trouble, but if you fuck with me -- I'm ready for you, man, I'm ready."

"Watch yourself, son. People around here have been disappearing. You could be next."

The boy swallowed silently as the towering giant straightened up, his shadow engulfing the boy's figure.

Garth softened his stance. "If you see Jerry tell him I'm worried about him. Very worried."

There was no response from the boy.

"Welcome to the neighborhood," added Garth with a slight smile. "Hope you stay a while." Then he turned and strode off toward the rickety old house.

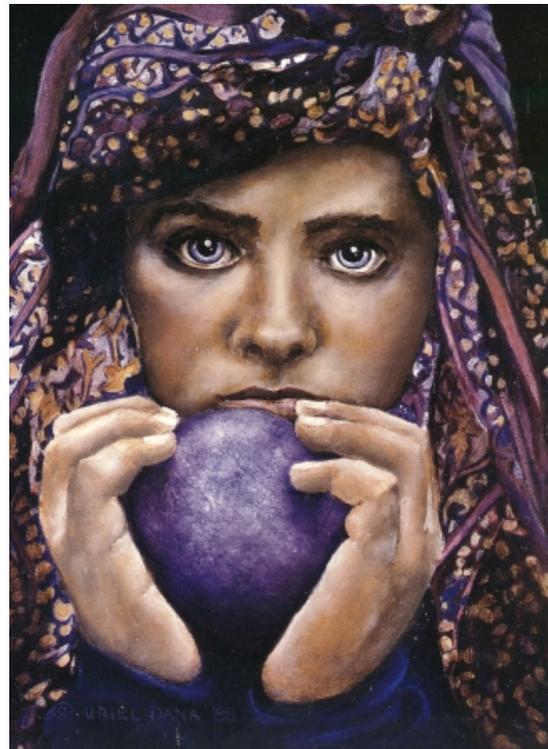
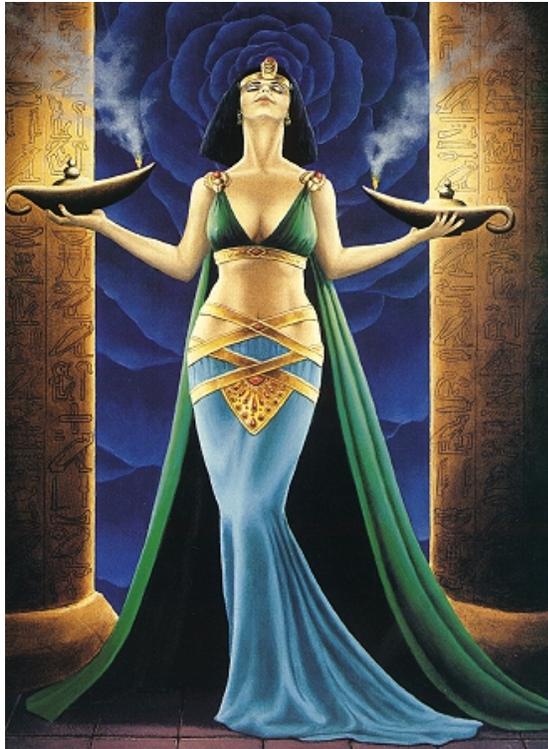
His attention turned to the white washed porch before him. A green mesh of entangling vines and potted plants cast shade and serenity upon the aging home. Above hung a faded cloth banner declaring the word "MASSAGE" in bold letters and in a window lay a palmistry sign with a picture of a hand that could have been drawn by a child.

Garth searched the interior for signs of the residence's attractive proprietor. A sense of longing swelled within as he attempted to pick out a female form. But darkness concealed any evidence of life within.

A small gray shape jumped from the shadows and rubbed against the biker's legs. "Hey Butch," said Garth as a sweep of his arm lifted the tomcat. Butch purred as he sank into a comfortable leather perch. A callused hand rubbed his protruding belly as feline eyes glazed over in ecstasy. The purr turned into a quiet roar.

"Now that's one pleased pussy," cooed a sultry voice. Garth's heart leapt as he turned to face a familiar form. The porch railings now supported an attractive dark female of Spanish lineage. A

simple black dress, wrapped around a slim figure, was accompanied by numerous necklaces and bracelets. Shiny black hair, accented with large metallic earrings, flowed over soft shoulders. She smiled pleasantly, her sleepy Spanish eyes suggesting a childish innocence. But a closer inspection revealed the crow's feet markings of innocence lost.



Garth stepped back in surprise. This was Starla, a lady who spoke to him often in his dreams but rarely in reality. For years he has sought her attention, pursuing her presence as the cure for chronic loneliness. But never before has she returned the interest. Always she had acknowledging him in only the most cursory manner, shunning every effort at even simple conversation.



Yet now she stood before him inviting converse like an old friend. He hesitated in his response, fearful that an ill-formed retort would restore her usual callous manner. He opened his mouth to speak but, unable to select proper words, he stood with only a questioning gaze and a slack jaw for his reply.

Suddenly the form cradled in his arm stiffened and twisted. The gray tabby hissed through clenched fangs at a newly discovered foe. In the direction of the cat's stony glare, resided another feline. This one jet black with intense eyes peering out from the cover of bushes.

"It's just a cat you silly kitty," scolded Garth as he rubbed Butch's neck in reassurance. But Butch squirmed in his grasp and, with a fierce snarl, used razor sharp claws to tear himself loose. The cat's form disappeared down the sidewalk as he raced away impervious to the damage inflicted on his former host.

Surprised, Garth turned his attention to the source of the anxiety. Large cat eyes glared back through dark shadows. He could not see much of the animal but it was huge for a cat. And there was something odd about its shape.

"That's the biggest damn cat I've ever seen," he said gesturing toward the animal with one hand while licking the blood off the other.

"It's just a cat," Starla shrugged, not bothering to look.

"It's kinda weird looking too. I've never seen a cat that looks like that."

"I'll bet there's a lot of things you've never seen. You've been stuck in this hell hole for too long. You need to get out, to travel." As she spoke, she glided along the railing toward the steps to the sidewalk.

"Really?" the biker asked, moving in tandem.

"Don't you just love to travel? To see exotic new places full of exciting new things. I know I do. You look like the adventurous type -- strong and brave. I'll bet you love to travel."

"You selling travel packages?" Garth stopped suddenly.

Starla laughed. She looks beautiful when she laughs, thought the biker. But then, she looks beautiful when she doesn't laugh.

"I'm not selling anything. I'm just trying to be friendly. I think you've got the wrong impression of me. Of course it's all my fault. I haven't been very sociable. But I want that to change. I think we should become friends. Why don't you come inside? I just boiled some water and have some great chamomile tea. I think you'll like it. I know I do."

How many lonely nights had Garth dreamed of this moment? Too many to count. Yet for some reason he wondered if maybe Butch didn't have the right idea.

"Let's get properly introduced," she continued. "I'm Starla Enrica the owner of this establishment and you . . . ?"

"Garth, Garth Mjolnir."

"Pleased to meet you Garth," she extended her hand. As Garth shirt, smiled at his elderly companion. "Don't worry amigo strength. "Got ya," she beamed. "Now you can't get away so you have to come up for some tea. Come on, I promise not to attack you . . . or maybe I don't promise." She turned her head sideways to throw a seductive glance.

Garth moved to the wooden steps. Only when he began his ascent did she release her grip. He searched her face for a clue to her true intent. This was a side of Starla he had never seen before. It was a side he could learn to like.

"Your hands are like steel," she observed, "they're marvelous hands, so big and strong."

"Yeah, well pounding nails, carrying wood and heavy equipment and all. That will toughen your hands pretty quick. And hell, I've been doing it for a long time."

Starla led her guest into the dimly lit residence. Ancient wood boards creaked underfoot as the vine-encrusted structure engulfed their forms. Together they vanished into blackness.

Inside, the air was thick with the artificial odor of burning incense. She directed him to a quaint old sofa trimmed with lace and proceeded toward a tiny kitchen in the back explaining, "I'll just be a minute."

Garth stowed his helmet beside the couch as he sat and peered about. The wooden furniture was old and of simple design. To one side towered a bookcase overflowing with paperbacks crammed in amongst wooden figurines and an occasional leather bound volume. The other walls were crowded with handmade constructions of flowers, shells, bones, and other organic artifacts. He felt as if he were in a small cave with wild roots creeping in on all sides.

In a far corner, smoke drifted above an ornate bronze orb housing smoldering incense. Through the haze he saw a striking pair of skeleton hands. They were pinned to the wall with the palms forward and digits spread, frozen in a permanently startled poise. Garth wrung his own hands as he eyed the decorative oddities. This display of gleaming human remains sent a cold shiver down his spine. He could not help but wonder about the fate of the original owner.

He jumped as something touched his shoulder. Starla stood beside him with a silver tray supporting teacups.

"This is really quite good," she assured with a smile.

"Nice hands," remarked Garth, nodding to the skeletons as he accepted a cup.

"Thank you, I soak them in rose water," she responded, thinking the compliment more personal. "So then you're a carpenter?" she asked as she set down the tray, sitting beside him.

"Yeah, well, when I can find the work. Mostly I've just been a bum as of late. It's been slow."

"You're not a bum; I can tell from your hands." She took one of his hands into her own, his large fingers dwarfing her slim feminine ones. "I can tell a lot about a person from his hands. These hands have a great future."

With the feel of her caress, all fears and suspicions melted away. The human touch holds a special magic. One that he enjoyed far too infrequently.

"They're good for more than just carpentry," he answered.

"I'll bet they are!"

"I didn't mean . . .", he realized with horror that his retort sounded lewd, "I mean I've been using them to write. I'm writing a movie script."

"A movie script. See I knew it. You're not a complete loser."

"Thank you."

"I didn't mean it like that. So what's your movie about?"

"Well I guess it's kinda hokey but it's . . . well it's about aliens."

"Really, aliens, how interesting." She straightened her posture and stared with eyes wide to show interest.

"Their ship breaks down so they land on Earth for repairs. And while they're here they eat people."

"Eat people! How ghastly! Why do they eat people?"

"Because they're hungry."

"That's a good reason."

"And they find that human flesh is a tasty commodity. So they create this organization where humans kidnap other humans and sell them as food. This outfit preys mainly on the homeless. People who can disappear without anyone taking notice."

The sleepy Spanish eyes turned away. "Where did you get a crazy idea like that?"

"You know people around here have been disappearing."

"What do you mean, disappearing?"

"I mean disappearing. Like they used to hang around here but now they're gone and nobody knows why. Like that old Vietnam vet with no legs who was always wheeling his ass up and down the strip. Like Banjo Billy, the singing banjo player who looks like Jesus Christ on roller skates? Surely you've noticed he's missing? Remember how he always picked out a pair of tourists and trailed along beside them, sharing his art while waiting for a tip? Remember how his singing grew louder and more off-key the longer they avoided tipping him? I can't say I miss that noisy fool, but he's gone too.

"And then there's Black Jerry -- the saxophone player who always played beside your building. Now him, I miss. Whenever things got so bad that I'd think they couldn't possibly get worse, he'd look me in the eye and say, 'cheer up, Garth, things will get worse.' So I would -- and they would. I've been looking for that son-of-a-bitch for over a week now."

Garth paused to sip the tea. It had an odd perfumery smell but was strangely pleasant and relaxing.

"And I'll tell you something else weird," he continued.

"What?"

"Driving down here, I saw two guys digging in that old cemetery up on the hill."

"So?" Her expression betrayed concern.

"So maybe they were digging themselves a fresh new grave."

"It's a cemetery. They're suppose to dig graves there."

"It's little after normal business hours, don't you think?"

"So they were putting in a little overtime. Maybe business is good."

"That's exactly what I'm afraid of."

Starla leaned back, annoyance written on her face.

He leaned forward. "Don't you see, it's the perfect place to dispose of murder victims. Who's going to search a cemetery for buried bodies?"

She seemed ready to scold him for being a fool when a soft thump from the rear of the house interrupted them.

Garth turned toward the sound. "Who's that?"

"Nobody. Nobody else is here. It's just you and me, big guy."

"Are you sure? That came from a room in the back."

"Of course I'm sure. It's probably just a tree branch hitting the side of the house."

Garth looked out an open window toward the darkened beach. A glow on the horizon was all that remained of the day's sun as its final rays flitted among gentle waves.

"It's not windy," remarked Garth.

Starla shrugged. "It's probably that cat climbing a tree. I don't know. It's just a sound. Just relax and drink your tea and I'll give you a nice massage."

"Sorry Starla," he apologized with downcast eyes.

"About what?"

"I can't afford a massage. I'm plumb busted."

"It's free, Garth. Will you stop worrying. I don't want your money."

"Yeah, that's what worries me."

She looked annoyed. "Am I really that bad? Is that all you think of me?"

"Starla, I've brought you flowers and other gifts but you'd never take them; you'd barely even acknowledged me. One time I left roses on your porch and I found them in the trash the next day. When did I become a human being to you?"

She displayed a wounded expression. But it was only a moment's pause before she explained, "These are scary times, Garth. How do I know who to trust? You comes by here, all dirty – wearing the same clothes day after day -- and I get scared. If you want a girl to treat you like a

human being, try dressing like one. A bath wouldn't hurt either."

"Yeah," he agreed sheepishly, "I guess I am a scary sight. Hell, when I look in the mirror it scares the piss out of me. But that's why I'm suspicious. What does a beautiful lady like you want with a low-life like me?"

She reached over and gave his shoulder a reassuring squeeze. "I don't think you're a low-life. You just haven't had the right opportunities. Besides, look closer, Garth. I'm not so young anymore. My face has wrinkles, the skin on my arms has started to sag, and my breasts as well. You're not the only one who gets lonely, you know."

"I like the way your breasts sag."

"I know you do. Now drink your tea and I'll rub your back."

Garth sipped more of the tea. Then his heavy jacket made its way to the floor as expert fingers began working tension out of tired old muscles.

Pleasure streamed like rivers through his frame -- filling the emptiness of so many lonely nights. No midnight fantasy, no fabricated rendezvous, no matter how intimate or indecent, could compare with the potency of this simple caress. He prayed it would never end. "I could grow accustomed to this," he murmured.

She smiled. "Tell me Garth, you want to travel, don't you? Do you ever think about leaving this piss hole of a town and starting out someplace new?"

He put down the teacup and faced her squarely. "Why don't you tell me what you want?"

Defensively, "I told you."

"No. I mean I'd like to know more about you. What kinds of things do you want?"

"Well, I want nice things. I'm tired of being poor. I grew up a poor girl with poor parents in the poor side of town. Chinga la pobreza. There's nothing wrong with wanting nice things, is there?"

"Not of course not." He fingered a necklace around her neck. Small bones hung from a thin leather strip. A chill crept under his skin as he recognized their origin.

"What kind of bones are these?" he queried.

"Metacarpals, a type of finger bone."

"Human finger bone?"

"Sure. Fingers are a source of great magic."

Looking around the room, he noticed similar bones imbedded within hanging arrangements. "You practice witchcraft, don't you?"

"That's right. I'm a white witch."

"A what?"

"A Dianic white witch. A good witch. Through the Craft, I harness the power of magic for the benefit of humankind."

"Holy shit, that's it!" Garth cried, springing to his feet.

"What's the matter?"

"I feel dizzy," he gasped. The room seemed tilted at an odd angle. "You poisoned the tea. My god, you poisoned the fucking tea!" Fear churned in his gut.

"No!"

"Yes, that's it isn't it? You're murdering me for my hands! You're going to cut off my fingers for some kind of demon worship."

"Garth, really!"

"My god, to end up like this -- as an ugly necklace on some wrinkled hag with sagging tits."

She bolted to her feet, flushed with anger. "Garth, watch this."

Swooping up his teacup, she downed the pungent fluid. Smacking her lips loudly, she declared, "Delicious! Chamomile is my favorite." Then her voice hardened. "Now, what is your complaint with my tea?"

He wiped a hand across his brow removing sweat as embarrassment replaced fear. The room still had a slight tilt, but he realized that old wood was merely resting in a comfortable stance.

"Actually, I feel much better now. Sorry about that. Don't know what came over me."

She continued to glare.

"Look, I need to freshen up. Where's the John?"

"It's the door over there," she pointed. "Are you all right?"

"Yes. I'm fine now, thanks."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. I'm sorry for the fuss."

"Would you like this wrinkled old hag with sagging tits to fix you some more tea?" she asked with a smile.

"No, I'm really sorry. But no more tea, please. Though it's very good tea. Delicious tea. I really like your tea."

Awkwardly, the big man moved toward the back. As he grabbed a doorknob her voice cried an urgent plea, "No. Not that door!"

He turned and was startled by her expression. Her jaw hung loose, her stare was intense.

"That's the wrong door, Garth."

"Oh? What's behind this door?"

"Just my bedroom. Don't go in there."

Her concern was curious. He turned the knob.

"No!" she cried out, "Stay out of there. Please!"

Fear filled her eyes, inflaming his curiosity.

"What's wrong? What's in there?"

"Nothing is in there. Nothing that is any of your damn business. Now stay out of there. I mean it!"

Why so agitated? What dark secret hid within that chamber? He wanted to throw open the door and expose the mystery. But he had no right to trespass. What lay within was, as she pointed out, none of his business. He wavered uneasily.

"What's your relationship with the gravediggers?" he asked.

"What do you mean?" The question unsettled her even more. She wrapped her arms tightly around herself and glared back.

"When I suggested that their actions were odd you seemed annoyed. A little pissed even. Why should you care if I find their activities suspicious?"

"I care that you're behaving neurotically. You're really crazy. I think you should leave."

"I may be crazy but I'm not blind. When I spoke about those guys you became nervous. Do they work for you?"

"That's ridiculous."

"So are Satanic sacrifices but they do happen."

"Not by my hand they don't. Now please go." She pointed to the front with an extended arm.

"Listen, people have been disappearing and men are out in the graveyard right now digging another hole. Who are they digging the hole for? Is the body in this room behind me?"

"No!"

"Or perhaps it's being dug to my own dimensions."

"Will you stop it!"

"No, you stop it. You didn't invite me here out of loneliness. This game of cat and mouse has gone on long enough."

He regretted violating her privacy. But he had to know.

Ignoring her glare he slowly pushed the door open. The room behind was pitch black. The bronze knob felt cold and clammy in his hand as he watched a expanding wedge of light illuminate a pinewood bed. Against a far wall he saw a matching dresser topped with a mirror showing his own face peering back anxiously. His eyes were large and beads of sweat glistened on his forehead.

But nothing seemed out of the ordinary. No dead body lay upon the simple woven bedspread. He took a step into the room and looked around. Still nothing. He began to fear that he was again playing the fool.

Then something touched his elbow.

Startled, he whirled about.

Starla stood behind him, her body stiff with tension. As she stared intensely past, searching for something in the dark, she threatened in a low tone, "For your own safety, get out of here. I'm warning you!"

"Why? What's in here?"

She started to speak but froze. Her eyes widened.

He turned and detected movement in the blackened corner past the bed. Something or someone was hiding there. He squinted hoping to see better. But it did not help.

Starla grabbed his arm. "Get away quickly," she whispered.

He tore her grip lose and pushed her roughly back. Ignoring her pleading eyes he turned toward the secret guest. Cautiously he stepped inward. The blackness in the corner squirmed with life.

Garth strained to decipher the hidden shape. He thought he could make out the figure of a man. He called out, "Buddy, there's no use hiding. Come out or I'm coming over."

No response.

He crept in slowly, advancing on the dim shape.

It started to move.

From the depths of darkness sprang a cat-like creature. Its four-foot black body leaped upward, attempting to mount the dresser. But the effort fell short, catapulting drawer top items across the room as its mass dropped back into darkness. Immediately it rose back up and turned toward Garth snarling with gleaming fangs. It had the eyes and face of a cat but the fur clad body was lanky and poised like a man. Its yellow eyes glared hot as it hissed and coiled and poised to strike.

Seized with terror, the biker stumbled backward. He turned to flee. But his exit was blocked. The dark silhouette of a female figure stood in the door gripping a fireplace poker. It was held high, ready to strike. He raised his own arm to ward off the coming blow but trapped between a cat demon from hell on the one side, and a poker yielding princess of Satan on the other, he held little hope of escape. Slumping against the wall he resigned himself to a violent end, praying

only that the pain be brief.

"Hurt him and I'll kill you," Starla threatened.

"Huh?" He blinked.

"I swear it Garth, you hurt him and I will kill you." The fire in her eyes left no doubt the threat was real.

"O.K. No problem."

She lowered the poker and pushed past to tend to the beast. Hugging the creature like an old friend, she spoke words of reassurance. The creature welcomed the embrace, molding its body into the contours of her form.

Moving away on shaky legs, Garth gasped to regain his breath. Grabbing the door frame for support, he pressed against the jamb. The cold wood felt reassuringly solid beneath sweaty skin as he fought down the nausea within. With closed eyes he listened to his heart pound between his ears while his brain fought to make sense out of the bizarre event.

There was a crazy logic beneath it all. He could sense a pattern emerging. Sense it but not see it. The final solution escaped rational logic.

Even blind he could feel the cold feline stare cut through darkness like beacons at night. Licking dry lips he forced open heavy eyelids and turned to face the strange scene before him.

Starla cuddled her fur clad guest who was, as expected, scrutinizing Garth's every move with a relentless glare. Garth scanned the rest of the house and, relieved to see no others, returned his attention to the bedroom.

As the Spanish witch stroked dark fur she turned toward Garth. "You should not have scared him so," she scolded. Then extending a hand she adding, "Come here. It is time you two were introduced."

He reviewed the cat's stony stare. Was it ferocity or was it fear that burned behind those yellow eyes? "Gosh, look at the time," he sputtered breathlessly with a glance toward his wrist.

"I'll be right back," Starla whispered to the beast and then moved quickly to Garth's side. Leading him out of the room she continued, "There's a lot of money involved here you idiot. Don't blow this deal. You stand to make a tidy profit yourself."

A smile forced itself upon Garth's lips. Profit. He should have known. Beneath her facade of new age spiritualism and old world esthetics lay the heart of a entrepreneur. Starla was a modern material girl and an old fashion profiteer. But what was her product?

"Me? How do I fit in?"

"You're what he wants."

"I have to leave."

"You have the type of large hands which they seek."

"Yeah, well sorry but I'm rather attached to them."

"They're not going to hurt you. Come with me. I'll show you."

She grabbed his arm and pulled. But Garth held his ground. She taunted, "Don't you ever want to be anything?"

"What I want is to be is alive."

"What you are is a coward. If they wanted to kill you, you'd already be dead."

"That's reassuring."

But it did make sense. Maybe. And he could use some cash. But mostly he just wanted answers. So, cautiously, he allowed himself to be dragged back to the odd visitor.

The two guests of the Spanish witch eyed each other apprehensively.

"Pet him Garth."

"What?"

"Come on, pet him!" She clasped his hand and placed it on the head of the beast. With fingers buried beneath soft fur he pressed flesh in an effort to reassure. But this was no household pet.

Sharp fangs emerged from beneath a fleshy sheath as a low growl predicted coming catastrophe. Immediately, Garth began a slow retreat as palpitations pounded his chest.

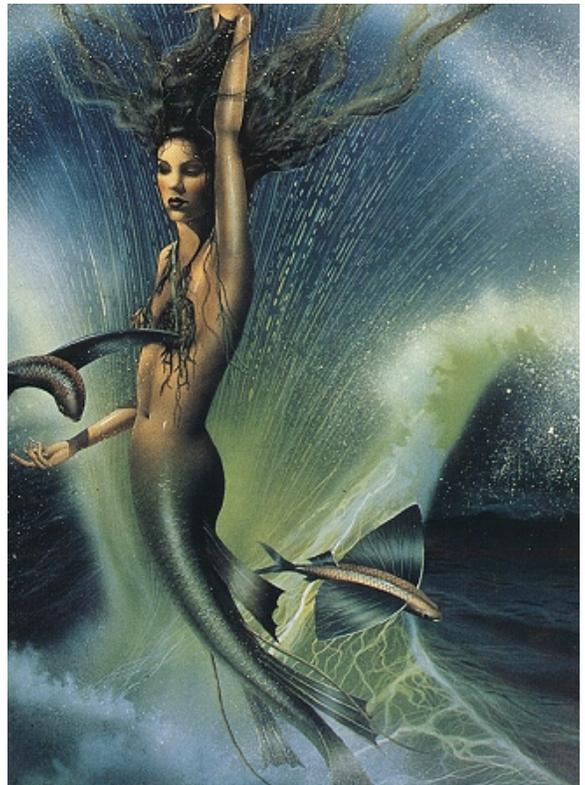
"Relax," ordered Starla, her steel grip discouraging withdrawal, "Stop being cowards, the both of you."

Subdued by shame, the sharp canines vanished from view as their dangerous host softened his stance. But the feline glare never wavered. The bright yellow eyes penetrated in an ancient knowing way. It was the look of predator stalking prey.

He wanted to run.

Instincts a million years old swelled within and insisted on flight. Run. Run while you can. Run back to the safety of lonely nights; the serenity of the solitary male. Run back to familiar territory and venture this way no more.

Don't you ever want to be anything?



The question echoed in Starla's silent stare. He felt it penetrate surface skin and breach his shell of fear. It continued down past hard edged scars through cavities of mind, resonating deep within where secrets never die. And memories from far inside returned from long ago.

Ambitions thought dead and buried awoke from restless slumber. To have, to own, to love -- to be somebody. Memories of youthful yearnings returned again to haunt. He saw the house he never built filled with children never born. And heard their joyous laughter over presents never bought.

What happened to those dreams of youth? When did he give up and why? Emptiness resided now where ambition use to roam. And cynicism, like a cold stone tomb, contained the dreams that died. Without a goal to propel him forth he had no place to go.

Suddenly, he felt old and weary.

He stared into the wild eyes of the savage beast. He searched within the stony glare for the answer which lay hidden. But all he found were vile threats and promises of cruel demise.

Too jaded to attempt to flee he rose up in a challenge. Go ahead, he gestured in silent dare: take my worthless life. Slash out with ragged tooth and claw -- relieve me of the pain. Why not end it here and now with nothing left to lose?

But the creature did not strike.

Instead it faltered.

In a moment of self-doubt, the mask slipped from its snug fit. This was no wild animal. This thing of strange construction did not come here to fight. This was some sort of lonely traveler a far, far way from home. It paused here on some unknown quest to seek the human touch. Its ferocity was only fear -- a protective phony shell.

Fear. Again and again it is fear that drives the wheel of destiny. It is a sordid angel fueling constant needless war, turning neighbors into niggers, and directing would be lovers down separate lonely paths. Fear is the foe -- the monster of the night.

But not tonight.

Tonight, Garth vowed, he would be no slave to fear. Safety offers slight reward for a fee of solitude. This traveler was a friend of sort, they shared a common plight. Both man and beast sought shallow shelter from the chill of lonely night.

Looking deeper still for the courage to proceed, Garth reached out and, once again, sought trust with common touch. And then, with bated breath, he waited for response. Will the reaction be benign?

Or brutal?

The beast held still, its rigid form unyielding. But the threatening stare began to wane, replaced by growing wonder. Slowly it relented, releasing its stiff stance. And then, at last, it looked away -- a coy signal of surrender.

The victor now was trust.

"They come from the stars," Starla explained with quiet voice, "and they're fascinated by human hands. They've traveled across hundreds of worlds and seen millions of strange life forms, but never have they witnessed the likes of the human hand. Look at it." She lifted her own, the fingers wiggling like serpents. "Twenty-seven separate bones bound together with muscles, ligaments, and tendons -- all wrapped in a soft sheath of protective skin. Behold an engineering marvel capable of dexterity unparalleled in nature or artifact. With these hands we can build homes, write stories, play music, even dig graves, and . . ." she added while running long fingernails through thick fur, "excite ecstasy. Hands are indeed powerful magic." Beneath her sharp nails, strong muscles surrendered their tension.

At last he understood. "You're selling them finger bones, aren't you?"

"Yes. They buy the bones I am having dug up at the old cemetery. They wear them as health charms seeking to benefit from the magic."

"You mean like a rabbit's foot."

She laughed. "Sort of."

"And what else do they buy?"

"Living hands. Hands connected to living people who go with them as they travel amongst the stars. Think of it, Garth. Excitement, danger, and adventure as you tour the galaxy as highly paid masseuse. By the time you return you'll be wealthy. I envy you. You will have such amazing stories to tell."

As she spoke, Garth continued to massage the traveler the way he has done to cats for years. And the beast relented to the puerile instincts within. Closing its eyes, it abandoned fear as a contented purr took up residence. The familiar nasal cadence had a relaxing affect on the biker.

"Danger? What sort of danger are we talking about?"

"Did I say danger? I didn't mean danger really. I just meant it will be exciting, full of adventure. Safe adventure."

"Sounds like Disneyland."

She moved in close. Her body rubbed up against his, a light perfume fragrance igniting a feverish passion. His lips moved toward hers as he spoke, "And when I come back, I don't suppose you'll be waiting for me."

"I'm waiting for you right now, big boy."

Their lips met in a tender embrace. It was a strange sight to behold, two humans kissing with increasing vivacity while an unusually large black cat purred beside them.

