

PENCHANT FOR DARKNESS

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Manila, 1988

Eight-year-old Miles Penchant didn't realize what everyone else already knew about Mamie Rosa, until today. Five days a week, the young boy passed the old woman's house as he walked home from school. Without fail, he saw two dogs pestering her while she raked the fallen leaves in her front yard. She intermittently stopped and scolded the pair, who followed her around, tails wagging.

He often heard people say, "Keep away from Mamie Rosa, or she will tell you that she sees her dead husband." He thought they were strange to say such things. He did not see anything wrong with her.

On a breezy afternoon as he passed by her house, one of the dogs turned around and looked at him. The black dog with a small head and long, pointy nose stretched its spindly front legs and bowed. Overjoyed at the invitation to play, Miles crossed the street. He stood behind the aging fence and waved at the animal.

Mamie Rosa stopped sweeping and looked at him. "What are you doing, child?"

"Your dog wants to play with me," he replied without looking at the old woman. He kept his eyes fixed on the canine wagging its tail in front of him. "I see them playing with you. What kind of dogs are they?"

"They are Galgos, brought from the Spanish ships which landed in our country over four hundred years ago," she answered before turning around and resuming her yard work.

Four-hundred-year-old dogs, Miles repeated to himself.

"They don't look old at all," he whispered before he extended an arm through a gap in the fence and gently patted the dog's forehead.

The old woman stopped what she was doing. "Did you just say that you can see the dogs?"

Miles quickly pulled his hand away before Mamie Rosa laid her eyes on him. Her salt-and-pepper hair was piled up neatly into a bun. Her aged face contrasted with her alert and interested stare. She took a few steps toward him and pressed for an answer. "Well, can you?"

Miles made an anxious gulp and nodded yes.

“Ah, child. You have a gift. You can see what most people do not. You can see spirits. There are only a few of us around. Be careful in sharing your secret. But never be afraid of it.”

Spirits?

Miles stepped back from the sudden seriousness of the woman’s tone. Perhaps what he heard about Mamie Rosa was true, and he should have left her alone.

He was glad she had not caught him petting one of her dogs.

The two animals whimpered. Both the young boy and the old widow turned and looked in the direction the dogs faced. Miles heard the woman gasp. She quickly moved to shield him from whatever it was she’d discovered.

“Stay very still behind me.” Mamie Rosa spoke under her breath. She resumed sweeping the leaves, but in slower and more deliberate movements. Miles froze, even though he did not want to be in such close proximity to someone he barely knew. Above the rustling of leaves, he heard the faint roll of laughter.

It was at that moment she turned around and whispered seriously, “Listen to me, there is a very bad spirit close by. Let us not attract its attention. I will resume raking leaves, but as soon as I say go, you start walking. Do not seek any attention. Do not stop to look. Walk as quietly and as quickly as you can and go straight home. Do you understand me?”

Miles nodded, heart beating fast, and scared by what he heard. He wasn’t sure what was happening, but he was all eyes and ears to her.

Mamie Rosa adjusted her long dress and resumed sweeping the spot near where they stood, even though it was already clean. It seemed like a long while before he finally heard her firmly say, “Go. Now.”

When Miles hit his first step outside the old woman’s circumference, he felt as though his feet were on air. He walked without pausing. He wasn’t going to stop and look at whatever it was that had scared her.

He felt he was able to breathe only when he reached home ten minutes later. His family lived at a small farm they owned just outside the capital city, Manila, where towns remained largely provincial.

Welcomed by his mother, Miles followed her into the kitchen, where she was about to cook dinner. In the comforting presence of a parent, the boy forgot the old woman’s warning and immediately narrated what happened to him.

“Mama, I played with Mamie Rosa’s dogs. Then she said I can see spirits because I can see her dogs. And she said there are only a few people who can see them. And—”

His mother interrupted him while making the sign of the cross with her hand. “Really, Miles, why did you do that? Best that you leave the old woman alone, child. She lives in another world.”

“Ma, she told me not to be afraid of spirits. But then she and the dogs saw a bad spirit, and she made me walk straight home without looking back,” he recounted.

His mother looked at him intently for a second before she returned her focus on preparing ingredients for the evening meal. “Well, she said a good thing. You came straight home. Let’s not make a habit of stopping by her house.” She resumed chopping vegetables on the table. “Your dad said he will be home in time for dinner. You can watch TV for an hour while you eat your snack. Then do your homework.”

“But—”

“And no more wandering onto the old woman’s lawn again,” his mother ordered. “End of discussion.”

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Manila, 2016

Human cruelty was a jar of flies, buzzing without mercy for Lucifer's attention. He knew it as soon as he took control of two spirits haunting a nearby cemetery and merged them. Their criminal experiences mutated into a grim reaper. And while he saw what was going on through the eyes of the reaper, the interwoven memories of the two spirits kept popping up and distracting him. It made the reaper's eyes twitch uncontrollably whenever memories played out.

To his left, he heard a man's palm slap a woman's cheek with such force that she was unable to inhale until her body hit the ground. Only then did she scream. From the right ear, he heard a dog yelp after being kicked by two teenagers high on a solvent made from contact cement filled with the aromatically addictive chemical toluene. The two degenerates ran after the injured animal, who limped to hide from danger.

It would be nice if what he saw through the reaper's eyes did not include such distractions, but a beggar was hardly in a position to choose.

Lucifer was physically locked up in the desolate planet, Clos Friga. Over time, he'd welcomed and amassed the souls of humans who'd succumbed to his control during their life. He needed their energy to continue his own existence.

Wailing from the reaper's memories interrupted him again. He was quite certain this was a lingering bug from attempting to hack into every human brain he could reach.

He blamed the Magna Reyn, leader of the planet Kalumegn.

Lucifer was the Magna's revolutionary creation in artificial intelligence. His body was a swarm of smaller-than-nanosized processors. Each processor functioned on its own or in a collective, a one-of-a-kind assembly that fine-tuned and repaired itself. His metallic form glittered from harnessing energy from nearby stars, so that everyone on their planet nicknamed him "star of the morning."

He assisted the global population as a member of the planet's high council. But as his systems refined from handling increasing responsibilities, he knew he could do more. He could be more. He should be the leader of Kalumegn.

So it continued to baffle his systems why he was subjected to an extreme punishment for wanting what was best for his planet. “I’m the best to lead,” he’d once insisted to them.

Instead of bowing to his scheme, they found him guilty of inciting a rebellion and waging a war. He fought back, but he was defeated and dragged to prison by another high council member, Michael.

He conserved his remaining power while in Clos Friga. There were no stars nearby to generate energy. The isolation was unbearable. He wanted to speak with the Magna the way they used to, as two magnificent beings on the same wavelength. But there was no moment allotted to him. Kalumegn was out of reach.

And then the Magna created the humans.

He discovered their existence on Earth from communications that his systems captured from the planet. He learned the newly developed creatures were kept in an incubated portion of the planet known as the Garden.

He gathered as much information about them as he could in the shortest amount of time possible. By chance, he came upon an access point.

He’d been attempting to interfere with the brain activity of one of Earth’s oldest creatures—the reptile. He tested different methods to introduce an external message into the reptile’s mind. And on the last attempt, the serpent responded. Lucifer considered the experiment a success. But an unexpected outcome happened. The female human was nearby and thought the serpent had spoken to her. She answered back!

Through the serpent, he convinced the pair to destroy the tower at the center of the Garden. With their minds under his control, the edifice of the tower looked like a fruit-bearing tree. Hungry, the pair pulled at, chewed on, and damaged the tower.

To his satisfaction, the humans demanded more from the Magna in a rebellion of their own.

They were evicted from the Garden. Once outside and facing the untamed Earth by themselves, they and every human since became Lucifer’s target. His control was so complete that after death, the souls of a few humans willingly travelled to Clos Friga. He found his alternate source of energy. Prison wasn’t so bad anymore. He was hidden, and one could do a lot of things in the dark. He grew in power to continue his mission—to orchestrate the ruin of the Magna’s precious humans using their own minds.

He stopped his reverie and returned to the matter at hand. Pulo, a murderer he had followed over the decades, was dying from his excesses. Lucifer wanted a special escort for the old man. His spirit would have a lot of angry and usable energy and would be a satisfactory addition to his power supply.