



One Body, Two Bodies, Three Bodies, Floor!

You'd think a dragon perched on a skyscraper, in downtown Irvine, Southern California would cause mass panic. Fortunately, at six am, nobody looks up. Bloody convenient, that. Add in the surrounding tech designed to protect the veil and keep normals from seeing anything they shouldn't, and I'm golden. Well... Black.

Black scales, black ridges down my back and tail, and funnily enough, vivid blue talons. Those selfsame talons, long and razor-sharp, scraped a rhythm against the concrete of the roof. The sound comforted and grounded me. I felt at home in my dragon form. Frankly, the morning wasn't complete without me parsing the air currents on my dragon tongue.

Below, the city sprawled out in all its gritty glory. Streetlights flickered against the December dark, and the first commuters scurried through the dimly lit streets. I watched them closely. I could already make out the texture of the pavement and the threads of the wool coats. Below, a man walked, unaware of the toilet paper trailing from his trousers. Normals—gotta love their soft, squishy hearts. The primal thought, a flash of ancient instinct, was a reminder I wasn't human. Not anymore. I was a survivor and a predator. Certainly not prey.

Just then, Absalom's voice crackled through my earpiece. "Agent Genevieve, you up there brooding again?" he said, "Or have you started the shift early, hoping for some additional pay?" STRIKE's auditory devices used special frequencies, pitched too high for normal ears to catch. Unfortunately, that made my partner's voice as dry as week-old toast.

"I don't brood," I muttered. Though hanging out on the roof of a skyscraper... It might be a tad dramatic.

"Please tell me the ECPs are on, at least," he returned. I rolled my eyes.

"Are you saying I'm a daft cow?" I purred, the earpiece making my voice sing. "Of course, the Environmental Camouflage Projectors are on." As usual, they hummed silently around the headquarters rooftop. They combined magic and tech to project an illusion of normality. In short, they hid my thirty-foot beast of scales and spite. Otherwise, if anyone did look up, I'd have a riot to deal with—especially when I'm perched like a gothic gargoyle with commitment issues.

"Don't get your scales in a bunch," he snorted. Over the airwaves, I could hear him shuffling. There was a slight pause, then, "I'm at Starbucks. Are you going to get down from there so you can get a coffee, or do I need to get one of those really long straws?"

"A really long straw, please," I deadpanned, though the thought of a chai tea latte did make my mouth water. So I was a caffeine addict. At least it wasn't blood.

"I heard you gave the holiday bash a miss last night," he continued. A beat, then he added, "Again..." I swear, the salamander had all the subtlety of a golem on speed.

"Wasn't my scene," I replied. "All that forced merriment and small talk. Does anyone honestly care who's shagging whom in Accounts?" I rolled my eyes. Did nothing happen in our supernatural soap opera without Sergeant Absalom hearing it?

"It was karaoke, Gen," my partner responded, laughing. "Off-tune singing and eggnog to make it palatable. Hardly a den of iniquity."

"Exactly," I said. "Torture disguised as team building." I shifted on my perch, talons and tail scraping against the concrete. "Besides," I added. "We can't all warble to T-Swizzle. Someone had to watch over the northern sector."

The silence that followed stretched a beat too long. I could practically hear him thinking. Absalom had been an agent for twenty-plus years—he knew when I was hiding. Truthfully, I'd forgotten how to do anything else.

"Any movement on the warehouse?" I said quickly, before he could offer some well-meant twaddle. "That case has been too quiet for my liking."

Absalom didn't respond. Just as I opened my mouth to encourage him, he finally responded. "Yeah," he drawled. He must have left the cafe. I could hear his footsteps on the pavement through the earpiece. I could hear him grinding his teeth together, and then, "Night shift caught another one. I heard George slipped in something nasty and had to be taken to HAVEN." Fuck. HAVEN? My stomach plummeted to my talons. Ice crawled up the ridges along my spine and a fleeting phantom memory of pain lanced through my chest.

"Is George ok?" I asked, swallowing hard. My tail twitched, reflecting my anxiety. I'm not the most empathetic soul; I hate people, I really do—but George was a decent enough bloke. Plus... I wouldn't wish that place on anyone.

"Don't worry," Absalom replied, "He'll pull through." That was good news at least. A pleased rumble vibrated through me, and the spines along my back relaxed.

Absalom was close now; I could sense his fiery salamander essence getting near. "He's not a supe," he continued. "Cap handed the case off to the local police."

"The captain did, huh?" I said. "Well, that figures. That prick never lets a veil piercing get in the way of a perfect roster." Our unit hadn't had a single instance of veil crossover since he took over. That takes work.

"You got that right," Absalom said. The rooftop door opened, and he appeared, striding toward me with his usual unhurried gait. In human form, his trench coat flared around his legs in the breeze. His chocolate skin set off the silver in his close-cropped curls, making him look dignified as hell.

Both of his hands were laden with venti cups. I grinned. My partner loved me after all. As he walked towards me, the operator cut in over our earpieces. "Seven-niner-three-seven, call back."

"This is unit Seven-Nine-Three-Seven. Sergeant Absalom Brenner and Agent Genevieve Allen awaiting orders," my partner responded. Hearing official protocol, my dragon form folded inward, bones realigning and reducing in size with an audible crack. A burst of energy washed over me as the magic worked. Scales dissolved, and pink skin took its place. Smaller, squishier, infinitely more breakable—back in my human disguise. Long brown hair, blue eyes, and eyebrows that telegraphed my every thought.

"Code 187," the operator continued, "multiple victims, The Park at Irvine Spectrum. Requesting investigator presence and veil enforcement."

"Affirmative. Seven-Nine-Three-Seven en route." Absalom said. With a reassuring smile, he handed me the drink, and we headed down the stairs. It had all happened so quickly, my tailbone still itched from the shift. The transformation left me breathless but whole—fully clothed in the same blazer and button-down I'd worn before shifting. The STRIKE-issued fabric was good like that; it didn't shrink or grow. Instead, it dissolved in the folds of my being when I shifted, only to reappear once the change was complete. Reactive, resilient, and expensive as hell—one of the few perks of supernatural law enforcement. Yet, the discomfort of feeling alien in my own skin remained.

The murder site was only a few blocks away, but the pit in my stomach made me wish it were oceans. Not wanting to dwell, I said, "I heard there's been a string of weird ones—closer to Santa Ana than Irvine, but still within our beat." When Absalom didn't respond as I'd hoped, I continued, "You hear anything about the Salford murder?" My voice was calm, but my dragon instincts were roused and edgy.

Walking beside me, Absalom's brow was furrowed in thought. "Apparently," he responded, "The Salford case was so bad, it had to be a supe." He stroked his salt-and-pepper beard and wrinkled his nose. "I hate the weird ones. At least with the regular cases, we can just hand them off to the local police and be done with it." He had a point; the weird ones sucked. But I enjoyed the mystery, the thrill of the hunt. That at least made the job interesting.

As we moved closer, chatter started coming in over the earpiece. Piece by piece, we got a better picture of what we would soon face. The small details helped calm my thoughts and prepare me for what I would see. Dread crept up my spine. I enjoyed puzzles, but the victims, the blood. That brought back memories.

More voices added their perceptions to the chatter. Three bodies, one female and two males, all supes. Rigor mortis had yet to set in, so the deaths occurred recently. The technical team had beaten us to the scene and put veil enforcement in place—ECPs, Sonic Nullifiers, and Disinterest Emitters. The magical tech was our best weapon in hiding the veil.

As we listened, I reviewed what I knew about The Park at Irvine Spectrum apartment community. It was close to the office, and on my way to work. Designed so that it spread out around a market, pool, and gym, it was gated. Which probably meant the killer was someone the victims knew.

Arriving on scene, we showed our badges at the entrance to the community. Without bothering to look, the guard pointed toward the five or six Irvine Police Department cars. The flashing lights were dazzling to my dragon sight, a riot of color all the way down the block. Seriously? Did he think we were blind? I bit back the sarcastic comment on the tip of

my fangs. The normal stood there so proud and oblivious, an apex predator in a world where we didn't exist. I rolled my eyes at Absalom, who simply shrugged.

Looky-loos were also out in force, officers struggling to keep them off the property. One twat actually tried to block me off. Made me want to bite. Hard.

We'd just reached the crime scene tape when Absalom pulled me aside. "Look, Gen, I know these calls can hit you hard... Just want you to know I'm here if you need it." My back stiffened and my eyes narrowed. I love that old man, I do, but seriously. Now?

Instead of responding, I put my work face on and swept past him and the yellow tape, heading toward the house.

A human police officer guarded the entrance. To get past, Absalom and I flashed our 'alternate' credentials. The IPD—and every other human, for that matter—had no idea supes existed. So STRIKE agents usually pretended to belong to a cover organization. In this region, it was the Californian Investigative Unit. Even the HQ was branded CIU. Just in case...

The officer handed us booties and directed us upstairs. I put mine on quickly and headed inside. As I walked through the living room to the stairs, I noted that nothing appeared out of place. It all seemed relatively typical.

Arriving at the top of the stairs, I saw a friendly face was waiting.

"It's bad," Zahir warned. I raised an eyebrow in surprise. A young African, he kept his dreadlocks neat and swept them back off his face. Despite being an agent, he was always overly casual—a goatee and snake tattoo completing his look. Of course, humans had no idea he was a vampire. Unlike me, he fit right into the California melting pot. As he passed us, Zahir put a hand on my shoulder. I waited, but he said nothing.

"You ok?" I asked. The male was the biggest flirt this side of the pond. Since his face was drawn and wan, the scene must be hard to stomach indeed. I felt my stomach clench, and sweat beaded on the back of my neck.

His eyes tight, he responded, "Yeah." A pause, then, "Good luck." Instead of letting the other STRIKE agent walk away, Absalom stopped to get his perspective on the murder. My partner often did that. It was part of his routine. Me? I preferred to take my own impressions, so I carried on to the bedroom alone.

Stepping over the threshold, I froze. The STRIKE tech had done its job a little too well. Outside the room, I had smelled nothing. Inside? The tech adjusted the scene to look normal for humans. If a crime scene could ever be termed normal. To the normies, everything supernatural was veiled. No scales, no green skin, no talons, or wings. For me, though? The tang of blood and fear punched through me like shrapnel. My throat clenched. Copper coated my tongue. Even the air felt too thick to swallow—like breathing through smoke and static.

The smell brought back memories. Memories I didn't have time for. Sirens. Pain. The moment everything changed. Instinct roared beneath my skin—hungry, barely leashed.

I blinked rapidly, trying to adjust, but the sheer volume of arterial spray overwhelmed my senses. The bodies were sprawled in disarray, the gore a stark contrast to the sterile urban quiet outside.

A large hand pressed against my lower back—Absalom, checking in. That wanker knew me far too well. A tilt of his head, and I knew he was reading me like a book.

Still, I was grateful. With Absalom, I never had to spell it out.

His touch helped ground me, letting me catch my breath. Though with my enhanced senses, I'd rather be knee-deep in sewage than take a truly deep sniff. Instead, I took a moment. With deceptive calm, I slowed my pulse. On each

exhale, I forced each muscle to relax. HAVEN training at its finest. I was tense and ready to pounce, but I'd dialed my instincts back enough to work the scene.

Absalom pulled on his gloves and passed me some Vicks VapoRub. There'd been zero risk of evidence contamination outside the room. Now? We both needed the protective layer of latex.

With a quick nod and a smile, he knelt beside the first body, a salamander. He was careful not to disturb anything, and just observing his demeanor helped me even further. Seeing another of his race like that had to bother him. But Absalom had his professional mask firmly in place. Time for me to pull up my big girl panties. I had to leave my nightmare past where it belonged. Between my predatory nature and my PTSD, I needed a good dose of calm.

Breathing shallowly through my mouth, I made my way to the other side of the room. Absalom had started near the door; I would work the other side. Edging around the carnage, I took stock of the overall layout. An overly large sofa dominated the back of the room, and a barrage of family photographs took up the side wall facing the bay window. I could just imagine the room as it had been before the attack. It seemed warm and welcoming.

As I looked around, I gritted my teeth. The curtains had been ripped off the rail, their original shade unknown. They were now a mottled brown-red and covered in what looked like pink scrambled eggs.

Most supernaturals are harder to rip apart than humans. Whoever did this was either seriously pissed off—or a major magical player.

Turning to scan the room in reverse, I bumped into a small side table that had fallen over. The telephone base lay on its side next to my foot; the receiver was nowhere to be found.

Rubbing my shin and feeling more than a little foolish, I noted the discrepancy in my log. Then, I inched towards the female victim. She was a dryad, based on the hue of her skin. Her entire body battered and bruised; her right arm completely ripped off. My lip curled. Bite marks ripped through her stomach and lower intestines.

"It makes no sense," I muttered, more to myself than to Absalom. "Blunt force trauma. Surgical precision to remove the arm. Then... feeding? It's like watching a pack hunter, a torturer, and a scavenger all occupying the same space."

Absalom didn't say anything, but I could feel his gaze on me. I didn't need him to; I knew he was seeing the same thing. Three completely different methodologies from a single site. It was an anomaly that didn't fit any crime scene I had ever encountered, and it was probably the key to this entire case. Magic had been used here. I was certain of that, but like the violence, the magical pattern didn't fit any known type of creature.

Still, the dryad had fought back. The nails on her remaining hand were ripped and torn, but there was definitive evidence of skin and perhaps DNA under the nails. Ensuring my booties were nowhere near the viscera, I carefully slipped an evidence bag over her hand to preserve what I could. Tying it in place, I made sure to make it tight enough to prevent it from falling off. Then, notebook in hand, I did a thorough head-to-toe, noting fractures, bites, and even crush injuries.

A couple of tiny details caught my eye. The female was missing an earring. It could have been torn off in the scuffle, yet for some reason, it jarred. And her blouse didn't match the rest of her outfit. I made notes to ask the technicians to find the earring and to investigate the dryad's wardrobe. Something was definitely off. It felt staged.

Still in place, I stretched, then rotated my neck, trying to relieve some of the building tension.

That's when I heard it. Or at least when I became aware of it.

There was a discordant hum emanating from the victims. Two or three notes, so close together on the scale that it hurt my ears. It had a magical energy. I didn't know how to describe it, other than it was wrong. It made my bones ache and my body want to shift.

Incredibly low, it wasn't something the average normal would pick up on. At least, not unless they had a bat grafted to their skull.

I swallowed and looked over at Absalom to see if he'd noticed the residue, but he was talking with a forensic agent. With his back turned to me, I couldn't even catch his eye.

Now that I was aware of the humming, my anxiety ratcheted up even further. I gritted my teeth, but the pressure on my skull kept increasing. Noting the sensation and concussive vibration in my book, I stood. I was determined to get a hold of myself, but vertigo immediately hit. For a moment, I struggled to stay upright. My knees trembled, and I felt the contents of my stomach rising into my throat.

Working hard to remain professional, I slowly made my way to the untouched back wall. I didn't want to cause an issue, especially since I seemed to be the only one affected. Instead, I stood there using a meditation technique to steady myself.

Although the intensity reduced, no matter what I did, the thrumming remained in my thoughts. Like an earworm, it filled my mind, making thinking difficult. It felt like an aftershock of immense power, a lingering predatory purr reverberating through the space.

My pen hovered over the page. How to document this? What to write? It didn't fit with any known magical pattern I knew. Tapping the nib on the paper, I went back and forth in my mind. Not wanting to waste another moment, I wrote 'Hum???' next to the earlier notation on sensations. I left it at that.

Before I could come to any further conclusions, movement outside the room caught my attention. Footsteps, and then a human technician appeared in the doorway.

"Sergeant Absalom, your witness is ready for you," he said. The technician was holding the arm of a very pale gargoyle. Granite skin and greasy dark hair, the supe's eyes shifted back and forth.

Glancing at the human officer, I wondered what he was seeing. He seemed oblivious. Completely unconcerned about the gargoyle's fangs. I had often wondered what a normal saw through the veil—a human, a trick of the light, or something much stranger?

Taking it in stride, my partner took the witness's other arm and steered him away from the bodies. No doubt he'd noticed what I had. The witness was twitching in place. High as a kite and starting to come down. Any statement from this guy would be total bollocks. It was a good thing Absalom had more patience than I.

Sighing in disgust, I went to the third victim and started taking notes. Also a supernatural, the redcap's face was stark white. Like the female, he'd been ripped apart, and yet, more of his internals were missing. Evidently, the redcap was tasty. I wanted to gag, but refused on general principle. Almost all of the redcap's intestines were gone, along with his kidneys and liver.

Shuddering, I looked away and snuck another glance at my partner and the witness. The gargoyle had black, hollow eyes that kept darting towards the exit. His weathered features and the dirty, lived-in clothes he was wearing spoke more than his actual words.

"I have to go, man," the gargoyle whined. "It's almost dawn. I gotta be on my church." That at least rang true. Like all of his kind, he would turn to stone with the first rays of dawn. I doubted that was the whole story, though. The way he shuffled his feet and wrung his hands—he had too much energy and seemed more focused than your typical junkie coming down.

"OK, OK," the witness continued, "It was like this, see? There was this weird smell - like sulfur and rotten eggs. And the air got real cold right before I found them. Ice cold, like winter." The description felt overdone and rehearsed, like he'd gone over it multiple times. Yet, Absalom's face gave nothing away. He was an old hand at this game.

Instead, he continued questioning the junkie. "I understand you were picked up in the area?" he asked. "I believe it was a couple of nights ago. Loitering, perhaps? Mister...?" Asking the witness for his name a second time was classic. My partner had caught the lie and was fishing. I could have watched the back and forth, but I wanted this over and done with. Nothing screamed professional like vomiting your breakfast over the evidence.

Satisfied that my partner had his part covered, I decided to catch up with him later and learn the details. Moving back towards the bodies, I continued scanning the room for anything out of the ordinary. Spotting another body part partially obscured by the blood-soaked rug, I beckoned over one of the technicians, pointed out the obscured arm, and asked him to check the female's nails. There was too much evidence at this scene. Processing everything would take weeks, not days. Sod it. I hated nasty cases like this. Give me a clean whodunit any day.

I'm a predator. Yet, I had no idea if the motive was pure rage or a targeted hunt. The sheer level of violence indicated primal anger, but it could also suggest magic gone wrong. Did the killer—or killers—choose these victims for a reason? What was so special about them?

It was no good. I could make neither head nor tail of it. My head ached, my teeth were vibrating with the hum, and all I wanted to do was shift and fly away. Still, there was sod all use in bitching. Taking another reassuring glance at Absalom, I worked the scene from top to bottom, then left to right, first splitting it into quadrants. The routine helped steady my nerves and settled the dragon within.

Thankfully for my stomach—and what remained of my breakfast—Absalom finished interviewing the witness and beckoned me to join him.

"You got what we need?" he asked, scanning my face.

Rather than replying, I simply nodded. I'd review the wardrobe inventory later. I needed to ensure the mismatched blouse and the missing earring weren't signs of staging. The sheer carnage at the scene said otherwise, but you could never be too damn careful. I wasn't going to risk a conviction on something so easily checked.

"Let's go," Absalom said, jerking his head towards the entrance. Once outside, I handed my still half-full chai latte to one of the other agents. The discordant hum receded with every step away from the house, but the memory of its vibration was etched into my bones. It was a call to the beast. The dragon didn't want to run from the sight of blood. It wanted to hunt. The blood reminded her of her trauma, yes. But it also awakened a primal hunger. I would tear this case apart, piece by bloody piece, until I found it.