SALEM'S WITCHES

- excerpt -

by Tizzy

ACT ONE

A New Slant on Crime

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On that winter morning, Dominion Square was silent, frigid, and full of petrified people.

Only one of those things was not like the others, and far less common even in New Wakilork, where crime ran rampant to the point of honesty being considered a flaw. Petrification was just not the kind of thing criminals went for. Nevertheless, there was a certain beauty to the scene, where hundreds of people seemed to be partying: Stony musicians played music to which their stony guests danced, while other stony people who hadn't been blessed with the ability to dance sat by the main table and ate.

The relative peace was then disturbed by not one, but three most uninvited guests who hadn't been taught about the rudeness of party-crashing.

Veronika was one of these guests and, as she stepped into the square, a mixture of curiosity and dread took over. Her

companions, Sarah and Laura, walked in behind her. As usual in New Wakilork, no amount of caution was too much: In the city state people died unexpectedly in an instant if they lowered their guard at the wrong time.

She wished they'd been given more information about what was going on before being sent to investigate. Far too often, Salem would just tell them *something* had happened *somewhere* and leave it at that, denying them any details or even a hint at what to expect. He'd excuse himself, saying he didn't know, but she doubted it: If he never knew what happened, he would have the worst informants in the whole city. This lack of knowledge had resulted in interesting results on numerous occasions, where they had been sent to investigate such things as bachelor parties gone wrong, grisly murders committed by a fanatic clown, and, on one occasion, agents of the Dominion itself running a smuggling ring. In all three cases they had ended up running for their lives while being chased by a crazy man wielding an axe.[1]

Veronika hoped their current case wouldn't be a bloody one. The Midwinter Feast, celebrated the night before on this very square, had a tendency to go wrong and was known for devolving into the city's biggest brawl. Many of those attending did so with that expectation, the bloody conflict being the main feature of the night.

She sighed in relief as she failed to find an axe-wielding madman. As tiring as it was for them to always be on their guard, crime was what New Wakilork excelled in, and it did so proudly.[2]

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[1] Axes were very cheap in New Wakilork. Most axe factories were owned by the Dominion, so the population was often forced to buy them *or else*.

[2] Cities usually shine at specific things — It's not uncommon for a city or zone to be called the jewel of an empire, for example. In The Neitherlands New

Not only weren't there any killers present, but there also was no blood anywhere. It was the cleanest crime scene she had ever seen, with nary an indication of a crime taking place at all.

Except for the strange statues, that is, although to her knowledge populating a public square with statues wasn't a crime. It was just a weird thing to do, one done by highly eccentric and probably suicidal people, considering the expense and openness of such a display. This would cause all streets surrounding the square to become blocked by the sheer concentration of thieves who would be attracted. And then, once the author was discovered, the assassins would likely step in. Rich people always had heirs, and said heirs were more often than not all too anxious for the inheriting part to come.

She approached one of the statues while her two friends walked around. When she examined it up close, something caught her attention: The statue's clothes weren't stony. They were made of real fabric.

The food also wasn't stony. It was real food, being eaten by people made of stone. Come to think of it, the musicians' instruments were also real. It looked almost as if real people had been turned to stone while everything else remained in its natural state.

"This is impressive!" said Sarah, nearing a space containing several statues. The one in the center depicted an inebriated woman who had gone topless, obviously to thank the gods for her good looks. Several attendants stared at her, their mouths agape in what could be taken as horror if one wished to ignore other, likelier reasons for their amusement.

Wakilork had, with no small amount of effort, cemented its place as the sewers.

"I guess we can assume these statues used to be people?" said Veronika, staring at the grisly scene with the woman, men and debauchery. "Otherwise the guild of stonemasons really upped their game…"

"It was a warlock," said Laura.

"Are you—" said Sarah.

"A warlock," Laura repeated.

"But—"

"A warlock."

"Can you at least tell me *why* it was a warlock?"

"Look at the crime scene, Sarah!" said Laura while Veronika listened, secretly hating Laura's know-it-all tendencies. "Everyone in here was turned to stone. Can we at least agree, at first, that this was done with magic?"

"I…guess…"

"Good. Now, think about it. A whole party, turned to stone. Isn't it…flashy? Well then, what kind of magic user is flashy like this? Tell me, Sarah. When you hear of a curse being cast upon people where the caster spares no expense and goes all out with a song-and-dance production that ends with something as noticeable and remarkable as this, who do you think of? The Coven?"

"Certainly—"

"The Coven wouldn't do this kind of stuff. If anything, a disgruntled witch will turn whoever disgruntled her into a frog and leave it at that. No, Sarah, this wasn't done by a witch. So ruling out the Coven, who else could?"

Veronika sighed and prepared to join the conversation, hoping to become the third voice to help end the argument. "Laura, perhaps a wiz—"

"*Have you met any local wizards, Veronika?*" Laura raised her voice. "The College of Wizardry of New Wakilork has never produced anyone capable of doing more than singeing their own eyebrows off."

Veronika opened her mouth.

"And don't talk to me about sorcerers! Yes, I know there are plenty of those where you came from, but there are none around here. Zilch. Zero. The College of Wizardry has made it a task to chase any sorcerers away. So yes, this is a warlock's doing. Can we agree now?"

Veronika stared at Laura, who displayed the patience of a time-bomb whose clock had been running for far too long. And it was barely Monday morning.

"I'll take that as a yes," she added.

"But what about a—" said Sarah, only to be met with a stern stare from Laura. "I mean, you know, deities are known for doing things like…" She lowered her voice. "Like this one."

"Why would any deities do this, Sarah? Pray tell. Last time I checked, and I don't know if you did your homework before coming, but I did, and this whole damn feast is made to honour the gods. Now why would they crash their own party?"

"Well, maybe…" Sarah said, but it was too late. Laura had wandered off to examine other statues.

Veronika tried to get Sarah to calm down for a moment, before resuming the investigation. "I know this looks like a warlock," she whispered to her, taking advantage of Laura's distance, "but if you look around you'll notice the scene is lacking in—"

"*Of course there's terror in the scene!*" Laura yelled from the other end of the square. "*Just look at it, right here!*"

Veronika ran towards Laura, while Sarah followed her closely. Two statues were staring at the floor. One looked shocked, while the other was aghast. The space between them, however, was just empty.

Laura dropped her arguing for a minute to, perhaps, try to discuss what the men had been staring at.

"They were obviously staring at the war—" said Laura, only to stop her self-aggrandising statement when the whole square got covered in a myst[3] that made it impossible for anyone to see anything farther away than their own noses.

For a moment or two nobody moved: Plenty were the tales of people trying to walk their way out of a myst only to get permanently lost in it. Nobody knew if they were true, for nobody came back from the myst, but most agreed it was better to not tempt fate and, when a myst arrived, just stay put until it passed.

Veronika felt a bustle around her as the flapping of what seemed to be all the birds in the city reached her ears. A *clank* then sounded from the empty space. She almost ran, afraid the myst had been conjured by a warlock who would try to kill them all for learning of his existence. She didn't move because running in high heels was difficult enough when you could see anything; doing it during a myst was essentially suicide.

A few seconds later the myst left the square for better, friendlier places, and Veronika found herself able to see again. She was greeted by an almost impossible amount of black feathers covering the place. It looked as if someone had murdered a whole murder of crows. An instant later she remembered about the

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[3] A contraction for "Mysterious mist" meaning "Mysterious mist that comes out of nowhere". Yes, this was a common enough issue in the Neitherlands for people to have a specific word to describe it.

empty spot. She turned to find Laura there, kneeling and holding something.

A smug Laura got up and showed her a thin bar made of silver tied to a chain: an amulet. Veronika reached out to grab it when she realized yet another thing had changed during the myst.

The statues were gone.

That also explained why Sarah, instead of marveling at the magically appearing amulet, just stared around, aghast.

“Don’t mind me, I know nothing,” she said, “but I fear somebody may be playing tricks on us.”

The women got together, all three of them staring in wonder at the ridiculous amount of feathers and lack of statues. There was no denying something was up, but what could it be?

2

One could say New Wakilork has a certain degree of political complexity people might want to be aware of, but that would be akin to stating a tiger has a few stripes one might want to look for just to know whether to run away in panic. In truth, New Wakilork's political climate is a jumbled mess of stripes of all types and colors that would make any tiger feel either proud or absolutely ridiculous.

Yet when it comes to tigers the stripes in the end don't matter because, if you ever run into a stripeless tiger, *it is still a tiger and you should run before it eats you.* In the same vein, all political complexities and eccentricities in New Wakilork were for naught,

because a woman who called herself the Dominatrix ruled over it with an iron whip and it was whatever she wanted or said what happened in the end.

She wasn't new to the political game, as very few people remained who remembered a time when she wasn't around. More remarkably, her ploy to take over the city involved not only memorizing the rules of the game, but carefully rewriting them while nobody else was watching and making sure none of the other players found out—until it was just too late and they were being used as crocodile chowder *because the rules said so.*

Her name was Madame Xantiplam, and everyone loved her, because there was a hefty price to pay for not doing so.

Nevertheless, one thing most residents of New Wakilork openly agreed upon was that, by removing any and all political actors from the stage, the Dominatrix had finally given the city state political stability. That the magical formula for political stability happened to be making sure there were no political elements at all to cause instability was one often discussed by scholars all over the Neitherlands.

She wasn't happy.

But then again, Madame Xantiplam was seldom happy. Being happy wasn't a part of her job description, and therefore she saw no reason to do it. Instead she chose to get angry over anything at all that went wrong, no matter how small. She also chose to fix most problems by introducing whoever was causing them to her ever-growing menagerie of beasts, and this often fixed whatever the problem was for good.

Her current problem wasn't that simple.

She sat in her throne room atop Dominion Fortress, where meetings with highly ranked officers were held. Anyone who

wasn't a part of this tight group and who lacked friends in high places could only dream of ever speaking with the Dominatrix herself—not that many people wanted to, considering her track record when dealing with commoners.

The walls of the lavishly decorated room were filled to the brim with portraits depicting her as a complete success in pretty much any professions anyone could think of, barring those deemed unbecoming for such a paragon of virtue and good manners. As she gazed about her, she took a sip from a golden cup containing her most loved delicacy: cherries doused in sparkling wine. It was something she could both eat and drink, and that made it the best thing since sliced bread.

She had never quite understood what was so good about sliced bread. It was overrated.

She knew what everyone was thinking. It was something among the lines of "*Madame Xantiplam is staring at all those portraits to remind herself that she's always successful and therefore there's a way out of this.*"

They were wrong.

She cautiously disguising her gaze by staring at the paintings while she counted, out of the corner of her eye, how many people had attended the meeting and who each of them was. All of this was part of the delicate process of figuring out on whom to pin the blame for this disaster.

"Mister *Gupitaaaaa*!" she yelled when her inner voices deemed it the right moment to break the silence. Her voice was chill, raspy, and the kind of voice children all over the Neitherlands reported hearing during their worst nightmares.[4]

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[4] There were children all the way down in Ussuck who had never heard of her yet sometimes reported seeing her in their nightmares, perfectly describing her looks while shuddering and crying.

A diminutive man with a thin mustache approached slowly. He held a notebook and she could tell he was doing his best to not show he was trembling. His best was not good enough.

"We might have to investigate this, don't you think?" she said, in her peculiar manner of asking questions that didn't so much demand a positive answer as it did everything possible and then some to scare away any non-positive ones.

"If you so desire, your excellenc—"

"I know, we rarely ever bother investigating, but this one seems big enough, and I fear we won't be able to put it to rest by blaming everything on some random person and calling it a day." A collective sigh answered her. "However, we'll need to tell people something in the meantime, won't we?"

Mr. Gupita assented.

"We'll need a lie. Where is our resident liar today?"

Mrs. Anderson, the Resident Liar,[5] raised her hand. It was nowhere nearly as shaky as everyone else's, but then again she was good at lying. "I'm here, your Domination. And I've already planned all excuses we're going to need to get out of this. You see, there's false information making the rounds stating everyone in the feast was turned to stone, but that's a lie. The truth is, your poor husband disappeared, see? Everyone else went home safely. We're looking into what happened to Mr. Whatshisface, but in the meantime we need to ask you for strict secrecy. After all, spreading rumors or misinformation is a crime and you wouldn't

[5] Not only was the Resident Liar an actual position in the Dominion, it was one of utmost importance. It was she who kept track of every single lie told by the Dominion, and there were plenty of those to go around. In fact, it was often thought that the Dominion should drop all pretense and hire a small country for this task instead of throwing it all on a single person.

want to be judged for a crime while your husband is gone, or would you?"

Madame Xantiplam let out a grin scarier than the student debt of a recent graduate. She loved this woman and her ability to make up lies on the spot. She'd throw her to the alligators if that ability ever faltered.

"I love it. Thanks, Mrs. Anderson. Now, we have to—"

A second hand rose above the crowd, interrupting her. This one was noticeably shakier, weaker, and overall less good at lying to hide its own fear than Mrs. Anderson's.

"Yes, Colonel Hover?"

"Excuse the interruption, your Domination." Colonel Hover was the head of the Dominion Intelligence Enterprise,[6] and one of the best when it came to capturing anyone who dared plot against the Dominion. He was also a renowned coward who always seemed to be shaking. "But there's something else we need to mind."

"What is it?"

"It's this investigation you want. It's ludicrous. When has the city guard ever looked into anything? Having them investigate this is downright suspicious. It could even make the headlines!"

Madame Xantiplam stared at the man. There was some logic to his words; he had somehow found a flaw in her plan and managed to capture one of her pieces in the imaginary game of chess permanently taking place in her head.

She was the kind to flip the table when losing.

"Well, Colonel Hover, since you fancy yourself so—"

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[6] Usually shortened as DIE. This acronym was, fittingly, the last thing conspirators saw after being found out by the Dominion.

The main door opened of sudden in the rudest possible way. Doing such a thing called for capital punishment.

In came an older man wearing a white suit who walked with a cane. His tall, thin frame looked elegant, yet not enough to keep Madame Xantiplam from being annoyed at the interruption. Until she realized who it was.

"Desiderio Marcano," said Madame Xantiplam while the man traversed the considerable distance between the entrance and her throne. "It seems to me you have arrived at our little meeting late, suddenly, and in a borderline illegal manner."

"Then I must have arrived just as expected, your greatness." Desiderio stood in front of the Dominatrix and had the gall to not tremble. She loved him for that. She also felt disrespected and wanted him dead, but he was too useful to kill. "And with me, of course, I bring information. The kind of information your regular informants are unable to give you." A grunt roared through the room coming from seats filled with many not-too-useful ministers and other collaborators.

Madame Xantiplam wasn't sure how to feel about that. Her collaborators often slacked on the job, which was why she replaced them near weekly. Desiderio also often one-upped her team, making the efforts of her intelligence group useless. Yet there he was, insisting on not accepting a place working for her. "Then tell me what you know!"

"But wait, my lady!" Desiderio beamed at her then made obeisance. "First I wanted to thank you. I wanted to thank you for always being magnanimous and calling for me to aid you. It is truly an honor for me to repeatedly serve as an adviser and helper to the Dominion."

Madame Xantiplam blushed. Not that you would have noticed it under her many layers of makeup. "Why, I am glad you

feel so, Desiderio. One can only wish all our citizens were as driven toward helping their city as you."

"And I expect most of them are, your Domination, for I've been out there, and this city has nothing but love towards you. It is, then, a shame that your position as our leader means you more often get to meet the unsavory kind of citizen, instead of the fine, upstanding citizens such as myself that—"

"What's this information you bring?" Desiderio had veered off from praising her to praising himself, and Madame Xantiplam was just not into that.

"You see, my beautiful leader, I have learned that somebody meddled with the scene of the crime." Desiderio let out a thin smile. It was almost unnoticeable, but nothing escaped her eyes. "The information arrived just as I was getting ready to come over, so I expect you'll understand my tardiness. It was important that I arrived here knowing everything possible about the case, both to save you time and to offer the best possible solution for your troubles."

The Dominatrix stirred. She didn't like recent developments if she wasn't in on them. They filled her with anticipation, and she wasn't good at anticipating things. She'd much rather torture information out of whoever was withholding it. "Speak, now. Who was this? I'll have them in custody within the hour."

"These three women, your Highness. They fancy themselves investigators, or heroines, or something of the sort. They've been making the rounds for a while, investigating mostly small robberies or missing cats or things of the sort—the kind of things bored housewives get into. Sometimes they stick their noses in bigger cases, but mostly they deal with robberies, murders, and other such everyday cases."

"Not a problem. What danger could three bored housewives be? We'll just have to silence them, that's all. Make sure they don't say a word. I'll put the guard on it."

"There's…something else about their involvement in this, your Highness."

Madame Xantiplam said nothing. She sat there, expecting Desiderio to finish whatever it was he meant to say or face her wrath.

"You see, something…uncommon happened while they were there. And by that I mean that when they arrived at the square, the statues were there. When they left, they were not, but a bunch of black feathers had taken their place."

"The thieves! They're probably hoping to resell them on the black market!" The Dominatrix was not amused, but not all that impressed either. In New Wakilork one could expect everything to eventually make its way to the black market, usually sooner rather than later. At times, you'd find crime memorabilia out there before the crime it related to was even committed. "Tell me who they are, right now! This city will not stand by and have petrified people sold on the streets."

"Your thoughts about them might be right, although I'd recommend considering they might have darker…purposes when it comes to this. And what I'm trying to say is, these women might be related to the crime itself. After all, it is rather suspicious, don't you think? These three women show up to investigate and then all evidence disappears…"

"Tell. Me. Who. They. Are." Madame Xantiplam's patience was wearing thin. Or thinner. Thinnest, perhaps. One could see straight through her patience and would likely be arrested for indecent exposure were one to dare go out wearing it in lieu of actual clothing.

"They're called Salem's Witches, your Domination," said Desiderio. A grin crossed his face at the same time Madame Xantiplam's expression turned stern.

"So we have three witches running around the city?" Madame Xantiplam was baffled. How could she not have known that before? Clearly somebody was keeping information from her. "Like, witchy witches? With spells and magic brooms and all that stuff?"

"I know not, your Highness, but I am absolutely sure they go after that name. There's this fashion designer called Salem, I hear he's their boss. He's known for—"

"I know about him," said the Dominatrix, trying to remember the man. She could, for some reason, only conjure a parrot. "The…*funny* guy. Yes, I happen to find him most upsetting. I didn't know he hung around with witches, that only makes him weirder to me." As she spoke, her team of collaborators and ministers were making their best impressions of bobbleheads. Desiderio, of course, wasn't. "Either way, it isn't safe to go around arresting witches. They're… rowdy. And dangerous. And have a tendency of casting curses when cornered and turning people into frogs and all those things. There was this case a few years back involving a young maid and a spindle; it was… shameful. As it is, I'm going to need to better look into them before I send the guard their way. Standard procedures, you know, after all we have to respect their civil liberties and all that stuff."

Desiderio assented. "And I expect you'd like me to be in charge of this investigation, yes?"

"We will indeed, after all I've been told having the watch start an official investigation could be counterproductive. So you go, learn everything you can about them, and then we figure out how to deal with it. After all, they might have been able to commit an

almost perfect crime and be protected by who knows how many spells and curses, but…it isn't over until the fat lady sings, or is it?"

The witches entered their lavishly decorated, picturesque office that boasted a panoramic window with a view of Dominion Road. Immediately after, the parrot sitting to the right of their desk woke.

"Good morning, witches!" it said in the voice of a human who spoke one or two octaves higher than what would be considered natural.

"Good morning, Salem!" all three witches replied, leaning on the desk together, as they were expected to. They separated after, each of them going for some personal space in other areas of the office.

"How are things going today?"

A moment of silence followed. Sarah stared at her companions, noticing they were as lost for words as she was: Being sent to investigate petrified people and watching all of them disappear was not a common occurrence, even in New Wakilork.

"It was…interesting," she said. Salem would often get angry if conversations featured prolonged silences he hadn't caused. "I mean, when we arrived the whole square was full of…statues. Statues that looked like they used to be people and—"

"It was all caused by a warlock," said Laura.

Sarah gave Laura an annoyed look, then ignored her comment. “So, it seems like somehow all these people got turned to stone—”

“By a warlock.”

Sarah sighed. In moments such as these she felt like slapping Laura.

“That’s interesting indeed,” said Salem. “I thought it was a murder, not this. But this is exciting! Statues! Did you bring any around?”

“Uh…no,” said Veronika. “We did not walk into a crime scene and steal the evidence, Salem.”

“Shame, that would have been good to see. Then what did you do? Did you at least get a drawing of the place?”

“We couldn’t,” said Sarah, “because when we were about to get to it a myst took over the square—”

“Summoned by a warlock.”

“And then the statues disappeared and were replaced with feathers—”

“When the warlock decided to hide all evidence and misdirect us.”

Sarah sighed. It was the least aggressive response she knew.

“Gone without a trace then? Did you hear this warlock chanting the enchantment or something?”

“No, we didn’t,” said Veronika. “Because we don’t even know if there was a warlock pre—”

“There was one.”

Sarah went to Veronika. “Let her have this, she won’t back down,” she whispered.

“Either way,” said Sarah, “we found something else. After the myst went away, there was this sort of amulet on the ground.” She took out the amulet from her purse. “It’s… peculiar.”

"Well what does it look like? Do tell! You know I can't see anything through this."

"It's like…a metal bar," said Veronika. "A thin, long metal bar."

"And there's a Q carved at the bottom of it."

Salem coughed. It sounded as if he was choking on his breakfast cereal.[7]

"Salem?" said Sarah.

"I'm fine…just fine," said Salem. "I just… Nothing, I'm fine. What were you saying?"

Sarah repeated the details about the amulet.

"Well, it's probably from one of the people there. Isn't that feast supposed to be for the gods? Somebody probably dropped his amulet. It's hardly a clue, really."

"I'm sure it wasn't on the ground before the myst," said Veronika. "Also, there was that noise…"

"Coincidences. Maybe a statue was holding the amulet, then it disappeared and the amulet fell. Sure the square must be littered with amulets on the ground and you just didn't see them."

"I'm sure I didn't see anything else around," said Veronika. "And it's the only clue we have so…"

"You take this as a clue? Oh dear…" said Salem. "This is unexpected. I'd advise against it. I don't want you lot to waste your time chasing nonexistent clues. It's better to perhaps move on to another case. A better one. Less dangerous, too."

"Why would this be dangerous?" said Laura. "We're just looking into this amulet. Nothing more."

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[7] Wakilork O's, featuring the faces of celebrities from New Wakilork. Salem had once signed a contract to be featured in it, but whoever was in charge instead put the face of a parrot. He sued.

Salem coughed again. “Sorry. I guess you could say it’s not dangerous, although you know how people are. Maybe somebody learns you’re trying to implicate their religion in such a case and what do you know, five minutes later you have the whole assassin’s guild on the lookout for you. It’s quite dangerous, I’d say.”

“I’m going to look into it regardless,” said Laura. “I feel this is important.”

“Whatever,” said Salem. “If you girls want to go for it, go for it. See if I care.”

Salem’s comment was met with silence.

“*Fine,*” he said, raising his voice after silence threatened with taking over the conversation permanently. “If you wanna waste your time, go ahead. I’ll even tell you where to go, because I’m nice like that.”

“Where?”

The parrot sighed. “There’s this religious item store run by two ladies. They sell things for just about any deity in existence, so they should be able to point you in the right direction, which of course is towards a new case. That way we’ll know if the amulet is a red herring, and has nothing to do with any cults.”

“It didn’t look edible,” said Veronika.

Laura rolled her eyes.

“Then we’ll get going. We should—”

“But you won’t be going there, Laura,” said Salem. “I have a special task for you.”

Laura stared at the house after double-checking the address. She was sure Salem had it wrong, for there was no way his supposed informant lived here. The house was in a well-off part of the city. It wasn't a rich area, but it looked decent enough you didn't feel in imminent danger and most buildings were pretty and well kept.

Except for that one house.

One could say the house was in ruins, but that would miss the mark. In truth, it looked like a once-decent house that had collapsed, been rebuilt on top of the ruins, collapsed again, taken for a second rebuilding without clearing any of the debris then left abandoned for a few years.

Laura knocked on the door, fearing it would fall to the ground and bring the whole house down with it. It was sturdier than it seemed, for it didn't budge.

A few seconds later the door opened, if only barely, and an old man stared through a crack. After studying Laura, he opened the door a bit more, just enough that they could have a conversation without it seeming as if she was talking to a door.

"What do you want?" said the man. At a second glance, he didn't seem as old as she'd originally assumed. While his hair was white and his face wrinkled, something about him seemed off for an old guy. He looked like a younger man who had aged too much too fast.

"Are…are you Mr. Atoms?" said Laura, hoping the man would deny being the informant so she could leave the area without having to speak with him. "I was told you—"

"You were told *lies*!" said the man, closing the door on Laura's face. After a second or two he opened it again. "What is it you were told, by the way? I'm sure it's all lies, but I'm making this list, you see, just to keep track of what people say about me."

"I was told you could help with an investigation—"

"Investigation!" said Atoms, closing the door again until it was barely ajar. "What is it you're investigating? I swear I have not, in any way, done anything to contradict any gods. Go away!"

"I'm not here to talk religion," said Laura. "And I can't see any reason why I or anyone should be investigating you. I need help with a criminal investigation about—"

"If you can't see any reason to investigate me then you know nothing of this city!" Atoms opened the door just a bit further and slid his head through the crack. "There's a whole conspiracy going on against me and against enlightenment. It's become impossible for me to do anything these days, what with everyone sabotaging me all the time."

"Can you help me or can you not?" Laura didn't enjoy being left outside by some crazy, seemingly paranoid man being as uncooperative as could be. "If you can't, I'll just turn around and…"

Atoms opened the door. "Please do come in. And understand I needed to first make sure you're not one of… *them*."

Atoms led Laura into the single most disorderly parlor she had ever seen: While thankfully the two sofas there were clear, the whole place was full of…things. Big things, metallic-looking things, things that seemed to move on their own, and things she wouldn't want anywhere near her body. Also, she couldn't identify all of these things, and in some cases confirmed ignorance was bliss.

She took a seat on one of the sofas and Atoms sat on the one in front of her. Between them was a coffee table full of more of those things, a bunch of official-looking papers, and a weird ball with some stuff drawn on top.

"Sorry this place isn't cleaner," said Atoms, "but I don't entertain many people. Barely anyone comes over these days. And women, well, I can't recall when I last had one of those in here."

Laura forced a smile. "That's…fine. Now, what I wanted to ask you about… I'm investigating a certain event, and we aren't sure if it was caused by anything other than mag—"

"*Do not use that word in my presence!*" Atoms jumped from his sofa, then landed on it again. "*That word is banned in this household, do you understand?*"

Laura understood, and looking around to identify possible escape routes wasn't a bad idea after all. "At least let me tell you about this, can you?" she said. If she was to run away from a madman's house, she'd rather do it after obtaining the information she needed. That way the ordeal wouldn't be a total waste. "I promise I won't use the word."

Atoms calmed down and sat back on the sofa. Laura then told him about Dominion Square, doing her best to explain the exact chain of events with all possible detail, hoping it would help Atoms determine what had happened.

"Yes, that sound like…the m-thing indeed."

"And that's it?" Laura felt scammed. "I tell you this whole story, hoping you'll help me explain what caused it, and all you say is it was magic?" Atoms shuddered at the mention of the word, but said nothing. "Not that I didn't know that already. It's clear a warlock did it, but I hoped you would at the very least help me prove it!"

"And how do you prove m-m-ma-mag-*that thing*? The M-word. How do you prove it?"

"I would guess it would leave remains or something you could detect, I don't know. You're the expert."

"I'm not an expert on that. I think I made it clear already. The only way I know to prove whether that horrible art was performed somewhere is simple: Is there another explanation? If there is absolutely no explanation that would make sense, then it was probably caused by the m-word. And in this case even I have difficulty coming up with an explanation to all of it."

"But then what is it you do here? If you don't study mag—" Atoms jumped on hearing the word. "Sorry, the m-word, then what do you do?"

"Look around." Atoms pointed at the little and not-so-little things around him that did everything and nothing. "Does this look like that horrible thing that's banned from this household to you?"

Laura still couldn't understand the purpose of any of the things. "I guess. I mean, there are many things moving around that shouldn't be moving around unless there's mmm involved."

Atoms grinned. "That's because," he said, getting up from the sofa then standing proudly with his arms to his sides and puffing out his chest, "you haven't heard of science!"

Laura was unimpressed. "What's science?"

"Science is everything, my dear…and nothing at all."

Laura changed her opinion of Atoms. Minutes earlier she had thought he was a somewhat insane man who spent his life making crazy, useless inventions nobody wanted and blamed ~~magic~~ for it. Now she thought he was just a crazy little man who spent his life doing nothing at all and calling it a lot. "That explains nothing," she said. "And I don't feel all that confident in you when you say your life's work is nothing at all."

"But it is! Unlike others, I don't create. When I go you won't see anything that didn't exist before and came to exist only because of me. That's not my thing." Atoms looked giddy.

"Instead of creating things, I explain them, you see? Everything in this room, absolutely everything, is designed to explain how our world works in ways that can be understood and replicated by anyone."

Laura found it difficult to believe anyone could walk into that room and come out of it with any questions answered. If anything, they'd leave with so many questions about whatever was going on in there they'd just forget their original question.

"I…can't see how that could work. I mean, I'm here and I haven't had any questions answered by any of this clutter."

"Because you're not asking the right questions! See, ask me what any of the items in here do and I'll tell you what secrets of the universe they explain."

Laura was trapped. The little man didn't seem dangerous, unless you pronounced a certain word in his presence. She wondered if he'd also go berserk were she to refuse to humor him, then decided that question was better left unanswered. "What's that thing there?" She pointed at the sphere on the coffee table. She chose it carefully, after deeming it the least dangerous-looking item in the room.

"That!" Atoms's face lit up as he grinned. The whole grinning thing made him look like even more of a maniac. "That's the most important thing I've ever created! It is my latest theory, the one that will one day revolutionize the way we look at the Neitherlands!"

Laura was unimpressed. For all she knew the man had invented a ball.

"You see, that sphere there…it's the Neitherlands!"

Laura leaned closer to the sphere. Now she could see the sphere indeed had what looked like a map of the Neitherlands

drawn on it. Why anyone would go drawing maps on spheres was still a mystery to her. “What do you mean?”

“It’s, well, a model of the Neitherlands. You see, the very land we’re standing on right now is… It’s a ball, of course!”

Laura stared at the man and, for a moment, wondered if he was toying with her. She wanted to slap him and leave the house, but she was constrained by a sense of decency and more than just a bit of curiosity about his insane ideas. She also desperately wanted to know why he wasn’t locked up in the nearest sanitarium.

“Atoms… I’ll admit I’m not the most studious woman around—” Atoms giggled, and Laura chose not to inquire what his reasons for giggling at the idea of a studious woman were, for the sake of Atoms’s well-being. “But let’s be honest. Everyone knows the Neitherlands is not a ball, that’s a ridiculous idea.” She pointed at the southern hemisphere of the ball. “Why, if that were so people around here would fall off.”

“No they don’t. I can’t explain why yet, but I know there are forces at play that make people stick to the ball. I can, however, assure you that this is true. If you want any further proof, just look at how I’m being persecuted by the churches and the colleges and all those people who make their living by the means of religion or, that one ugly word.”

“Who’s persecuting you? And why?” Laura couldn’t understand why anyone other than the employees at the sanitarium would want anything to do with Atoms. And even those would probably rather steer clear of such madness, dreading the day when Atoms got caught and institutionalized again.

“All churches! They all have different theories as to what the Neitherlands is like, and most of them think it’s flat, so they find

mine to be rebellious and a heresy. They've been harassing me, threatening me and doing their best to keep me from telling anyone what they know to be the truth! They can't stand the idea of going out of business when people learn their ideas are lies!"

Laura stayed silent for a moment. The man's ideas were ridiculous, but she couldn't see why any churches would have such an interest in silencing what anyone could see was a crazy man with crazy ideas no one in their right mind would ever believe. "Right…what about the colleges? Why would they harass you?"

"Because I hate that…that one thing, you know it. The one that doesn't exist. What I do, I try to explain things without using it, and they feel that cuts deeply into their territory. They're afraid that, should I succeed, and I will, there will be no need for their little tricks one day."

"But that has nothing to do with the ball there. One could just say the force that you say makes people stick to the ball is magic, and therefore your own theory admits that magic exists and rules our universe."

Atoms looked unimpressed. "Yes, one could say that, if one had a lot of disregard for the truth and was an overall imbecile. And I expected they would say that, because of course those idiots at the College of Wizardry will stop at nothing to prove what they do is important! They just don't want logic to get in the way of their stupid, useless little ancient art that does not even exist!"

"Right… Now, this was a nice conversation," said Laura, trying to find a way to leave the madman's house lest his rambling turn dangerous. "However, I should get going since Salem—"

"You leaving? But you were going to help me!" Atoms moved between Laura and the door. She could've shoved him aside and

walked out but, once again, common decency kept her from it. “I helped you with your case and even gave you a little class on the nature of the Neitherlands. Now it’s your turn to help me. It’s only fair, after all.”

Laura stared at the little man. “But all you did was listen to my tale and tell me it wasn’t caused by magic! Nothing more. It took you but a minute!”

“Yes, I did exactly that. But I did it with a knowledge and authority nobody else in this city has, you see? So if you see it like that, I did a lot. Now, I must insist that you help me carry out an experiment. It is very important.”

Laura sighed. “And when shall you carry out this experiment of yours? I expect you need to plan things ahead, make sure to have all ingredients, choose a good day for it lest the weather—”

Atoms looked through the window, ignoring her. The sky was cloudy and gray, growing darker by the minute. “The way I see it today is a good day as any! Come with me. You’re going to love what we’ll prove today!”

This finishes the excerpt of Salem's Witches.

If you wish to read the full text, it is available on print and kindle e-book on Amazon.com

If you wish to know more about the author and his work, you can do so at

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