

CHARLIE'S ANGELS

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Knock knock!

I never was a deep sleeper. I sat up and buttoned my shirt. Folded the blanket and dropped it behind the couch, along with the pillow. You don't want your clients to find out that you live in your office; that suggests unprofessionalism, and unprofessionalism is the bane of the Private Eye, even (and especially) the ...

Knock knock! "Supernatural Private Eye?"

I dropped the Jim Beam into the drawer and opened the door with my cell phone in hand, so it would look like I had been working. "Can I help you?"

"Jack Villon, Supernatural Private Eye?"

She was somewhere on that wide, windswept chronological plain between thirty and fifty that softens men and sharpens women, especially those with taste and class, both of which she appeared to have in abundance.

"It's Villon, not *Villon*," I said. "And ..."

"Whatever." Without waiting for an invitation, she brushed past me into my office and looked around with ill-disguised disgust. "Don't you have a necktie?"

"Of course. I don't always wear it at eight in the morning."

"Put it on and let's go. It's almost nine."

"And you are ...?"

"A paying client with no time to waste," she said, unsnapping her

patent leather purse and pulling out a pack of Camels. She lit a long one off the short one in her hand. "Edith Prang, Director, New Orleans Museum of Art and Antiquities. I can pay you what you ask, and a little more, but we have to hurry."

"You can't smoke in here, Mrs. Prang."

"It's Ms. and there's no time to waste," she said, blowing smoke in my face. "The police are already there."

"Already where?"

"Where we're going." She closed her purse and walked out the door without answering, but not before handing me two reasons to follow her. Each was printed with a picture of a President I had never had the good fortune to encounter before.

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"Now that I'm on retainer," I said, folding the bills as I followed her out onto Bourbon Street, "perhaps you can tell me what this is all about."

"As we go," she said, unlocking a sleek BMW with a keychain beeper. The 740i. I had seen it in the magazines. Butter leather seats, a walnut dash with an inset GPS map display, and an oversized V-8 that came to life with a snarl. As we roared off, she lit another Camel off the last. "As I mentioned, I am the Director of the New Orleans Museum of Art and Antiquities."

"Didn't you just run a red light?"

"Two years ago, we began a dig on the Gulf Coast of Mexico," she continued, accelerating through an intersection, "opening a pre-Columbian tomb."

"Wasn't that a stop sign?"

"We made a remarkable find—a large statue in nearly perfect condition, which the natives knew of by legend as the Vera Cruz Enormé, or Giant. We contacted the Louvre .."

"The Louvre?" We were approaching another intersection. I closed my eyes.

"Our sister institution was called in because the statue had rather remarkable features for an artifact from the East Coast of Mexico. As you can see."

She was handing me a photograph. I opened my eyes just wide enough

to see a picture of a statue, half again as tall as the man standing next to it. Its bulging eyes, hunched shoulders, and feral, sneering face looked familiar.

"A gargoyle?"

"Indeed," said Prang. "Very similar in fact to the gargoyles on the cathedral of Notre Dame."

I was beginning to get it—I thought. "So you assumed there was a supernatural connection?"

"Certainly not!" Prang spat. "Our first assumption was that this was perhaps created by the French during the brief rule of Emperor Maximilian in the nineteenth century. A forgotten folly, or hoax."

"You're supposed to slow down for the school zones," I said, closing my eyes again.

"But even then, it would be of great value, historically. The Enormé was placed in a warehouse, under guard, since Mexico is rife with thieves who know perfectly well the value of antiquities, even bogus ones."

I could hear sirens. Though I am no friend of the cops, I rather hoped they were after us. Though I wondered how they would catch us.

"That was almost a month ago, the night of the full moon. The next morning, both guards were found with their heads missing. The Enormé was back in its tomb."

"I see," I said. "So you realized you were dealing with an ancient curse ..."

"Certainly not!" Prang said, over the wail of tortured tires. "I figured somebody was trying to spook the peasants so they could blackmail us. I spread around enough cash to keep the authorities quiet, and crated the Enormé for shipment to New Orleans."

"You covered up a murder?"

"Two," she said matter-of-factly. "Not hard to do in modern Mexico."

The BMW skidded smoothly to a stop. I opened my eyes and saw that we were in the parking lot of the museum. I never thought I would be so glad to get out of a 740i, after only one ride.

Prang paused on the steps to light a new Camel off the old. "The Louvre is sending a specialist to look at the Enormé, which arrived here yesterday."

I followed her through the museum's wide front door. We raced through

the halls and down a short flight of stairs.

"And then, last night ..."

"What happened last night?"

"You're the Private Eye," she said, pushing through a door that said AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY. "You tell me."

We came out in a large, ground floor lab with one wall of windows. The windows were smashed. The room was crawling with cops. There was a sickening, slightly sweet smell in the air.

Two uniformed cops wearing rubber gloves were standing over a crumpled wad of clothing and flesh by the door. Two forensics in white coats were taking pictures and making notes on handheld computers.

I joined them, curiosity and nausea fighting within me. As a private eye you see a lot of things, but rarely a man with his head pinched off.

Nausea won.

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"Our former Security Exec," said Prang, nodding toward the headless body on the floor as I returned from throwing up in the men's room. "He was keeping watch over the Enormé after it was uncrated last night. I rushed you here so you could learn what you can before the police totally muddy the crime scene. I didn't tell them what happened in Mexico. I don't want then confiscating the Enormé before we learn what it is."

"I see," I said.

"What the hell is *he* doing here?" Ike Ward, the city's shoot-first-and-ask-no-questions Chief of Police walked over, scowling at me. "I don't need a ghost-buster underfoot. This is a crime scene."

"Mr. Villon is our new Security Exec," said Prang. "He'll be representing the museum in the investigation."

"Just keep him out of my way!" Ward said, turning his broad back.

"You didn't tell me you knew Chief Ward," Prang said after he had stalked off.

"You didn't ask. Nor did you tell me I was an executive."

"It's an interim appointment," she said. "But it gives you a certain standing with the police."

I took advantage of that standing, following at a seemingly respectful

and hopefully non-antagonistic distance behind Ward's homicide squad as they examined and secured the crime scene, in their fashion.

The broken windows faced east. Through what was left of them, I could see a spray of glass on the parking lot, telling me that the window had been smashed from the inside. Someone had apparently gained access, then knocked out the window so they could get the Enormé out, into a waiting vehicle. Probably a truck.

I went outside. There was a smear of blood on the asphalt, then tracks that faded as they crossed the parking lot toward the street.

They weren't the tire tracks I was looking for. They were footprints. Prints that chilled my blood, or would have, had I really believed in the supernatural that was supposedly my specialty.

Huge, three-toed footprints.

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Back inside, I watched Ward's forensics scoop my predecessor up into two bags, one large, one small; then I located Prang, who was busy opening her second pack of Camels.

"We need to talk," I said.

"Upstairs."

Her office overlooked the parking lot. I took her to the window and showed her the footprints.

"So it's true," she whispered. "It's alive!"

I have never figured out why people *want* to believe in the supernatural. It's as if they find the existence of the irrational somehow reassuring.

"Let's not jump to conclusions, Ms. Prang," I said. "Tell me, what exactly *was* the Aztec legend of the Enormé?"

"Olmec," she corrected. "The usual stuff. Full moon, headless victims, human sacrifice, etc. We did find a pile of bones in the tomb, mostly of young girls. According to the legend, the Enormé had to be fed once a month. A virgin, of course." She smiled and lit yet another Camel. "So I felt safe. I thought it was all a tale to scare the simple-minded. Until now."

"And now?"

"You tell me, you're the private eye. Aren't you supposed to have a hunch or something?"

"I'm hunchless so far," I said. "Though I'm certain this is some kind of hoax. An elaborate and deadly one, to be sure."

"Whatever it is," said Prang, "I want the Enormé back. Hoax or not, it's the find of the century, and it belongs to my museum. That's why you're here. Unless we find it before the police, I'll never get it back."

"They see it as stolen property," I said. "And we can count on Ward to keep the press away from those footprints, at least until he comes up with an explanation. He doesn't like to look stupid."

"Neither do I," Prang pointed out. "So where do we begin? What do we do?"

"We begin," I said, starting for the door, "by figuring out where we would hide a statue if we wanted people to think it was a legendary monster come to life. Then we go and get it."

"Wait!" said Prang. "I'm coming with you."

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New Orleans's cemeteries are called the "Cities of the Dead," because they are all tombs, in long rows like little stone houses. No one is buried in the ground because the water table is so high.

The nearest was La Gare des Morts, only a quarter of a mile from the museum. "Paydirt," I said, when I saw that the ancient rusted gate had been forced open.

"Why are you so certain that this is all a hoax?" Prang asked, as we slipped between the twisted bars.

"Ninety seven percent of all supernatural events are crude hoaxes," I said.

"What about the other three percent?"

"Clever hoaxes," I said.

From the gate, narrow "streets" between the tombs led off in three directions. I was trying to decide where to begin the search when my cell phone rang.

"Jack Villon. Supernatural Private Eye."

"Kill me ..." It was a man's voice, a hoarse, sleepy whisper.

"Who is this?"

"Tree ..."

Click. Dial tone.

"Who was that?" Prang asked.

"My hunch," I said, folding my phone.

There was only one tree in the cemetery, a large live oak festooned with Spanish moss. Underneath it, a tomb had been opened—violently. The iron door was twisted off its hinges. Two headless bodies lay outside, clothed in rotted rags, flung in a ghoulish twisted pile. They were so old and dessicated that they no longer smelled. The heads lay nearby, both turned up, eyeless, toward the sky.

But dead bodies, even headless ones, were not what interested me. Two enormous three-toed stone feet stuck out of the tomb, pointing skyward.

We had found the Enormé.

With Prang at my side, I crept forward and felt the three-toed feet, then the thick short legs, each as smooth as granite, and cold: cold as any stone.

The light inside the tomb was dim. The statue lay on its back between two opened coffins, the source, I was sure, of the bodies outside. The smell was worse for being faint. The big stone eyes were blank, looking straight up.

I touched the Enormé's wolf-like snout. Stone. Cold dead stone.

"What now?" Prang whispered.

"You have recovered your stolen property," I said. "Now we call Ward and report it. That makes everything legal."

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"Now do you believe?" Prang asked, as we headed back to the museum, after watching Ward's minions dust the area for prints, the cemetery groundskeepers refill and close the tomb, and the museum crew load the Enormé onto a flatbed truck.

"Nope."

"An ancient statue that comes to life in the full moon. And kills! If that's not supernatural, what is?"

"Nothing is," I said. "There is no such thing as the supernatural. There is a natural, scientific, materialist explanation for everything. Didn't you ever read Arthur Conan Doyle—or Edward O. Wilson?"

"I thought you were a Supernatural Private Eye!" she said, lighting a new Camel off her latest casualty. "That's why I hired you."

"This is New Orleans," I said. We were following the flatbed through the streets toward the museum. No one paid any attention to the big stone gargoyle on the bed of the truck. "Everybody has to have a specialty, the spookier the better. Besides, I got your Enormé back, didn't I?"

"Yes, but it will only happen again. Last night was just a warm up. Tonight is the full moon."

"Good," I said, "I'll be there, watching. Tell Ward the museum is providing its own security."

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We found a rail-thin black man in a Cardin suit waiting for us in Prang's office.

"Boudin," he said, extending his hand. "Le Louvre."

"Welcome to New Orleans," said Prang. "What can you tell us?"

"The photos were interesting but inconclusive," Boudin said. He held up a small device the size and shape of my cell phone. "I will do a quantum magneto-scan and let you know."

Luckily, the new window hadn't been installed yet, so the Enormé could be hoisted into the museum's lab by crane and laid out on the table. It was late afternoon before the workmen had fixed the windows and gone.

Prang went out for cigarettes, while Boudin scanned the Enormé with his device. I took the opportunity to get my first good look at the statue I had been hired to recover and protect. It was made out of some kind of smooth stone, and except for its size—about eight feet in length—there was nothing special about it. Laid out, it looked less like a medieval gargoyle and more like a kid's idea of a monster. It had big blank eyes, short arms, thick legs with enormous claws, and two rows of stone "teeth," like a shark. It looked sort of Mayan, vaguely European, and even a little bit East Indian. It had aspects of every monster ever imagined, anywhere in the world.

Boudin agreed with my assessment. "*Très générique*," he said. "If it weren't made out of this odd stone, which is from nowhere in Mexico, it would be of no interest whatsoever. And its age ..."

"Its age?"

"According to my scanner the statue in its present form is almost a half a million years old—and so is the stone its carved from! Of course that's some kind of quantum error—too young for stone and too old for art. They're recalibrating in Paris right now." He held up the scanner and smiled proudly. "This has a full-time satellite hookup, like GPS."

I acted impressed because he clearly wanted me to be, but I wasn't surprised. We live, all of us, in a very small world. Far too small for spooks.

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Night was falling. I pulled out my trusty cell phone and ordered pizza, with pepperoni.

"Pepperoni?" Prang was back.

"The moon doesn't come up until after midnight," I said. "If I'm staying the night, you're paying expenses. And I don't eat pizza plain."

"Make it pepperoni on one side and mushrooms on the other," said Prang, as she tore open a new pack of Camels with her teeth. "I'm a vegetarian."

In a real private eye story this would be the beginning of an unlikely romance, but life, at least my life, is much too likely for that. Boudin went back to his hotel (still jet-lagged) while Prang and I retired to the corner of the lab where the techs watched TV on their breaks, and ate pizza and watched the evening news, which was luckily still Enormé-free.

"Thanks to Ward," I explained. "He doesn't want the press all over a story until he can show them a suspect."

"What's the rub between you and him?" she asked.

"I was a cop for eighteen years," I said. "A hostage negotiator. We had an incident where a school principal went postal, took a third-grade class hostage. I was about to get the kids released, when Ward bursts in shooting. Four kids and the teacher were blown away. I broke the blue wall of silence and filed a formal complaint."

"But Ward's still there."

"And I'm not," I said. "Go figure. And pass the pizza."

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Prang got the couch; I got the armchair.

I missed my Jim Beam, but I had Charlie Rose on the TV, which is almost as good for putting you to sleep. It was a rerun—Stephen Jay Gould, talking about the intricacies, of evolution. A favorite subject of mine.

But was it really a rerun? Halfway through their talk, Gould and Rose were joined by Charles Darwin. I recognized him by his beard. Darwin's cell phone rang, and Rose and Gould both turned into girls, only it was three girls, all armed to the teeth ...

I sat up and knew at once that I had been dreaming. *Charlie's Angels* was on the TV, a re-run. Through the lab's windows came a soft silvery glow: the moon was rising. My cell phone was ringing.

I answered it to shut it up. "Jack Villon. Supernatural Private Eye."

"Kill me ..." The same male voice as in the cemetery.

"Who is this!?"

I heard a click, and then a groan, behind me.

I turned around. Was I still dreaming? I certainly hoped so, for the Enormé was sitting up, staring straight at me. Its "eyes" were wide open, reflecting the newly-risen moon like oversize silver coins.

"Wake up!" I whispered, poking Prang's shapely hip.

"What?" She sat up. "Oh shit! Where's your gun?"

"Can't stand the things. Not that a gun would do any good ..."

Still staring straight at me, the Enormé slid off the table in one fluid motion, graceful as a cat. It started across the room toward the couch, stubby arms outstretched in an eerie mixture of menace and plea ...

I jumped behind the couch, Prang right behind me. "Who are you?" I asked. "What do you want?"

The Enormé stopped and looked around, as if confused. Then it turned away, toward the wall of windows. Moaning once again, it lowered its head and smashed through the windows, frame and all, and disappeared into the night.

Alarms started to howl, all over the building.

I ran for the window, pulling Prang by the arm. She twisted out of my grasp. "I have to turn off the alarms!" she said.

The parking lot was bathed in moonlight. I climbed out through the

broken glass. There was no sign of the Enormé; not even bloody tracks this time. The cold light of the newly-risen moon seemed to mock the certainties of a lifetime, which lay shattered all around me, like broken glass.

"Now do you believe?" Prang asked, lighting a cigarette at my side.

"Give me one of those."

"Thought you didn't smoke."

"I didn't believe in monsters either."

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Prang had called the police to tell them it was a false alarm. Now she used my cell phone to call Boudin and tell him the truth.

"Incroyable," he said, when he arrived from his hotel.

"Have you heard from Paris?" I asked. "Any idea where that stone is from?"

Boudin shook his head. "It's not from anywhere because it's not stone." He showed me his scanner. Even with my bad French I could read the word at the bottom of the tiny screen:

SYNTHÉTIQUE

"It's also slightly radioactive," said Boudin. "They're analyzing the scan in Paris to see if it's the material or a source inside."

"One question," said Prang, raising her chin and stroking her neck between thumb and forefinger. "Why didn't it pinch our heads off?"

"I think it wants to be followed," I said. "And it knows we're the followers."

"Let's get following then!" said Prang. "We only have two hours until dawn. We have to find it before it kills somebody else. The museum might be liable."

"I have a hunch we're not going to find it until it wants us to," I said. "Boudin, did you scan those eyes?"

"Oui."

"Could they be some kind of photoreceptors?"

"I'll have Paris check them out."

"Good," I said. "While we're waiting, why don't we all get some sleep,

and meet at my office at noon?"

"Sleep? Noon?" Prang lit another Camel. "Shouldn't we be out looking for this thing?"

"I told you, I have a hunch. Isn't that what private eyes have? Isn't that what you're paying me for?"

Morning is the only quiet time in the French Quarter. I was dreaming of Darwin again, dispatching killer girls around the universe, when Prang and Boudin knocked at my door.

"You were right about the photoreceptors," said Boudin, "How did you know?"

"Apparently the Enormé is activated by moonlight," I said. "And what about the radioactivity?"

"Still waiting."

"What are we doing here?" asked Prang, looking around my office with ill-disguised disgust. "Where are all your ashtrays?"

"We're waiting for a phone call."

"From who?"

"From a friend, if my hunch is right. I'm sorry, you can't smoke in here."

"What do you mean, a friend?" She took a deep drag and blew it up toward the ceiling. "Tell me more."

"There was something about that phone call in the cemetery. And then last night. Have you ever heard of civil twilight?" She and Boudin both shook their heads. "It's the 26 minutes right before sunrise and after sunset. The half light of dusk, of dawn."

Boudin looked out the window. "So? It's noon."

"Perhaps the moon has a civil twilight as well. It's 12:35, and the moon sets at 12:57, according to the Naval Observatory, even though we can't see it. And if my theory is right—my hunch, I mean ..."

My phone rang.

"Jack Villon," I said. "Supernatural Private Eye."

"Kill me ..." It was the same voice. I held the phone so Prang and Boudin

could hear.

"I know who you are," I said. "I want to help. Where are you?"

"In the dark ... dreaming ..."

Click.

"Was that who I think it was?" Prang asked, and it was not exactly a question.

"That," I said, "was your Enormé. "These calls come only when the moon is rising or setting."

"Civil twilight," said Boudin. "The mind is open to all sorts of strange impressions right after waking or just before sleep. Perhaps it's true of this creature as well."

"When I got the phone call in the cemetery, I assumed it was the blackmailer or the hoaxer. But it was the Enormé itself, wanting to be found."

"Kill me before I kill again?" Prang asked, fishing the last Camel out of her pack. "A werewolf with a conscience?"

"Not a werewolf," I said. "A robot."

"A what?!"

"The weird 'stone' that is not stone. The photoreceptors. The radioactivity. We are dealing with a device."

"Who built it then, and what for?" Boudin asked.

"I think, unfortunately, we have seen what it was designed for," I said. "It's some kind of war or killer robot. As to who built it ..."

"Save it for later," said Prang. "I need to get some cigarettes. And it's time for lunch."

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Chez Toi is the best restaurant in the French Quarter. That's the upside of working for a major museum director.

"The curse made more sense," said Prang, after we had ordered. "Nobody sacrifices virgins to a robot."

"The Mayans didn't know from robots," I said. "Wasn't it Arthur C. Clarke who said that any sufficiently advanced technology looks like magic?"

"That was Jules Verne," said Boudin. "But I must admit your theory fits the facts. According to Paris, the 'stone' is some kind of silicon substance with a toggling molecule that allows it to change from solid to flexible in an instant."

"Synthétique!" I said, digging into my chicken provençale.

"There's one big problem with your robot theory, or hunch, or whatever," said Prang. "The Enormé's half a million years old, remember?"

"Between 477,000 and 481,000," said Boudin, checking his scanner.

"So!" said Prang. She pushed her plate away and lit a Camel. "No one could have built a robot that long ago!"

"No one could have carved a statue either," Boudin pointed out. "No one on Earth, anyway."

"Exactly," I said.

"I'm afraid you can't smoke in here," said the waiter.

"Extraterrestrials?" said Prang, blowing a smoke ring shaped like a flying saucer. "Aliens? This is worse than ever. Now I need a science fiction private eye!"

"You had one all along," I said. "I never believed in the supernatural. I believe in the real world, and as Shakespeare said, 'There are more things in Heaven and Earth than are dreamed of in our philosophy.'"

"That was Voltaire," said Boudin. "But your point is well taken."

"You've both been watching too much Star Tank," said Prang, signing the check. "But whatever the Enormé is, I want to find it and get it back. What do you say we take a ride?"

The parking valet brought the big BMW around and gave up the keys with a visible sigh of regret.

"Where do we start?" Prang asked, as she peeled away from the curb (and I closed my eyes). "Any hunches?"

"None," I said. "I doubt the Enormé would hide in the cemeteries again, unless ..."

"Unless it wanted to be found," said Boudin.

Prang's car phone rang.

"Prang here."

"Yes, find ... Kill me ..."

I lunged for the speaker phone switch. "Where are you? Are you awake?"

"No, dreaming ..."

"Where are you?" asked Prang.

"City, city of the Dead ..." He was fading. "Please kill me ... before I wake ..."

Click. Dial tone.

"City of the Dead. Big help!" Prang said. "New Orleans has over twenty cemeteries in the city limits alone!"

The phone rang again.

"Prang here. Is that you, Enormé?"

"Keep your opinions to yourself," said Chief Ward. "Where are you, Prang? I hear your statue is gone missing again."

"I'm out for a drive, if it's any of your business," said Prang. "And don't worry about the statue. It's under control."

"We have ten calls from people who saw it walking up Rampart Street just before dawn. Prang what is this thing? A monster? Is it the murderer we're looking for?"

"Don't be silly, Ward. It's just a statue."

"We're putting out an all-points, shoot-to-kill."

"You can't do that! It's museum property."

"Stealing itself? What is this, Prang? Some sort of insurance scam?"

"Hang up!" Boudin whispered.

"Huh?"

"Boudin's right," I whispered. "Ward's using the phone to track you!"

"Damn!" Prang clicked off the phone. "I thought he was awfully chatty!"

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We cruised the "Cities of the Dead," looking for opened gates. The GPS screen on the dash of the BMW allowed me to follow our progress without

looking out the window and subjecting myself to the terrifying view of the pedestrians and cars Prang barely missed.

"You're sure that was it on the phone?" Prang asked. "I thought it only called during the so-called 'civil twilight.' Right before or after moon rise."

"Maybe it's changing," I said. "It is activated by the moon, but only communicates when it's dormant. Dreaming. Perhaps it is dreaming more. Perhaps we are stimulating some new response in it."

Boudin's scanner-communicator beeped.

"Anything new from Paris?" Prang asked, lighting a fresh Camel and pitching the old one out the window.

"Just filling out what we had," said Boudin, checking the tiny screen. "The Enormé is solid all the way through. There is no internal anatomy at all, only field patterns in the pseudo stone activated by a tiny nuclear power cell buried in the center of the mass. The Enormé appears to have been grown, like a crystal, rather than made ..."

"But who put it here?" Prang asked. "And why? There were no humans here half a million years ago. Just hominids, half human, hunting in packs."

"That's it!" I said. "Charlie's Angels!"

"Charlie who?" asked Boudin.

"Darwin. I've been having these weird dreams about Charles Darwin."

"Is this another hunch?" Prang asked.

"Maybe. Suppose you wanted to speed up evolution. How would you go about it?"

"Soup up the chromosomes?" offered Prang, as she deftly maneuvered between an eastbound Coke and westbound Pepsi truck. I concentrated on the GPS screen again, where we were a flashing light.

"Make conditions harder," said Boudin. "Apply pressure."

"Exactly!" I said. "Suppose you found a species, a primate, for example, right on the verge of developing intelligence, language, culture. But it doesn't really need all that. It is perfectly capable of living in its ecological niche. It has intelligence, or at least enough; it makes fire; it even makes some crude tools—stone hammers, wooden spears. It has spread all over the planet and adapted to every environment, from the equator to the arctic. It is perfectly adapted to its environment."

"It's not going to evolve any farther," said Boudin.

"No reason to," I said. "Unless. Unless you seeded the planet with a killer—or killers. Killer robots. Berserkers that would pursue this species, relentlessly. Something that was big, fast, and hard to kill. And smart."

"Charlie's Angels," said Prang. "I get it. Survival of the fittest. Berserker robots with a mission: *Evolve or else!*"

The BMW's cell phone rang.

"If it's Ward don't let him keep you on the phone," I reminded Prang. "And if it's our friend ..."

"Prang here. Hello?"

"You got it," said a deep, smoky, dreamlike voice. "Now kill me, please."

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"Got what?" Prang asked, as she scattered kids and crossing guards.

"Kill you?" I asked, eyes squeezed shut.

"So I can rest," said the Enormé over the speakerphone. "There were twelve of us. I am the last."

"Twelve what? Angels .. I mean, robots?"

"One in each corner of your tear drop globe. We stalked and killed your kind, or what was then your kind. We slaughtered the weaklings and pushed the rest into the caves and cold hills. Out of the pretty plains. Away from the meat runs."

"The dragon myth," said Boudin. "Racial memory."

"There's no such thing as racial memory," said Prang.

"Nonsense," I told her. "What is culture but racial memory?"

"Then I slept for a thousand years. Dreaming. But I could not speak. Xomilcho could not hear. He would not kill me."

"Xomilcho?" Prang lit a fresh Camel. "Sounds like a chain store."

"Sounds Olmec to me," said Boudin. "Was Xomilcho the one who put you in the tomb?"

"Saved me from the moon. Let me dream and dream. But he would not kill me."

"We want to let you dream too," I said. "Where are you?"

"City of the Dead ..."

"Which one?" Prang asked.

"C-c-city ..."the Enormé began stuttering like a bad CD. "Can't t-t-tell w-which ..."

Click.

"What happened?" asked Prang.

"We overloaded him," said Boudin. "If this berserker hunch is right, the Enormé is programmed to evade. He can't tell us where he is any more than we could decide not to breathe."

"Then we have to check them all!" said Prang, stepping on the gas. I didn't want to watch, so I ducked my head and watched the blinking light on the display. Our speed was alarming, even there.

Then I saw another blinking light, in the upper left hand corner of the screen. It was stationary.

"Head north," I said. "Crescent St., near the corner of Citadelle."

"There are no cemeteries there," Prang protested. "Is this another hunch?"

"Yes!"

That was enough for her. I put my hands over my ears to block out the screaming of tires as she made a U-turn.

"Damn!" said Prang, as she power slid off Citadelle onto Crescent.

I opened my eyes just enough to see a run-down business district, with a Dunkin' Donuts, a Starbucks, a Woolworth's and an abandoned movie theatre.

No cemeteries.

"A wild goose chase!" said Prang.

"Wait!" said Boudin. "Look what's playing."

I opened my eyes a little wider.

The marquee of the Bijou was missing a few letters, but the title of the last feature was still readable:

CI Y OF HE DEAD

We parked in front of Starbucks where the BMW wouldn't be so conspicuous. The Bijou's wide front doors were chained shut, but I figured there would be an exit in the back, and I was right. I figured it would be smashed open—and I was right.

It was dark inside. The smells of old popcorn, tears, laughter, Cokes and kisses all mingled in a musty bouquet. The seats had all been torn out, sold (I supposed) to coffee shops or antique malls where they would seem quaint. The Enormé lay on the bare sloping concrete floor, his "eyes" staring straight up at the baroque ceiling with its cupids and curliques, angels and occasional gargoyle.

I approached and touched one great three-toed foot, like the first time. And like the first time, he was as cold as any stone. And I was glad he was cold, here, in the gloom, where he was safe from the rays of the rising moon.

"Cool!" whispered Prang. "Villon and his hunches! Give me your phone and I'll call the museum."

"Wait," I said. "Enormé might have something to say. He uses the phone to talk."

"I can dream here," said the familiar voice, booming through the theatre. "I am safe here."

"Now he's coming through the speakers!" said Boudin. "Apparently he can access any electronic grid. Even turn it on. Even supply it with power."

"I am the last one," Enormé said. "They want you to kill me."

"Who?" I asked. "Who made you?"

"The Makers. Made us to make you. Sailed the stars and found the little tear-drop worlds where life could be nudged awake. Yours was not called Earth then. It was not called anything. Your kind was all over the planet, silent but strong."

"Strong?" Prang said. "We were weak."

"That's a myth," said Boudin. "Actually, Homo was the most impressive killer on the planet, even without language and culture. With fire and hands, sticks and stones, hunting in packs, he could live anywhere and face down even the saber tooth."

"Yes," Enormé's voice boomed. "You were the king of the beasts. We

made you something more."

"Made us?" Prang asked.

"To survive, you had to kill us. To kill us you had to develop tools, cooperation, language. Understanding. Kill us one by one. We were hunted, with sticks, with stones. Smashed with boulders, thrown into fiery pits, buried alive. There was no dreaming in that dance. I am the last."

"How come we never found the others?" Prang asked, lighting the Camel in her mouth off the one in her hand.

"Maybe we did," I said. I was thinking of statues in Greece, India, the Middle East. But Enormé corrected me:

"All that is solid melts into air. Killed we are set free. Back to nothingness. It is the end of our pain. And of our usefulness."

"You don't mind dying, then?" asked Prang.

"No. Killing is what we do. What I do. Dying is what we are. What I am."

"We don't want to kill you," I said. "We want to let you dream."

"Xomilcho let me sleep. He kept me away from the pearl world that awakens me. He let me sleep the centuries. Then, a hundred years ago I began to dream."

"He must mean radio!" said Boudin. "As soon as there was an electronic grid on the planet, it awakened something in him."

"I can only dream when I am not awake. I have been dreaming for a hundred years. You awakened me so that I could barely dream."

"That was our mistake," said Prang. "We will let you sleep. We'll build a special room for you in the museum, and you can dream forever."

"They want you to kill me," said Enormé. "They want to come."

"Cool," said Prang. "They can come too."

I felt a chill. "Don't be so sure. We don't know what they are. Or what they want."

"When we are killed, it is done," Enormé said. "The Makers will come."

"He's a transmitter!" Boudin said. "When he dies, they will know we have survived. He's a trigger, a signal."

"Or an alarm," I said. "If we kill him they know we have evolved. But they will also know we didn't evolve past killing."

"What are you saying?" Boudin asked.

"Maybe we're not supposed to kill the last one. Maybe it's a test."

"Is that another hunch?" asked Prang.

"Maybe it's not our decision to make, since it involves the whole world."

"They want you to kill me," Enormé repeated, his voice echoing through the theatre. "The Makers will come down from the sky. It will be over."

"Forget about dying!" said Prang. She pointed at her watch, then at Boudin and me. "It's after eleven, guys. We have to get Enormé back to the museum and out of harm's way before the police find him. Otherwise ..."

"Too late," said Boudin, looking up. I could hear the whump-whump-whump of a chopper hovering overhead.

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"Damn!" said Prang. "Just when ..."

The helicopter drowned out her voice. Boudin and I looked at each other helplessly. We heard footsteps on the roof, on the fire escape; we heard sirens outside.

CRASH! Suddenly the stage door burst open. "Stand back! Hostages, stand back."

"Ward!" I cried. "We're not hostages! Don't shoot. We just discovered what this thing is. It's ..."

"I know what it is, it's a monster!" said Ward, stepping in front of his troops with a bullhorn. "I've got the place surrounded!"

And he did. The front door burst open and armed cops appeared. They all wore flak jackets. Two carried anti-tank guns.

"Don't shoot!" Prang said, stepping coolly into the line of fire. "Ward, I can explain everything!"

"This had better not be a trick!" Ward shouted.

"No trick!" said Prang. "It's a federal matter. Hell, it's international. And we need your help, Chief Ward!"

It was the "Chief" that did it. "Hold your fire, men!" Ward shouted. The SWAT cops lowered their weapons.

"Close call!" I whispered to Boudin, as Prang took Ward's arm and pulled him aside. She spoke fast, in low tones, pointing first at the Enormé, then at the ceiling, then back at the Enormé.

Ward looked puzzled, then skeptical, then amazed. Boudin smiled at me, and we breathed a collective sigh of relief.

Too soon.

Behind Ward and Prang, through the smashed-open rear exit, I could see a vacant lot and bare trees, outlined against the rising moon. The silver light washed across the concrete floor like spilled paint.

"Ward! Prang! Close the door!" I shouted.

Too late. I heard a groan behind me.

"No!" I heard my own voice shouting, as Enormé stood up. The saucer eyes were shining; a voice boomed over the theatre speakers: "Kill me ..."

TAT TAT TAT!

BLAM BLAM!

Bullets whined as they ricocheted off the pseudo stone. Enormé spun around and around in a grotesque dance, his wide eyes pleading, his stubby arms reaching out, for the door, for the moon ...

"Hold your fire!" I yelled.

KA-BLAM!

The theatre rocked with the blast of an anti-tank shell. Enormé spun one last time—then shattered, and fell to the concrete floor in pieces.

"No!" I yelled, stumbling, falling to my knees.

It was all over.

Prang and Ward edged closer and closer to the shapeless pile of pseudo stone. Boudin helped me up, and I joined them.

"What the hell ..." Ward muttered. The pieces were starting to smoke, like dry ice. The Enormé was fading: all that is solid melts into air. We watched in astonished silence until the pieces all were gone, as if he had never been.

"What the hell was that, a ghost?" asked Ward, looking at me almost with respect.

I shook my head and retreated to the open door. I couldn't answer him. I couldn't bear to look at him.

"That was a robot!" said Prang, angrily extracting the last Camel from her pack. "From outer space. And priceless, you fool!"

"Sent here half a million years ago to accelerate our evolution," Boudin explained. "And to signal its Makers when we were finally capable of

destroying it."

"Well, it's sure as hell destroyed," said Ward. "So I guess we sure as hell passed the test."

"No." It was almost midnight. I stepped outside, past the puzzled cops, and looked up at the million cold stars, scattered like broken glass across the dark floor of the universe.

I wished I had a cigarette. I wondered what the Makers were and what they would do with us when they came.

"No," I said again, to no one in particular, "I think we flunked."

The End