

AN AFFINITY FOR BLUE

an original short story by Rachel Caine

The city smelled of music -- the hot spice of jazz, the cool river-scent of reggae, the pulsing foggy swirl of zydeco. To some people, that might have translated as spilled sour beer, mildew and the stink of a city at perpetual low tide, but not to John "Evangelist" Fredricks. As he stepped off the bus, John took in a deeply colored breath and knew, *knew* he'd come to the right place. It was a place where things happened. Not always good things, maybe, but that was all right, too. Music was a wild horse, and sometimes people got thrown.

The sidewalk was old and stained, veteran of countless Mardi Gras. The party was over, the city sunk in exhaustion, but he hadn't come for the wild times -- not the way the tourists saw it. He'd come for the music.

The baggage compartment on the bus creaked up like the wing of a dusty beetle; he ducked in and grabbed his single battered suitcase, and his horn case. The suitcase was a Salvation Army find, stained like the New Orleans sidewalks with decades of travel; the horn case was fine leather, scuff-free, maintained like the finish on an antique Rolls Royce. The horn inside, nestled in wine-red velvet, had been polished to a high gleam, and in John's imagination it felt warm as flesh to the touch.

"Bewant in 'a room, I 'spect."

He looked up, the weight of his horn case dragging on his arm like an insistent child, and saw a shadow blocking out the watery early-spring sun. Big man, twice his size, thick through the chest and arms. A face that could have been carved from granite by wind and rain, eyes the color of wet river stones. It seemed to John that the man must have been standing there, arms crossed, ever since the sidewalk had been poured.

"What?" he asked. He'd been thinking about other things, about hopes and dreams and music. He focused on the man, who reminded him of nothing so much as a cigar store Indian made out of stone.

"Room," the man repeated. "You want one?"

"Is it cheap?"

The man's granite face split, revealing a line of white teeth like a seam of limestone. "Sure, cheap and clean. C'mon wit me."

He started to walk away. John stayed where he was, the horn case dragging at his arm. The man looked back and came to a halt again, looking as eternal as if he'd never moved.

"French Quarter?" John asked. The man nodded soberly.

"Course de French Quarter. You want de music, don' you?"

John smiled. He was two or three shades lighter than the Granite Man, but his teeth were just as white, perfectly straight. His mother had put a lot of money into that smile, paying for a perfect armature for her trumpet-playing son. Like the instrument, it was his legacy.

"Yes," he said. "I want the music."

And that was that. He set out, cases in hand, following his guide down Canal Street to Bourbon. As they approached the corner, which was thick with tourists even this early in the morning, already richly veined with the whispers of music from down the street, from clubs that opened early or stayed open night and day. The street drew him the way honey draws ants, a physical hunger like a hard knot of amber in his belly, and he started to turn that way.

A huge hand fell on his shoulder. Seen close, the skin looked rough and grainy, more like granite than ever. He looked up at his guide.

"No," the man said. "This way."

I want to go that way, John thought, feeling like a child denied candy. But he followed, because he wasn't a child anymore, he was a man, trained in the craft of patience. Didn't mean he didn't taste that candy, though. Didn't mean he didn't ache for it.

Bourbon street was kept mostly clean – he saw white-shirted, dark-skinned men on both sides of the streets, unobtrusive small men, picking up discarded bottles and cans and cigarette butts. Even so, the litter ran ahead of them; broken glass glittered like melting ice in the gutters, and even in the one look he took he saw a tall white woman in a sky-blue dress drop another cigarette to the pavement. *Work that never ends*, he thought. He wondered how they got through the day if they knew that.

"Where are we going?" he asked. It occurred to him for the first time that he was a stranger, and he could die in New Orleans as easy as Galveston. One good smash from a granite fist ought to do it. He thought about getting beat to death, about somebody taking his horn and pawning it for vials of crack, and his guts knotted up again.

"Dauphine Street," his guide said. He turned and stuck out his hand. "Sam."

He took it, careful, and was surprised how careful Sam was, too. As if he knew he might crush poor li'l music-boy's fingers with a twitch.

"John," he said, and then changed it. "People call me Evangelist Fredricks."

"Evangelist," Sam nodded. "Least they don't call you de Baptist."

He turned and walked on, nodding to some people, ignoring others. John was already seeing would-be tourists. The tourists were like ghosts, existing in some other world than Sam's; he walked, and they moved out of the way like mist, but never looking right at him. Their eyes were always fixed somewhere else – on a brochure, on a map, on the street ahead. *Two worlds*, he thought. *Two I know of*. But there had been worlds in Galveston, too, worlds of music and money and fear. Galveston hadn't carried melody in its bones, it was a city where the heartbeat was the steady growling pulse of traffic and the boom of ships being loaded in the harbor. Music threaded through all of the worlds of New Orleans, running like a pale whispering river through the stone and past the people. Older than the city. Older than anything.

He almost bumped into Sam when he came to a stop. There were tourists here, too, but on the other side of the street, crowded around a bar whose sign John couldn't see. Piano music floated out, something in a ragtime rhythm with a dark blue edge of Cajun accordion.

"Updere ," Sam said. He pointed at a window on the second floor, blind as something born in a cave. "Go indis door, up de stairs, tell Vivyan Sam send you."

He stood there, waiting, for long enough that John got the message. He dug in his pocket for money, hesitated, handed Sam a twenty dollar bill. Sam smiled.

"You gotdat to spare?"

"Not really."

"Where you from, son?"

"Galveston, Sam. In Texas."

"Shit, we know 'bout Galveston. Seaports know each other. You know how to take care 'round a seaport?"

"Got a pretty good idea."

Sam's smack on his shoulder almost toppled him, and it worked up his neck in an ache he knew would be a bruise later. A love tap from Sam.

"Where you playin ', Evangelist?"

"Thought I'd just go around and sit in until somebody liked me," he said. "That's the way we do it in Galveston."

"Way we do it here, too. But you take care," Sam said. "Get yourself a charm. Somethin' powerful."

John smiled and went in the door Sam had pointed to. It was a narrow little hallway, not much wider than his shoulders, the sides rubbed dark with the passage of time and bodies. The ceiling was lower than he was used to, and the one flickering fixture a converted gaslight with an ancient fly-specked bulb. The stairs smelled of incense and mold. He lifted his cases up and climbed, pausing at the landing to look up the second flight. It ended in a dark mouth that could be another hallway. Halfway up he saw a glow of light, and as he got to the top he saw it was a time-dusted blue window far down the hall, the iron lace of a fire escape misty beyond it.

A door was open next to that window. He walked to it, listening to a deep silence; the carpet was old but still lush, and the blue-streaked light gave him a feeling of being underwater. He paused at the open doorway and looked in.

There was a young woman sitting in a rocking chair. She looked up at him and smiled, and he thought, *Oh. It's her.* He felt he'd always known her, which was crazy, he'd never set eyes on her before in his life. In the next second that feeling passed, and he didn't know her at all, and he felt awkward and stupid and young.

She was wearing a flowing African-print dress, and her hair was in small elegant braids weighted with blue beads, and she was holding a baby. A small, wrapped baby who was asleep in her arms. She kept smiling as she looked at John, then lifted a hand and put one long finger to her lips. *Shhhhhhh.*

"I came for a room," he said as quietly as he could. "Sam sent me."

Her smile deepened, and he felt it wash through him like the pull of a tide. The room smelled of lavender and milk. She stood and walked the sleeping baby to a crib in the corner, put him down and covered him carefully with a blanket. She crossed to where John stood and offered her hand. Bracelets jangled.

"Vivyan," she said. Her fingers felt cool and strong. Her skin was the delicate color of milked coffee, her eyes a rich brown like the leaves at the bottom of an autumn pool. She wore gold necklaces, five or six of them, decorated with crosses and stars and moons and things he didn't even recognize. "I have one room next door. Clean and simple, the bath's down the hall. No cooking in the room."

"Yes ma'am."

"What's your name?"

It made him suddenly aware that they were alone in the blue-tinted shadows, the baby asleep across the room, and she didn't know who he was. There was such a thing as being too trusting. Any sensible Galvestonwoman would have met a potential boarder with a smile and a loaded .357, behind her back. "John," he said. "JohnFredricks."

"They call you John?"

"Mostly," he said. He looked down at the horn case. "Sometimes they call me the Evangelist."

"John the Evangelist." Dimples formed around a suppressed smile. "Bet you preach up *astorm* with that trumpet. No practicing in here, though. You want to play, you got to go out."

"Sure. How much?"

A glimmer like starlight passed through her eyes, and he realized too late how that might sound to a pretty woman like her.

"Seventy-five a week," she said. "First week in advance. You come to play, John?"

"Yes ma'am," he said. "I come to play."

She took one of her necklaces off, a crescent moon pendent with a white crystal hanging like a star next to it and a small, perfect model of a boat. She reached up, and he realized she wanted him to bow his head.

He hesitated. Saw dimples again, saw starlight in her eyes.

"You afraid?" she whispered. "Nothing here but the good symbol of Erzulie. Protection. You want to play here, you need somebody looking after you, John the Evangelist. Take it."

He dipped his head, felt the kiss of gold on his neck. The pendent was surprisingly light, the chain warm from her skin. He closed his hand around the moon, the star, the boat, and looked her in the eye.

"Seventy-five a week," she said. "For the room."

He reached in his pocket and took out the cash. He counted it out into her hand and watched her put it in her own pocket. She turned away and walked, hips swaying, to the small neat kitchen in the corner,

with a half-sized stove and small refrigerator, the dishes neatly stacked on shelves above the sink. She took down two glasses and filled them with water. *Water?* he thought. He'd thought something else, something more . . . New Orleans. It seemed like a city where babies as young as the one in the crib were raised on smooth hot whiskey.

She handed the glass to him. "You like to drink, John the Evangelist?"

"Sometimes," he said. What he meant was, *yes* . It had got him in a whole mess of trouble, trouble with women, trouble with friends, trouble with bosses. He liked the melted-caramel sting of fine scotch, the cheap cold burn of tequila. He liked wine, too. Fine dark wines like rubies. As he thought of them he could taste them melting on his tongue, and for a second he smelled the city again, old in booze, old in music. The two were mixed, in his mind.

As if she knew that, Vivyan said, "The old ways say drink is a doorway. Sometimes you don't want to open that door. They don't call it *spirits* for nothing."

He took his first sip of New Orleans water, and it was like no taste he'd ever known before, brassy and sweetly cold. He hadn't realized he was thirsty until then, and he tipped the glass, drank until it was empty. She watched him drain it before she sipped her own, then took his glass and hers and put them back in the sink.

"Key's in the door," she said without looking up. She ran a splash of water into the sink, and the patter of drops on porcelain sounded like a deliberate, complex Zydeco rhythm. "Make yourself to home, John the Evangelist."

He slept, dreaming of dark and wine and the brassy taste of music in his mouth, and when he woke up night's face was pressed to the window, and he could hear the echo of jazz in the streets.

Home.

He took his horn case and went out to play.

Bourbon Street had turned into a neon wilderness full of strangers, but that didn't matter, what mattered was the sweet wine-rich flow of music. Like the voice of God, it was everywhere, shouting down drunken conversations, music huge enough to swallow the noise of the world. A tangle of riffs and phrases washed over him, sticky and warm. He slowed to listen, closed his eyes and turned his face toward it like a flower to sun. He stopped in the doorway of a bar and picked out the instruments – alto sax, upright bass, electric guitar, trumpet – already a trumpet in the mix. He savored the vibe for a couple of minutes, then continued down the street. Strangers bumped and slid past him, a faceless stream of people caught in the music's wake, being pulled helplessly along like fish on a string.

He kept walking until the music told him to stop.

The bar had a name, but he didn't see it; it was just another neon glare in the dark, quickly gone when he stepped inside. What was inside wasn't air, it was a thick sweet smoky fog that rolled over him, whispered over his skin, settled hot in his lungs.

Oh, and the music. The music.

There were three men on the stage, two of them old, one young: sax, piano, accordion. When John

blinked his eyes he saw them as smears of color, something stronger than this world, something vital. The sense came over him that Music – Music with a capital "m" -- was here, right here, running like water through this room, pouring right out of the men on stage. He was only tasting a trickle, but it made him desperate with thirst.

He had been standing there for a while, gaping, when a girl tapped him on the shoulder and waited for his order.

What had Vivyan said? *Spirits are a doorway*. He'd always thought they were like keys, keys to open those doors that normal, sane folks kept closed. You had to be crazy or divine to live with those doors wide open. But behind one of those doors, one of those dark closed doors, lay Music, the way it was being played up on that stage.

"Rum," he said. The waitress nodded and went away. He turned his attention back to the stage, because the music was running wild, swirling like white water, drowning the unwary in a flood of blue notes and chords hard as jutting boulders. People were dancing, some just drunks moving to the music, some dancing that True Dance, the one that meant they'd given themselves up. More True Dancing than drunks, here. *A lot* more. The room was filled with worship, with bodies caught and turning in the savage, caressing flood of sound.

All musicians live the music in different ways. The piano player, he lived it in a churchlike exaltation, his eyes rolled up to heaven, his body moving in slain-in-the-spirit jerks and tics. His fingers blurred, moved so fast they didn't really seem a part of him. There was a deep rapture in his eyes.

The sax player – young, hardly old enough to be buying a drink in the bar, but plenty old enough to play in one, at least in New Orleans – grooved and moved with it, sending out joy with every move. But it was the accordion player John found he had to watch. That one was young, too, his skin a glossy blue-black, his body toned and fit. He had eerie eyes, bright, shocking blue in that dark face. And the pupils – it was hard to tell, through the smoke, through the silver fog of music, but John thought the man's pupils looked narrow, slitted instead of rounded. Intense eyes, amoral, full of power. Full of –

"Rum," said a voice at his elbow. He looked around to see the waitress standing there, holding out his glass. "Four fifty."

He dug for a five and dropped it on her tray. The rum caught the show lights, broke them into rainbows, smeared colors like fresh paint.

It felt like a ritual, putting that cold glass to his lips.

Fire tore down his tongue, down his throat, hit his empty stomach and kindled. He coughed and downed the rest of it, thinking of doorways and keys and music, and Vivyan's autumn-brown eyes.

In his memory, her eyes changed colors, to a blue hotter than a summer sky, and the pupils narrowed into a cat's knowing shape, and when he imagined her smile her teeth were needle-sharp and the color of polished opal.

On stage, the accordion player dragged notes out of the squeeze box that human ears could barely hear, music that vibrated deep inside of John's head. He looked up –

And met those hot blue eyes.

In the first instant it felt like a cold, sharp shock like stepping on ice with bare feet, and he was taken with the notion – as he had been with Vivyan – that he knew this man, knew him like he knew his own face. But he didn't. He'd have remembered a player like this.

The music swirled to a halt, leaving the room breathless and dizzy. John blinked and realized his eyes felt dry; he'd been staring into blue eyes for a long time. Too long, for a man who didn't go that way, and as the music that had held him up drained away and dumped him back in the real world, he started to worry about that, because the accordion player dropped lithely off the stage and pushed through the crowd, coming toward him.

Funny thing, John had always thought, the same crowd that worshipped the music barely paid any heed to the musicians who left the stage. It was like they turned invisible. The accordion player slid past knots of people and headed straight to where John stood, empty glass in his hand.

Close up, the man gave off heat like a wave, and he was slick with sweat. John had been mistaken about the eyes – they were blue, but the pupils were round and normal, and now the man looked like any other musician coming down off a sound-driven high.

"You a player?" the man asked. He had a deep voice, and it seemed to John that there were chords in it, music most folks could never even imagine. The man glanced down at the horn case John still held tight. *Was he a player?* It was a question John had never asked himself before, never had reason to. He'd always been a player.

But in this room – suddenly, he doubted it.

"Certified," he heard himself say. "My name's John the Evangelist."

A smile grew slowly on the other man's face until it showed white straight teeth.

"Always nice to meet a saint," he said. "I am Carrefour. You come to play?"

John lifted the horn case a little by way of answer. Carrefour's smile broadened.

"Then come on."

John followed him back to the stage. Carrefour jumped up, straight up, from a flat-footed start – not a thing John was betting he could do, horn case or no. He went around to the stairs.

Somebody moved like a shadow to block him halfway up the steps. He blinked and held up a hand to filter out the house lights, saw the piano player standing in his way. The man was old, but solid as a pile of bricks, and something shining in his eyes like a thin amber film of oil. John had been around enough stages to know an under-the-influence when he saw one.

"Scuseme," he said, and turned sideways to angle by. The piano man moved to block him.

"Got no business up here," the man rumbled. "Eh, Carrefour? We don't need no hounsi bossale."

Carrefour's blue eyes looked over the piano man's shoulder. "Let him up, Hunter."

"He got to pay the toll."

John took a step back. Hunter's toll was nothing he wanted to pay, no matter how thirsty he might have been. Carrefour must have known it, because he moved forward and pushed Hunter out of the way, as easy as if he'd been pushing aside a curtain. Hunter's eyes looked to flash hot amber, but that must have been the lights.

Carrefour held out his hand. "Come up, John."

"Not without toll," Hunter rumbled. Carrefour's lips twitched in a smile.

"*Oui*, the toll. Just to humor my friends, Evangelist. Give me something of yours to hold on to so we know you play us straight."

John's thoughts felt slow in his head, made liquid by rum and smoke and music. He could feel the pressure building around him, knew they needed to play, knew *he* needed to play. *Can't hand over my wallet*. The horn was out of the question. And all he had was –

His hand brushed the gold necklace Vivyan had hung around his neck. He saw a spark in Carrefour's eyes.

It's worth it. It's worth it for the music.

He pulled the necklace off and poured it into Carrefour's dark, waiting palm. The wink of crystal signaled him like a hand slipping under the waves, and then it was gone, transferred to one of Carrefour's pockets.

John felt oddly empty. He met Carrefour's molten blue eyes, and saw something – something flash. For a second they weren't human eyes, they were slitted, cool, endlessly amused.

And then it was gone. *It's the lights*. Lights, and rum, and too much smoke, not all of it off of cigarettes. The bar reeked of sweat and booze and drugs, the way a church reeked of incense. *Got to get my head back on*.

"Time to play, no?" Carrefour said, and turned away. Hunter grunted satisfaction and slouched back to his piano. John laid down the horn case and snapped the catches back. The trumpet gleamed in its ruby velvet bed, beautiful and hot to the touch as a willing woman. John slid the mouthpiece in place, blew warm air through the horn, and moved the case back to the shadows out of the way.

Carrefour smiled at him, a wide white grin of anticipation. He'd put on the accordion harness again.

"Save our souls, Evangelist," he said, and nodded to Hunter, who started into a hammering frenzy of notes. "Play!"

The sax player nodded to him, brushed sweat-beaded hair back from his face, and started to wail. Carrefour's accordion swirled and cried like the north wind.

The music took John down.

Inside the music, there was no time, no place. The music was a living thing, the tempo a vast red heartbeat, the notes the skin that held them all inside. Phrases began, faded, evolved, were born into minor keys; there was no confusion, no hesitation. There was no possibility of playing with anything less than total commitment. John's body made music and left his mind free to see, to see the white-hot lines that connected him to Carrefour and Hunter, spiderweb-thin, humming with power. *I'm part of this*. He'd

had moments, sometimes, when he'd been able to touch the music, live in the silence between its notes, but never like this. He hadn't known it could be like this.

The music shaded dark.

Carrefour's eyes met his, cat-slitted, inhuman and somehow more than human, doorways into eternity, crossroads into the dark. Hunter was something shadowy and wrong behind the keyboard, and the sax player – the sax player was just a boy, playing his heart out, playing out every ounce of strength and gift in him. The webs connecting him to Carrefour and Hunter were glowing white-hot, and John knew without knowing why that the boy had never played like this in his life.

And never would again.

The thought scared him, shocked him out of the seductive pleasure of the music. The room – the room swayed, the dancers threw themselves into the music, but there was something else in the room, designs chalked on the floor, intricate lines of gray and white. Designs that glowed the same pure and unhealthy white as the lines that tethered him into men on stage.

Stop. It sounded like Vivyan's voice, sharp with anxiety. *Stop, John!*

John lowered his trumpet, watched the white cord connecting him to the band flare and smoke and turn ash-gray. He felt like an empty sack, all his strength gone, and grabbed the edge of the piano to keep from falling.

The sax player's tethering cords were turning red. The boy's eyes were brimming over with tears that spilled over bloody on his cheeks.

"Stop playing!" John shouted, but the music shouted him down, screamed and cried triumph.

The sax player was crying tears of blood *and he couldn't stop playing.*

"The music chose you." The whisper came close to John's ear, and he winced at the feel of hot breath on his neck. Carrefour was next to him, strong where he was weak; his eyes didn't look anything like human now. "And you chose it."

John felt it pressing on him like a hand, the music, Carrefour's will, Hunter's wild black stare. He felt his arms tensing to raise the trumpet back to his lips.

He did the only thing he could. He jumped off the stage and ran, ran out into the street with the music chasing him like a blood-hungry tiger, ran until he couldn't hear it in his ears.

But it was still in him like a scream.

He found another bar and drank until he drowned it.

He woke up with gray light streaming through the windows, a flat acid taste in his mouth, and a feeling of being emptied, as if he were a bag all the music had been poured out of. *Dream*, he thought, and turned over to look at the old travel alarm clock he'd brought with him.

He must have forgotten to wind it. He fumbled for his wristwatch and squinted at it in the half-light.

Five 'til eight. He'd only rested for two hours, then. No wonder he felt so bad. As he sat up the room did a queasy, greasy whirl and he stayed very still until it decided to stay in place for him; that done, he stood up and realized two things. He had a hangover the likes of which he couldn't remember, and he needed to piss so bad it was like to bust him wide open. Headache or not, he stepped into his pants and stumbled down the hall to the cold-tiled communal bath, where he released the pressure on his bladder with a glad sigh.

As he washed his hands at the sink, he glanced up into the mirror. An old man looked back, shrunken, drained of life and vitality and purpose. A shuffling gray-haired empty-eyed wreck drinking cheap wine from a screw-topped bottle and mumbling about the old days when he was a player. *I'm halfway there*. The thought terrified him so much he felt his knees get weak, and he sat down on the toilet, stomach turning and fighting.

It started coming back to him. The bar – the music – the wild blue eyes staring into his soul. The music being torn out of him by the roots.

He broke out into a cold sweat that he wiped away with one of Vivyan's clean white towels, went to the window and opened it to catch a steamy, music-spiced breath of New Orleans air. The stench rolled over him – spilled beer, old vomit, low tide, rotten fish, the spices from a thousand French Quarter cookstoves – and he gagged on it.

This time, he gagged.

He voided his stomach into the toilet and wandered back toward his room, wishing that Vivyan was awake so he could talk to her. The hallway was the same cool soothing blue it had been before, the window at the end like an opaque aquarium.

Her door was open. He stopped and looked in, and saw her sitting in the same rocking chair, a baby in her arms –

And then he blinked, and it wasn't Vivyan at all. It was an old, old woman, her hair white and wild around her head, and she was holding what looked like a bouquet of feathers.

"John the Evangelist," the old woman said. She had a high, thin voice, and she mumbled some because she had no teeth. "Come on inside."

He did, because he'd been raised to respect his elders and if nothing else, she was that. Her eyes were dark, dark as windows into night, and too sharp for that aged face. The feathers she held were bound into a kind of duster, but like no feather duster he'd ever seen – colorful feathers, parrot maybe, or macaw.

"You look for Vivyan?" she asked, and grinned without teeth. "Gone. Gone off for a time. I'm her *Tante Marinette* - Bois Chèche. Nobody never tell you to wear a shirt, boy?"

In his sickness, he forgotten he wasn't dressed but for the pants. He looked down at himself in surprise.

"Nev' mind, I don't. Always good to see a strong man's body. You a strong man, Evangelist? You strong enough, you'ink?"

Yesterday, he would have said *yes*. Today –

"I don't know," he said.

"You know why you got no shirt?" she asked, and cackled a laugh. "'Cause you got taken! *Monterletête*! You got ridden like a rented mule!"

Carrefour. He remembered that with a jolt, the four men on the stage, smoke swirling thick as milk around them, Carrefour's slitted fire-blue eyes, the accordion pumping out a wild rhythm, John's trumpet screaming out notes that ripped open the sky. *Ridden like a rented mule*. The sax player crying bloody tears.

"I ain't talking 'bout wakin' up in the state you in," *Tante Marinette* said, and rocked back and forth in the chair with a creak of old wood. "You know that now."

"What happened to me?" The words sounded weak and thick, tasted foul in his mouth. *Tante Marinette* leaned forward like a stooping vulture.

"*Petro*," she said. "You know anything about the Vodun, boy?"

"Voodoo?"

She snorted. "No such thing as voodoo, 'cept in those movies. *Vodun*. What you know?"

"I – nothing." *She's crazy*, he thought. But her eyes looked more than crazy.

"This place, this New Orleans is full of the wild magic. Easy to call down *loas* here – spirits, you say. Spirits ride the head -- *monterletête*. *Vivyan* warn you, musicain' no plaything here. Music calls the spirits. The *caplatas*, they draw the *veves* and gather their *société* to dance the *ceremoni*. You, you drink your rum, you draw the spirit, the music open the way. And you dance, too. You dance like a puppet to the *Petro*'s tune."

Tante Marinette was staring at his bare chest. He looked down, half-afraid to see some fresh tattoo, but there was nothing but the skin he'd always owned. Her old eyes – dark as the shadows on the moon – looked up into his without warning and froze him in place.

Starlight.

"You give up the charm," she said. "You give up the charm, and you got lost, boy. You don't know how lost. Carrefour, he have your gift now. You want it back, you got to go to him. You got to send away the *loa* and take back what you lost."

He felt gooseflesh shiver up his spine.

"I didn't lose anything," he said. "I'm tired, that's all. Too much to drink."

Tante Marinette said nothing.

"I don't believe in voodoo. Or Vodun."

She shrugged and crossed her arms, the feather duster held there just under her chin. He remembered pictures he'd seen of mummies, withered skin intact, in the same kind of pose.

"I'm going to practice," he said.

"Heh," she said. "So you should."

It distressed him to realize that he'd lost his horn case, left it in his panic to get out of Carrefour's club. His trumpet lay fragile and gleaming on the bed, and he carried it carefully, like a baby. The mouthpiece he slipped in his pocket.

He went back to Bourbon Street to play. He felt drunk and stupid with sleep, and a hard-shelled knot of a headache ate at his brain like a tropical parasite. It was a busy evening in the Quarter; he followed music to another door, and another, and another. Too many musicians, not enough space for all the players. He caught no sight of Carrefour, or Hunter, or the sax player.

Toward midnight, he sat in with a Dixieland traditional band of venerable old men, their beards dusty tangles of gray, their skins dry and squeezed empty of life. He put in the mouthpiece and blew warm air through his trumpet, waking it slowly into life.

The clarinet player – as old as Pete Fountain, for certain – turned cataract-gray eyes toward him. "You ready?"

"I'm ready." He didn't feel ready. He felt odd, off balance, separated from his instrument in a way he'd never been. But he put his trumpet to his mouth, and waited.

The band swung into the *Basin Street Rag*. John struggled with it, a piece he'd played all his born life, jazz so primitive and bred-in-bone that he should have been able to play it dead or sound asleep.

He couldn't. His lips couldn't hit the notes, his fingers couldn't close the valves. After a painful refrain, he stopped playing and looked at his trumpet, stunned, began emptying spit valves and adjusting slides, as if it was a tuning problem. The clarinet player kept watching him with those blind, knowing eyes. Nobody said a word to him, even after the song was done. In the silent language of jazz, it was understood he wasn't welcome.

He pulled the mouthpiece out of his horn and walked out.

He bought a drink at another bar, politely asked to sit in and played freeform jazz. That didn't help, because the notes – always so quick and fluid and easy to find – moved away from him. Music washed around him like a rock in a stream, and he couldn't quench his thirst in anything but rum and whisky.

He bought more drinks.

Then he bought a bottle.

Toward dawn, he sat down in a doorway. Somebody dropped a dollar in his lap, and he was too tired, too sick, too numbed to curse them for it.

"Vivyan," he mumbled. "Help."

People walked by, stepping over his outstretched legs, paying him no more attention than they did the trash in the gutter. Closed, empty faces – white, black, it didn't matter. He was alone. He'd never been

so alone.

A shadow stopped and loomed over him. Big. Menacing. He hugged his trumpet closer, ready to fight for it even though it didn't love him anymore, even though he and music weren't even on speaking terms.

"Lord, Evangelist, you a mess." The shadow stooped down, got a hand under John's arm and lifted him to his feet. For the first time, John realized that the shadow was Sam, the one who'd met him at the bus, the one who'd shown him the room and Vivyan. "You drink it or take a bath in it?"

"Sam?"

"Sam I am." Sam's teeth flashed white. "Read Seuss a long time ago, but it do stick with you. You up to walking, preacher-boy?"

Sam was holding something in his other hand, a square black case that John recognized with a shock. Sam saw him looking at it and held it out.

"Vivyan said you'd be missin' this," Sam said.

It was his horn case. John opened it and settled his trumpet in the red velvet womb, carefully spread the square of cloth over it, and sat back on his heels, shaking.

"Where'd you find it?" he asked. Sam was silent until John looked up at him.

"Next to a dead man," he said. "Young kid, white. Seen him around. Think he played sax 'round here. Some kind of heart attack, folks say. Maybe drugs."

John stood up, holding to his horn case like it was the only thing anchoring him to this earth.

"I need to talk to Vivyan," he said. Sam smiled.

"Expected you would."

Vivyan was wearing sun-bright yellow, sharp and hard on his whiskey eyes. He blinked back tears and stood in front of her, as dignified as he could be stinking of booze and failure. She sat down in her rocking chair with the baby on her lap. Sam took a seat not far away. There was no sign of *Tante Marinette*, not even a feather left to prove she'd been here.

John stood silently while Vivyan looked him up and down, then shook her head.

"*Monterletête*," she said to Sam.

"Who rode my head?" John asked. She looked at him again, brown eyes wide. "*Tante Marinette* said that. She said something about *Petro*."

The baby fussed. Vivyan soothed it with a hand against its back, rocked it gently, and said, "*Petro* is the left-hand path of Vodun. Black magic. *Tante Marinette* knows this well. She walks both paths."

"What about you?"

Vivyan's smile made dimples rise in her cheeks. "Erzulie is the *loa* of love and beauty, John the Evangelist. I follow her right-hand path in the *Rada*, not the *Petro*. But some call down the violent spirits. We live in a place close to that world."

"The bar—" He closed his eyes and remembered. "There were patterns drawn on the floor—"

"*Veves*," she said. "To invoke the *loas*. I know the place you went. A dark *société*, not for someone like you. The *Carrefour* opens the road, the *Huntor* plays to invoke the spirits. And sacrifices are made."

John thought about the young sax player, crying bloody tears, now lying dead.

"You made a sacrifice," Vivyan said. She opened her hand, and in it lay a gold necklace with a crescent moon, a fleck of white crystal for a star, a boat sailing beneath.

"I'm sorry."

"This wasn't the sacrifice, it's only a charm, freely given." She held it out to him, and he took it, settled it warm around his neck. The warmth seemed to sink deep into his muscles and wrap him in its embrace. "You made the sacrifice to the *loa Carrefour*. You know what it is?"

It came to him in a rush and made him dizzy and weak. He hadn't seen Sam move, but the man was there, helping him to a chair, pressing a glass of water into his hand. The water tasted like brass and music, sweet on his tongue. It washed out the lingering trace of whiskey and despair.

"I gave him the music," he said. "Didn't I?"

"*Oui*."

"How do I get it back?"

Vivyan sat very still, watching him. For the first time he realized that he was standing on a rug with pale white lines that looped back on each other in infinite scrolling circles. A blue rug, the color of the sea.

Veves.

"You go into darkness," she said to him. "I set my hand on you, Evangelist. You go into darkness, but you do not go alone. Wear the charm, and believe. There is power in your music, too."

"I can't play."

She smiled. "Of course you can. Play for me."

He took out his trumpet and started with scales. C major. C sharp. D. D sharp. Up, up through the entire range of the instrument, the metal dead and unresponsive under his fingers, his lips clumsy and uncertain with the notes.

"Keep playing," she said when he stopped, sweating. He did.

After an hour of painfully slow progress, he began to feel the echoes of his gift, like whispers from a party miles away.

After four hours, he was playing. He didn't stop. Sam left, and still he played, played until Vivyan's warm hands closed over his from behind and her body pressed against his.

"You've come far," she whispered. "But you must come farther."

He turned toward her, saw sparks around her like circling suns, and terror spiked in him, then disappeared in a tide of wonder.

"How—" he breathed. She held up a hand that glowed like dawn, placed it against his lips and put the taste of light into his mouth.

"There are other kinds of music," she said, and began to show him the dance.

He had no trouble finding the bar. It stood waiting for him, and this time when he looked at the name over the entrance it shifted and blurred and changed until it read *Petro*.

John took hold of his horn case and went into the dark, smoky embrace of the left-hand path.

Carrefour was on stage, playing accordion; Hunter hammered the piano. A half-dead guitar player twitched and jerked with the music, and even though John couldn't see it, he knew there were threads between the three of them, and those threads were blood-red.

He looked at the crowd with fresh eyes and saw that they were dancing to a purpose, tipping back rum like consecrations, dancing the *veves* inlaid in the floor. Dancing up the power, to welcome the *loas*.

Erzulie's necklace hung heavy around his neck. He took a deep breath and tasted music, blood, rum, drugs, the violence lurking just out of sight in the smoke.

"Rum?" A waitress was at his elbow, tray ready. A glass already filled waited for him.

Liquor opens the doorways. That had been his last mistake.

He pushed past her and walked to the stairs, mounted the steps to the stage. The guitar player watched him with dull graying eyes, sucked empty of music and life, just conscious enough to be terrified and desperate.

John fitted the mouthpiece to his horn and began to play. Not the wild, powerful scream that poured out of Carrefour's accordion and Hunter's piano.

He played *Amazing Grace*.

It was drowned in the roar of the wild music at first, but he kept playing, sweet and controlled, feeling his own power trickle back. Carrefour's music tugged at him, demanded to be played, but he shaped each note, placed each accent as carefully as if he'd played in the crystal silence of a cathedral.

And though he blew no harder, the trumpet rang louder. When he opened his eyes he saw thin threads stretching from him out to Carrefour, thin threads of clear sky blue that pierced Carrefour like thrown knives. Carrefour turned, snarling. Nothing human in those eyes. Nothing sane. *I can die*, John thought. *They can spill my blood to feed the loas.*

He played. He had no real choice.

The guitar player stopped and slipped the strap of his instrument over his head. He dropped it with a discordant jangle of strings and staggered drunkenly off the stage. With luck, he'd make it. He'd live. He'd play again, someday, because music wasn't a God-given talent, it was a God-given obsession.

John played louder. The sky-blue threads wrapped Carrefour tight, pinned his arms to his sides, made the accordion squeal into sudden silence. Hunter's piano seemed tinny and lost, and then it faltered into silence.

John played *Amazing Grace* until it was the only music in the room, until he had taken all that he'd lost from Carrefour and Hunter and felt the power coiled inside him like white fire. Then he stopped, and the sky-blue threads binding Carrefour turned gray and faded, and the *loa* of the crossroads turned on him with claws outstretched to spill the offering blood.

Sam stepped in between. Carrefour's eyes met Sam's, and widened.

"Ogou!" he said.

Sam's hand closed around his arm and held him still. "Brother," he rumbled. "Time to go home. Leave the dancers to dance. *Renvoyer*. Return the *tibon angle* to this body and go to your place."

Carrefour bared his teeth in what was almost a smile, and said, "Blood and music, Ogou. Thick enough to taste in the air. Don't say you aren't tempted."

Ogou's hand touched his forehead and pushed. "*Renvoyer*."

Carrefour's body twitched and convulsed, a puppet on jerking strings. He fell to his knees.

When he looked up, his eyes were still blue, but they were confused.

They were human.

Sam turned and looked at John. After a moment, he held out his hand. John took it carefully, but it felt like a human hand. Stronger than his, but human.

"Keep playing, Evangelist," Sam said. "Maybe someday you learn to let the spirits in, *oui*?"

"Maybe," John said. "Mostly, I think my job will be to keep them out."

Sam smiled. "Not all of us," he said, and turned and walked away, straight out through the crowd, out into the street and the night.

Monterletête, John thought. I had a saint with me tonight.

He saw Vivyan smiling from the back of the room, *no loa* in her now, just the woman. He took up his trumpet and began to play *Basin Street Rag*.

And he led the people out of the *Petro*, into the street, where the night was full of color and light and the possibilities of grace.

When he looked back – just the one glance – he saw the sign change again over the door. It no longer read *Petro* .

It read *Closed*.

Vivyan's hand closed around his arm, warm and satin-soft.

He was home.

--end --