



Anthology Two Presents
BENTO BOX #6
Bite-Sized Fiction
by Jae Lizabeth, Nairda St. Taw,
and Jacob Milenstein

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HER BLACK DEVICES 'Part five'

Foreign Lands

by Jae Lizabeth

The village Naja lived in was small and savage. It was not the pictures of beauty, the splendor of Egypt that they tell you about in the history books. This was rustic, and poor, far removed from the pyramids, the lavished gold statues and the stately constructs of the Pharaohs. I would later see the marvels of Egypt, but that would be almost a century later. And when I did see it, I would know who paid for all the riches and luxuries of the upper caste of this empire. It's just as obvious, as it is in the modern times.

I walked behind the tall and beautiful Naja. Her waist sweeping from side to side like a noble, despite her bare feet slopping in the wet mud that must have served as the village's small thoroughfare. Bodies soon began to appear in front of our strides. There were not many straw roofed mud huts bunched around that narrow sweep of pathway. But bodies seemed to swarm through each of the open doorways. I was shocked at the amount of people they had somehow fit beyond the gray walls of those tiny cottages.

Naja abruptly stopped halfway down the strip of peat. The gallery of fifty or so bodies crowded around her. From small children to the worn elderly, all of them turned those bright brown eyes to the woman who had found me. Her beautifully rigid face turned on her shoulder. Her thick dreads lashed against her back as one of her eyes stared back at me. "I will introduce you as my guest." She snapped in an authoritative way. There was nothing I could say. And even if there was, there was little that I would be able to say. Her full lips began to talk in the series of uncanny noises and clicks I didn't even attempt to guess what was going on.

Her rapid words in the foreign language sounded as beautiful as her English, like a new instrument I had never before heard. And as the villagers listened transfixed, I knew her charisma was not wasted on me alone. The villagers too were swept by her words. And they all nodded every time she took a pause, like they were in a collective trance. Then they turned to me. It was almost unsettling the way the faces stared at me like I was a statue. At the time I thought it was because I was white, and perhaps they had never seen a man of such color before. In retrospect perhaps I should have thought harder on the situation.

Naja grabbed my hand swiftly. Her movement was so quick I did not even register the movement until her fingers had intertwined my own. Her lips put on a bright smile and she nodded to me, and tugged my arm with hers. "Come on." She said, "I will take you to my hut. You should rest, and when tomorrow comes we were work on finding you a way back home."

I remember saying a very disenchanted response like "yes." Or "Yeah" But I'm not sure if my response even registered with her. She already knew the score and knew that I was a fish out of water. I would go where ever it was, that I could lie down and clear my head. I was out of my area

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of expertise. And to an immortal that had lived for as long as I had, it was a very strange sensation. I didn't want to think about how long I'd have to live here before a ship suddenly came past. I needed to get back to civilization. Even as much as I loved to learn, something about this place felt off.

Naja's hut was away from the village proper. It stood on top of a small hill that looked over the village, about half a mile of travel when all was said and done. The hut she lived in was not constructed with the gray mud that the villager's homes were built from. Instead her walls were created from many crushed slabs of rock. They were not bound together with any sort of agent I could find. They just sat on top of each other, like a manmade cave. The large roughly jagged opening was set on both sides with huge wooden stakes sticking from the ground, about four feet high each. The tops of the pikes sat the gleaming ivory skulls. They looked almost human, and it made me stop moments from her door.

"Those are human skulls?" I remember asking her, stopping moments from her door.

Her beautiful face turned to me and shook her head, a kind expression surrendering me from all doubt of evil intent. "They were offerings from the villagers; they are the skulls of apes." She informed me.

I looked at them once more, and I shrugged. I was not as familiar with simian bone structure as I was with humans. But I did know many apes did have features similar to humans. And I could not disbelieve such a creature as Naja. "Okay." I said and followed her into the squat hut that she called home.

A fire roared in the center of the large hut. A circle had been dug out of the dirt that served as its floor where the fire had been brewed. Piles of books, most of them in English, were piled to one corner of the room. However at that moment I didn't look to see them in much depth. My eyes instead looked to the alter at the wall I was facing. It was a finely carved affair. Very different from most of the other things I had seen in the village, and in her hut. It looked like something of a desk, with legs that were formed from the mouths of lions. The face of the alter that stood before me had an intricate statute of a human face, with the horns of a ram that spread out to present the blond surface which was smooth and finely sanded. On the alter itself I saw a large book spread open, towering over it was large riveted horns of an animal I'd later identify as a gazelle. There were many bones arranged around the surface surrounding the book and large candles that were lit with small triangular flames. I also saw a few glass jars that sat in the rabble, a brain was floating in one jar thick with formaldehyde, and another contained a dead frog.

"There are blankets, please make yourself comfortable. You've been through much." She told me, taking my attention from her alter. I turned my head quickly to see her face once more; to meet her gaze with my own eyes.

"Thank you." I told her. It was all I could manage.

She bowed to me gracefully and put that smile back across her face. "I will find you something to drink and eat. For now just stay here, and get comfortable."

I watched as she left me to her hut, never wondering if I would look to see what secrets she held. Perhaps she knew just how tired I was. Or perhaps she wanted to know just how easily I was to be manipulated. If that was the case I failed instantly. For I did not look to dissect her home, I

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had no interest in learning of these things. My body was too tired, and I ached. Returning from the dead always took a lot out of me.

I lay down on the bunch of bronze furred blankets and slipped a few of those hides over my worn body. I closed my eyes, and let the black take me. For the rest of my long life I never forgot how easily I gave in to sleep. How easy I gave her all the answers she needed in the months to come. I inadvertently without looking to find out who or what she was, I did my part to help damn the world.

PHANTASMAGORIA
SMOKE AND MIRRORS

Wisp 1: Genesis
by Nairda St. Taw

Imagine, if you can, waking up in a completely unknown place with a throbbing headache, no memory and a sleazy, half-naked man staring at you while he *thinks* you're asleep. If you can picture that, then you know what the first day of my life – or at least, the first day of my life that I can actually *remember* – was like.

That's how my story starts. My name is Carmella, or so I am told, and that was my first moment of self-awareness. The man watching me from a doorway on the far side of the room was carrying two cups of coffee, and when he finally realised I was awake he made his way over to me and sat on the small patch of couch that wasn't covered by my laid-out body.

I sat up and gratefully took the cup of coffee that he offered me, but I didn't try to make conversation. I didn't even know the man's name.

“Good morning,” he said. I gave my assent in the form of a nod. He grinned at me as I took a sip from my coffee. “Did you sleep well?”

“Yes,” I replied. I spent a moment examining the guy. He had short, spikey light brown hair and brown eyes. His bare torso showed that he had a lean body, seemingly fat-free and not overly muscular. He had bright white, perfectly straight teeth and a very light tan.

“That's good. The couch is a bit lumpy for my tastes.”

I nodded again, and gave a little smile. I wished he would just say his name.

“You're not very chatty today, are you?” he remarked. “Still feeling the effects of last night, I guess.”

Last night? I thought. *What happened last night? What if he drugged me?*

“Yeah, I guess I had too much to drink,” I said, and took another sip of the coffee. I didn't know for sure whether I'd had *anything* to drink the night before – and that point, I couldn't even remember my name – but why else would he be offering me coffee first thing in the morning?

“Too much to drink?” he asked. “What are you talking about?”

I put down my cup of coffee and swallowed hard. I must have been right about the drinking; I could see no other real explanation for my situation. If I hadn't been drinking... I could only imagine that I had been kidnapped, or worse. What if the guy was going to kill me? What could I do? I decided to continue with the charade I had already started to act out.

“Last night,” I answered. “When we went out? All those drinks, I don't know what I was thinking.”

The man put down his own cup and rose from the couch. “Are you okay?” he asked. “You must have hit your head harder than you thought. I think you need a doctor. I'm going to call a doctor.”

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He walked behind the couch and reached for a cordless phone on a small desk. I was starting to get worried. If I hadn't been drinking, what had I been doing? It wasn't like me to take drugs... or was it? I didn't know. And who was this guy? A friend? A boyfriend? A one-night stand? A complete stranger?

"I'm fine," I said. I didn't want anyone else involved until I knew what was going on. For all I knew, I was a wanted criminal, and was calling his friends to come finish me off. "I just need some more rest. Did you say I hit my head?"

"Yes," he replied, without putting down the phone. "I found you down on the street at two o'clock in the morning. Some guy had pushed you against the wall, and you'd fallen. He ran off when he saw me coming, and you told me you were fine and just needed a rest, so I let you – hold on, someone's answering."

I stood up and made my own way behind the couch as the man listened to the voice on the other end of the line. I leaned-in beside him to get his attention and he looked up at me.

"Where's the bathroom?" I whispered.

He pointed to the doorway through which he had entered. It was the only way out of the room, and I finally noticed that I wasn't in a house. I was in an apartment. There was the living room, with a small kitchen area attached. The only exit from the living room was a small hallway, with the apartment's front door at the end opposite the living room.

There were two other doors, one on each side of the hallway, as I assumed one of those must open into the bathroom.

I didn't really want the bathroom, but I headed in that direction anyway. I just wanted to find a way out of the apartment. Maybe someone in the neighbourhood knew how I ended up there, or who I was. If they didn't, I could always go to the local police station.

"Yes," the man said as I reached the doorway. "On the St. Ann Street side of Jackson Square. Yeah. Fourteen."

That must have been his address. Jackson Square? I was pretty sure that was in New Orleans. Why was I in New Orleans? Did I live there?

I tried the door on the left side of the hallway and found the bathroom. It was tiny; directly across from the door was a small toilet. There was a shower beside the toilet and a small basin just to the left of the door. Whoever this guy was, he didn't seem to value his luxuries.

I noticed a small window above the toilet, but it was far too small for me to crawl through. It looked like my only way out of the apartment was through the front door.

I ran the basin faucet for a few moments, hoping to make the man think I was washing up while I considered my options. I could just run for it, pull the door open and bolt away, but I wasn't sure where I was and I definitely didn't know my way around the area. I didn't know my way around *any* area.

I could scream and hope that somebody would come to my rescue, but if I was going to be killed screaming might just cause the guy to kill me sooner.

There was only one other option. I turned off the faucet and stepped out of the bathroom. From the hallway, I saw that the man was off the phone and leaning against the back of the couch, waiting for me.

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“I want to leave,” I said. “I don't feel comfortable here.”

I was telling the truth. To be honest, I probably wouldn't have felt comfortable *anywhere*. I didn't know who I was, where I was or even what I looked like. For all I knew, I was a disembodied spirit floating around in an alien dimension. I didn't think that was likely, but I didn't have any proof that it *wasn't* the case.

“Okay,” the man said. He raised his eyebrows, apparently confused by my comment. “I'm not going to keep you here. I've called an ambulance and I suggest you wait until it gets here so the paramedics can check you out.”

“Fine, okay, whatever,” I said. We stood watching each other for several moments – I didn't want to move any closer towards him or even speak to him, and he appeared too concerned for me to pressure me by coming over. “I'll wait outside.”

I walked to the front door and tried to turn its small knob, but it wouldn't move. The door had been locked. “Let me out,” I said, without even turning back to face my host.

“Just getting my keys,” he said.

I turned and saw him push his way through the door opposite the bathroom. He was only gone for a few seconds, but when he returned he was finally dressed – a white business shirt now covering his torso – and held a keychain in his left hand. I stepped out of the way to let him unlock and open the door, and as soon as he did I ran.

Outside the apartment was a very long, very narrow corridor. There were many other doors on the same side as the apartment, each evenly spaced apart. On the other wall were windows, and I glanced out through one just long enough to catch a glimpse of a large, lush, busy park and huge cathedral beyond.

I found a staircase leading down, but before I began to descend I looked back toward the apartment. The man was in the corridor and was looking at me as he walked, but he didn't seem to be chasing me. I still didn't know whether or not he was safe to be around, so I ran down the stairs two at a time and emerged into an empty alleyway.

I made my way toward the park, thinking that if the man was after me he wouldn't attack me there, but I didn't need to go that far. Just beyond the alley was a busy street, and I saw that beneath the apartments were many small shops.

A few people stared at me as I joined the crowd but most paid no attention to me even as I looked for somewhere to pause and figure out what to do next. For a moment I considered that I might look something like a frightened animal fleeing from a hunter, but no one tried to stop me.

I found an unoccupied wooden bench beneath a tree at the edge of the park. There was an accordion player squeezing his instrument for tips a few meters away, but the area seemed to have less foot traffic than anywhere else I had passed.

I sat down and tried to regain my breath. I wasn't sure why I was running. The man had done nothing to hurt me or even scare me, as far as I knew, but that was just it – I didn't *know* anything. He could have drugged and raped me. He could have been holding me for ransom. I had no idea.

I decided that I had to contact the police. I'd find a phone, call them...

Do I have any money? I thought. Do I have a wallet?

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I reached into my pockets and found nothing, but I also took the opportunity to look at myself. I was quite fit, had long red hair and an olive complexion, but that was all I could really tell without a mirror.

What do I look like? I wondered. *Who am I?*

I hadn't realised until that moment just how frightening my situation was. Forget having been kidnapped or attacked; what if I was a murderer, or an escaped lunatic? The police would lock me up as soon as they saw me.

"Miss?"

The question was accompanied by a hand on my shoulder. I jumped more because of the male voice than the touch, which didn't make me feel uncomfortable at all. The voice did not belong to the man I had spent the morning with, but that didn't necessarily mean anything good.

As soon as I was on my feet I turned to look at the speaker. He was tall – taller than most people I'd seen that day – and thin. He had black, slicked-back hair, soft features and a dark tan. He was wearing black trousers, a white shirt and a long black leather coat. He looked young... and sleazy.

"Miss, are you alright?" he asked.

I backed away slowly. He had only been a few inches away from me when I was sitting down – I didn't want to stay within arm's reach, just in case.

"Don't worry, I'm a police officer."

He reached into the inside of his coat and withdrew an ID card and badge. He held it out so that I could see it, and although I couldn't read the text on the card I thought that the badge looked real enough. Besides, if he wasn't a police officer, there were plenty of people around to hear me scream.

"My name is Vincent," he said.

"Vincent what?" I asked. I was still a few feet away from him.

"Vincent Plexico. I'm a detective," he told me. "I got a call a few minutes ago about a woman fitting your description. They said you looked scared. I think they were right."

I didn't say anything. I was still too confused and panicked to figure out *what* to say.

"Wanna sit down?"

I shook my head.

"What's your name?"

I didn't answer. I wasn't really paying attention to the questions. It was strange – I was taking in as many details as I could about the detective, almost like my brain was automatically trying to fill up all the space left by my lost memories. For some reason noting his European accent seemed more important than the actual words he was saying.

"Okay," the detective sighed. He looked down at the ground, then back up at me. "What have you taken?"

"What?" I asked.

"What have you taken?" he repeated. "Drugs."

"I haven't taken any drugs," I said.

"Then what's wrong?"

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"I can' - " I began to answer, but over the detective's shoulder I saw the other man, my first memory, coming toward us. I felt better with the detective there, but I still didn't want him anywhere near me.

For some reason I couldn't remember much about the other man except his looks. He was handsome, *very* handsome, but I couldn't remember much at all about his voice or behaviour.

"There's a man coming," I said. "Behind you. I don't want him near me."

"Right." The detective rolled his eyes. "I turn around, you run off."

"If you *don't* turn around I will *definitely* run off," I promised. "I want you to keep that man away from me."

The detective turned his head, just for a second, and saw the only other person I could ever remember speaking to. He didn't look away for very long.

"In the white shirt? That's Remy Langel. He called about you this morning."

"I don't want him near me," I said again. "If you don't keep him away, I'll run."

"Did he do somethin' to you?"

"I - " I was going to lie. I didn't want to tell a complete stranger that I had absolutely no memory of anything up until fifteen or twenty minutes earlier, but the man was a police detective. Even if he didn't realise I was lying straight away, he would eventually. "No. At least, I don't think so," I said finally.

"Right," the detective said. "Stay here. I'll send him away, get him to come down to the station later."

The detective left me alone, but he didn't go far. I couldn't hear what he said to 'Remy', but their conversation lasted a good five minutes and when the detective turned away Remy lingered for a moment before leaving.

"Back to you," said the detective. "I need your name."

I didn't give him my name. I *couldn't* give him my name.

"If you don't tell me your name I have to take you to the police station."

"I'd tell you my name if I knew it." I said. "I just... I don't know..."

The detective sighed. "You say you're not on drugs? Prescription medication?"

"I'm not on anything."

"I'm going to have to take you to the police station. For your own protection, until I know what's up."

"I don't want to go to the police station," I said.

"You don't have a *choice*."

I did have a choice.

I ran.

I ran in the direction of the huge cathedral I had seen from the corridor outside Remy's apartment. I didn't think the cathedral would keep me from being taken in – why would it? - but it was the biggest building nearby and there were a lot of people between there and the corner of the park where I had spoken to the detective.

I only got a few meters away before I felt the heavy body of the detective tackle me from behind. I hit the ground hard and immediately felt blood slowly seep from my nose. Even though I looked

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much fitter than the detective, and he was too thin to have weighed much, the fall left me dizzy and I couldn't get out from under him.

He sat up, straddling my hips, and pulled my arms behind my back so that he could slip them into a pair of handcuffs. I realised that there was blood and grass in my mouth and lifted my head to spit it out.

“Let me go,” I said.

“Not happening,” the detective replied. I tried again to wriggle out from beneath him but he stopped me by pulling my arms further behind my back, stretching my spine and restricting its movement.

“A car's coming to pick us up,” the detective said. “I suggest you take it easy.”

AGNOSTIC

By Jacob Milnestein

It was hard for her to understand the way the world worked, the way in which events just came about that swept everything up and threw them back down without any reason.

@tokusatsuhero had been posting messages from Ultraman, Kamen Rider and other heroes following the quake. It was a lovely gesture, she thought, something to give people hope, something to remind them of an ideal that would give them a reason to go on. As water and supplies ran out in some of the temporary camps, as contaminated food was found within the dangerous radius of Fukushima Dai-Ichi, the messages of an actor posing as a variety of superheroes were no less significant an attempt to lift national morale than the Emperor's unexpected video message.

Yet she was uncomfortable with the context.

Perhaps it was because she was not religious. She had never had any real need to quantify her experience by the varying temperaments of tutelary deities, had never required approval from a father figure who art in Heaven. She had simply made wishes at New Year and, like everyone else, hoped for the best. She didn't need God to help her define the shape of the world.

Likewise, she had never been interested in superheroes. The idea of someone interceding on her behalf was anathema to her. As with religion, she understood why people read comics and watched TV shows about them, but she didn't like the idea of losing herself to fiction, because then it would raise the same questions she had about religion.

If there was an Ultraman in Nebula M78, then why hadn't he placed himself between the waves before they hit the northern coast? Why hadn't he placed his giant hands against the soil and prevented the ground from shaking apart. Why hadn't he saved the villages north of Sendai that had been almost completely wiped out? Or prevented countless lives from being wasted in the eschewing violence that had been visited upon them?

If Ultraman was real and was capable of communicating messages to them via 57-year-old actor Ogawa Teruaki's twitter account, then why hadn't he helped them when they needed him?

It was the same with God. If there was a God then why hadn't He parted the clouds and pushed back the tsunami? Why had He allowed so many people to die and countless others to suffer? Why had he allowed the world to fall to pieces without saying a word?

She shook her head angrily, tears in her eyes blurring her vision.

They were still trying to conserve power, to avoid excessively using electricity in the wake of all that had happened and all that might still happen, yet the laptop remained open before her, resting on the desk in the office which the majority of people had abandoned one week ago and not returned to.

She didn't blame them. Public transport was still problematic and even Tokyo didn't feel safe – not in the same way that the foreign papers were saying, but they were all still waiting for the big aftershock that had been predicted. It was the fear of this, the notion of an aftershock so powerful

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that it could roil the oceans once more and drive the sea inland, that left the city crippled by its own dread.

In convenience stores and supermarkets, old women continued to panic buy, stocking up on bottled water for fear of what would happen if sea water contaminated the reservoirs, or if the radiation in food near Fukushima provided to match the radiation found in samples from Tokyo.

The aftershocks had continued to rattle buildings and smash glass as far from the epicentre of the quake as Saitama. Yet despite the colossal scale of all that had followed, the largest of the predicted aftershocks had not yet happened.

She looked away from the screen, gazing out of the window and over the silent city.

Seven storeys up. She had thought she might die when the quake hit. She had thought it would be impossible to escape the building as it collapsed, yet the structure had remained resolute. Had she been in Sendai, the story would have been different.

One week still awaiting an aftershock only marginally less than the initial quake, and here she was, amidst a skeleton crew of workers, sitting once more seven storeys up in the office she knew better than her apartment.

Before her, the screen dulled to grey, the gradual slide from activity to the eventual onset of the screen-saver. She turned her attention back and viciously moved the mouse, the cursor darting on the page and the screen instantly awakening.

On the screen before her, @tokusastuhero's timeline still stood out in brave, bold writing, and despite herself, she found her eyes drawn once more, reading the words on the page.

“It’s fine even if you don’t listen to our words. I just want you to believe in yourselves, believe in the people around you, believe that there will always be a new morning. That is what I will believe in. – NinjaRed Sasuke”

Her cheeks warmed with tears.

She tried to remind herself that she didn't need this kind of message, that she didn't believe in God and she didn't read superhero comics, and yet she found herself reading the words over and over again and her head nodded slowly in agreement each time she did.

She had nothing close to faith in the world, yet, despite everything, she wanted to believe that it was all going to be all right, she wanted to hear that life would improve, that someone was out there fighting for them.

If she believed that, then maybe she could also fight not just for herself, but for other people.

She did not believe in religion or childhood television programmes... but she did believe in Japan and, more importantly, in the need for Japanese people to keep on despite the harshness of all that had happened.

This was a feeling worth documenting. This was why she had returned to work.

She closed the window, opened a document file and hastily began to type.

If possible, please donate to relief work in Japan either through local charities, your own country’s branch of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Society, or through the [Japanese Red Cross Society](#).