

Lost Gods

by Drew Beatty

Chapter Thirteen



“Hey honey,” called Kanene from the front door. She was home from work at last. “You look so sad. What’s wrong?” she asked when she saw me sitting in the living room.

I showed her the book I was looking at. “Not sad, just thoughtful, remembering all the times we used to have. All the plans we made.” I looked at the apartment, small and dingy, packed with other people's stories. Perhaps I had neglected my own? Perhaps I had let myself get trapped in this lifestyle, far from the shores of Africa. “I just hope we can do better, soon.”

“Don't worry, honey. We're fine as we are.”

I smiled and changed the subject. “What would you like for dinner?” I asked.

“Surprise me. I need to shower. You really don't want to know what my hands have been in today. I think I could shower for days and still feel dirty.”

“Well, don't shower for that long. I would miss you. But go,” I leaned over and gave her a quick kiss. “Clean up, and I will prepare something.”

She hurried into the bathroom, and I heard water running almost immediately.

I stood in the kitchen, staring at the contents of the refrigerator, not sure what to prepare. I settled on salad and leftover chicken, and began to make some fresh rolls. As I carried a tray of food out to the dining room I saw a shadow flick across the living room wall. I walked out to take a closer look, and found myself face to face with the Baron. He looked at me with his white, rheumy eyes, and smiled his skeletal smile. As always, he wore his dusty top hat and funeral suit. His necklace of cracked and yellowing chicken bones rattled around his neck. At least, I hoped they were chicken bones. I should have been more nervous, the Baron is probably as powerful as I am, and privy to some dark and secret magic, but I was just too tired and fed up to play the shrinking violet.

“What exactly is it that you want, Baron?” I asked. “I seek no communion with the departed. I did not call you here. Be gone.” He stepped forward again, took my hand in his, and we were gone.

Harsh dust blew into my eyes, causing tears to run down my face. I wiped them away, squinted, saw yellowing sand blowing wildly around the Baron and I. We were in a desert, not a stark, arid, beautiful desert of pristine golden sand, but one made of dried and cracked mud, covered with a layer of dust, cold and dark. A true dead place. On the ground before me I could just make out the crossroads, little more than footpaths, really, a pair of twisting paths that snaked through the dust, moving off in the four compass directions.

I turned and faced Baron. He was strong, but I was much, much older, and had my own power. “You will not get my soul, little boy,” I told him. “I was tricking people long before your skeletal visage was ever dreamed of. You are like a child to me, and if I have to beat you to teach you a lesson, so be it.” He said nothing, just raised his arm, pointed along the path. I looked, and saw

Kanene walking along it, a horrified expression on her face. I called to her, but she didn't respond. I tried to run to her, but Baron Samedi held me back with one hand, an iron grip on my shoulder.

“Kanene,” I shouted to her. “Kanene, look at me! I'm right here!” I thrashed and fought, kicking out at the Baron, but he held me firmly. No matter how much I shouted at her, she did not respond. It was as though the Baron and I were not there. As she passed us I could see that she was still young, no older than she had been when I last saw her. She walked out of our sight, still looking lost and confused. I tried to go after her, but the Baron pulled me back, turned me to face the other path, pointed again. There was a slight shifting of reality, as if the world blinked for a second, lost focus and then reformed itself. Along the other path I could see Kanene again. But this Kanene was an old woman, walking slowly, smiling, content in her fate, surrounded in a glow, a halo shining all around her head, lit up from within, still beautiful. She was looking forward, eyes straight on the path, confident in where she was going. I didn't bother shouting at this Kanene, I knew she could no more hear me than the first one had. And I understood the Baron's message. Two paths, two possible outcomes. One leading to Kanene's early, ugly death. On the other hand, she could live a long and apparently wonderful life, and slip away peacefully at a comfortable old age. I blinked back tears, tears of rage and sadness, watching her disappear over the horizon.

“Fine,” I said. “Take me back, I understand. You have won.” The Baron smiled at me, but of course, with his skull-like face he always appeared to be smiling. He waved his hands again, and we were back in my apartment. The water was still running, I could hear Kanene in the shower, she was fine, unhurt. The Baron still held my arm in a tight grip. I pulled back, trying to remove it from his unbreakable hold, but he did not let go. I realized why he was holding on to me, the Baron and his little games.

“Oh, yes. I remember, you like to collect little trophies of those you visit, correct?” He nodded at me, and stroked his bone necklace with his free hand. It was a huge and intricate thing, this necklace, interwoven like a web, strands criss-crossing one another in a pattern that had to be deliberate, had to make sense at some level, although it was difficult to see. It hung down to his stomach, hundreds of small bones held together with a rough, sinewy string. I knew for certain then that they were not chicken bones. They were fingers, souvenirs of those who called him, those desperate enough to ask for his help. The Baron always collected his due, a memento of those who sought him out in their darkest hour. I grew calm, icy in my rage. He came to my home, he threatened my wife, and then dared assume I would let him leave in peace, I would leave this insult unanswered? He assumed he would leave with my finger or hand as a memento? The Baron did not know me very well, not very well at all.

I reached forward with my free hand and grabbed at his necklace. It tore away from his neck with a loud pop. Bones rained down all over the floor, bouncing and rolling away from the now shredded weave. Baron Samedi looked down in horror as his collection, his life's work scattered across my living room. As he let go of my arm and bent to collect the bones. I kicked him, hard in the small of the back, knocking him down to the floor, sprawled out in a most undignified manner. “You can only take from those who call you, Baron,” I said, sitting down on his back

and leaning forward so my mouth was pressed up against his ear. “You were not called here by me, nor Kanene. You came into my home, uninvited. I owe you nothing. I gave you no bargain, no promise of repayment. But you, well, you owe me something. I think I'll keep your little trinkets.” I removed his hat, and the remains of his necklace. He struggled beneath me frantically, made little grunting noises like those of a baby learning to talk. These were perhaps the first noises he had uttered in centuries. “These are mine now, Baron, and all the power they possess. I wouldn't struggle too much, you will not have enough energy to leave here, to go back to your domain. If you were to overstay your welcome, I might just have to take your life.” I could feel him weaken beneath me, giving up. I stood, and allowed him to do the same. He looked mournfully at the remains of his necklace, strewn all over the floor. “Begone,” I said to him, and he faded from sight.

I collapsed into a chair, gulping down deep lungfuls of air. The relief I felt was immense. I had been bluffing completely, I had no idea that would actually work. Then I heard the shower stop.

“Hey honey, is dinner ready yet? I think I smell something burning.” Kanene yelled from the bathroom. I suddenly remembered the rolls I had been making. Smoke was pouring out of the oven as I raced to open it. The rolls were blackened, useless as food, but fortunately they hadn't actually caught fire.

“What the hell is all of this?” I heard Kanene ask from the living room. I set down the tray of charcoaled buns and walked to her. Kanene stood there, still in her bathrobe, looking down at the remains of Baron Samedi's necklace, holding the battered hat in one hand. She looked up at me, a look of utter bafflement across her face.

“What is this?” She asked again. I composed myself, tried to think up a convincing lie. “And please, don't lie to me again. I'm not an idiot.”

This threw me for a loop. “What do you mean, don't lie to you again. I never lie to you, honey.”

“Another lie. Another lie,” she shouted. “Do you think I'm a fool, do you seriously think that I believe all of these tales you tell me? I know something is going on. I know you don't sell things door to door. I know that Maichel isn't your co-worker. I want to know the truth.”

I had no idea what to say or do. I opened my mouth, closed it again. I couldn't even begin to frame a response. How can you tell the person you love that your life is nothing but a continuous series of lies, a fabrication that stretches back hundreds of years?

“I will tell you the truth,” I said. Kanene relaxed, shoulders dropping noticeably, as though she hadn't been aware that she had been holding herself so tightly. “But not now, not like this. Get dressed, I will clean up and finish getting supper ready. We can talk then.” She spun around without another word and went back into the bedroom. I found our broom and started sweeping up the scattered bones. I didn't want to just throw them out, it seemed disrespectful to the dead, so I found an empty shoe box and tucked them in the back of the front hall cupboard, out of sight. I placed the hat on top of the box. You never know when things like this can come in

handy. I went back and finished preparing supper, pausing to throw out the burnt buns, now just waste, yet another thing I could thank Iktomi for. Kanene joined me after a few minutes. I poured her a glass of wine. We were usually not wine drinkers, but some conversations called for wine.

“I'm not sure where to begin,” I began. Not much of a beginning, I'll admit.

“Why don't you start by telling me what exactly was all over my living room floor. They looked like bones.”

“They were,” I replied. “Finger bones, to be exact. I ripped a necklace from Baron Samedi while engaged in mortal combat with him after he threatened you. I took his necklace and his hat, which I had hoped were the sources of his power. I was right, and he fled. This happened while you were in the shower.” Kanene threw down her fork and glared at me.

“More lies. Can you not be serious, ever? Even for one minute? I have lived for too long with these lies.”

I held up my hands, trying to placate her. “I am not lying now, I swear.” I thought of what I could do or say to make her trust me. I could only think of one thing that would make her believe what would otherwise appear to be nonsense. “Just watch,” I said as I stood up and stepped slightly away from the table. I smiled down at her and watched her face as anger and frustration were replaced by shock and horror as I vanished in front of her eyes. I chose to become a common house spider, nothing too frightening or strange. She looked down at me, crawling over the clothing that I had left in a pile when I transformed. I am sure she had to resist the impulse to step on me, a reaction that wouldn't surprise me in the least. I reverted myself, stood naked before her.

“The truth is you are married to an ancient African God who loves you very, very much.” Kanene looked like she was going to be sick. She glared at me with such shock and revulsion that I was certain I had lost her forever.

“What are you?” she asked, her voice weak and wavering.

I bent to pick up my clothing, started getting dressed. She moved her chair away from me as I stepped closer. “I told you,” I said quietly, bending to one knee so I could look directly into her eyes. “I am an African God. I am Anansi.”

Recognition flickered in her eyes. “Anansi, the spider?” I nodded my head. “The trickster?” Once again I nodded. “I can't deal with this,” she said, getting up and stepping gingerly around me. “I knew you were a liar, but I thought you were going to tell me you were a thief, a petty criminal. Not this, Jesus Christ, not this. I don't even know what to make of this.” She hurried to the front hall and threw on her coat.

“Where are you going?” I asked her.

“Out. Away.”

“When will you be back?”

She turned and looked at me. “I don't know. I don't know if I will be back. My husband is an African God, a man who can turn himself into a spider. Not a man at all, really.” She shook her head. “And I am not sure what is worse, the fact that he has been lying to me since we first met, or that he expects me to be able to deal with this rationally. I need to go.”

“I love you,” I said to the closing door. All I heard were her footsteps echoing along the corridor.

I thought of going after her, following her, but realized I would probably do more harm than good. A public argument would probably ensue, and people might hear more than I would like them to. I paced back and forth in my living room, for hours I walked along the floor, feeling every creak and groan under my feet, thinking about what I could do, how I could make this right. Nothing came to me.

I finally went to bed, exhausted from the day, but utterly unable to sleep. I tossed and turned, thrashing around in my too empty bed. Finally I heard the front door open with a gentle click. Kanene walked into the bedroom, sat on the bed.

“We are not okay,” she said by way of greeting. “However, I haven't slept anywhere but by your side for too many years to change now.” She kicked off her shoes and slid, still dressed, into bed. I rolled over to embrace her, but she stiffened, and rolled away from me, almost falling from the bed in her desperation to be away from me. “We can talk more tomorrow. Good night.”

“Good night,” I said, sliding away from her in an attempt to give her space. She shifted in the bed, found a more comfortable way to lie down. I thought of telling her I loved her, but I wasn't sure what I would do if she didn't respond. Some things I do not need to know, so instead I rolled over, and tried to sleep. It was easier with her beside me again, but I still slept fitfully.

I woke up early, to find the sun's rays sun storming through the windows. In the excitement we had inadvertently left the curtains open the night before. I reached out beside me, but Kanene was no longer in the bed. I searched the apartment, but she was already gone, left for the day. I looked into our closet, but all of her clothing remained, so I felt some relief.

I poured myself a bowl of cold cereal, covered it with milk. There was still coffee left, so I drank down the tepid mixture of coffee and cream. Finally my phone rang; Coyote, snapping me out of my reverie.

“You ready?” he asked.

“Almost,” I replied. “Would you like me to pick you up?”

“Sure,” he said. “Is there anything wrong, you sound like you have seen a ghost.”

“I had a long night. I will tell you about it when I see you.”

“Fine, I'll be ready.”

I took a quick shower, rushed for the door. Today was going to be a long day. I would discover that it would be much, much longer than I had ever expected.

Coyote was outside his apartment, sunning himself on the front stairs when I pulled up. The day was warm, almost suspiciously warm after the deep chill of late. He was dressed in a one piece coverall, with a well worn suede tool belt loaded down with an assortment of electrical doodads, wire cutters and crimpers wrapped around his waist. He jumped in beside me.

“You look like hell,” he said upon seeing me. I check the rear-view mirror. He was right, I looked pale, with large dark circles under my eyes. I had aged ten years in just one night.

“Thanks, you look good. Do you have your clipboard?”

He nodded, “I left it in the back of the truck, with my toolbox. Let's roll.”

I filled Coyote in on the events of last night, starting with the appearance of Baron Samedi and finishing with my revelation to Kanene. He was quiet, letting me tell my story without interruption.

"That sucks," he finally said.

I nodded. “I know. Have you ever revealed yourself to a human? Other than Judy, I mean.”

He nodded. “Just once, a long time ago. Similar situation, though.”

"Was it worth it?"

"Totally," Coyote replied without thinking. “In every way.”

We continued in silence, driving north, away from Toronto, to the cluster of technology buildings that have sprouted up above the city. I found the building we were looking for, parked a short distance away. Coyote gathered his tools, his clipboard. He handed me a thick sheaf of papers before he left.

“What's this?” I asked, gazing down at the pile of papers, a computer printout that consisted of a long list.

“The codes, make sure you have them handy for the call,” he said. I nodded, knowing how important my role would be when the time came. "I'll buzz you soon," he said, slamming the back door. I watched him go into data farm, a huge towering building that looked like a gaudy

Christmas present, wrapped with gold foil. I knew that the delicate outside masked a robust interior. It was heavily fortified, multiple backups and safety systems to keep all of the data protected. Every technological advancement conceivable was integrated into this building in the name of information security. It was the home to racks and racks of computers, clustered together into servers that contained billions of dollars worth of data. Every transaction in every Canadian Imperial Bank and Empire branch across Canada was recorded here. Multiple power systems, redundant backups, state of the art air conditioning, FM-200 fire suppressing systems, and of course, security. Lots and lots of security.

The security system started with the standard things, every area in the building was monitored by close circuit security cameras. Security guards roamed the halls, watching everyones movement within the building. Access badges, encoded with a DNA sample of every employee was standard, as was a sophisticated biometrics and facial scanning system tied to the cameras. They scrutinized every visitor, recorded every word said on site looking for vocal stresses, measured heart beat patterns, looking for sudden nervous increases. Any transmission that emanated from the building, on any frequency, was scanned and recorded. There were probably only half a dozen people in the world that could bluff their way into this building.

Coyote and I were two of them.

Every security system had a weakness. Every one had a single common vector that enabled people to access the building; the sack of meat sitting behind the front desk. Usually a minimum wage desk jockey who cared more about the fate of the local sports team than the data they were sworn to protect. No matter how strong the technology behind him, that person was still weak, pliable. You could prey on their fears, and sway them to your will, if you knew what buttons to push.

My phone started beeping, the signal from Coyote. He had set the stage, provided the security guard with the service order, counterfeit forms all signed by the right people, everything in order. It wouldn't be enough, of course, but it was a start. The complex machines ignored this single transmission from Coyote's phone, alerting me to go to step two in the plan. It had taken Coyote two whole days to figure out how to defeat that aspect of the security system. I still didn't really understand how it was done, but he did it. I typed the number of the main desk into my phone, waited while the guy behind the desk fumbled with his receiver, finally got it up to his ear. Or more likely he hit the button that transferred the call to his wireless headset.

"Front desk," he barked. He probably wouldn't receive very many calls from outside. Those would probably get lost in a tangled network of the corporate phone system. Press one to have your call get disconnected.

"Yes, this is Roger Morrow, from the Keele Street branch."

"What can I do for you, Mr. Morrow?" I could hear the desk jockey tapping my name into his computer, checking my credentials. Everything would come up clean, we knew everything we needed to know about Morrow.

“I sent in a service order to have some computers on the system checked. I just wanted to see if the tech had arrived yet.”

“He's here right now, Mr. Morrow. You saved me a call, I was just going to contact your branch to verify.”

“We can do that right now,” I replied. This was a breach of protocol, the guard should contact every person directly in order to verify a work order. No one should be able to enter the building without the proper procedures being followed, but we were counting on human nature to prevail, and laziness wins out every time.

“So, Mr. Morrow, please verify phone check Omega.”

I flipped through the pages, trying to find the correct response. I was not focusing well, too distracted by the events of last night.

“Sorry, please say again,” I responded, trying to buy time. “I had some interference on my phone.” I found the code, finally.

“Sir, are you calling from a cellular phone? That is against protocol, please call back on a land line.” Too late I realized my boneheaded mistake.

“No, no,” I said, a little too desperate. “My office phone, it just has a short in the wire. It cuts out sometimes. It was Omega you wanted to verify, correct?”

“Correct, sir.”

“Verify Omega, Pericles.”

“Thank-you, sir.”

“Thank you. Can you please have the technician contact me upon his completion? It's urgent we reboot the system here as soon as possible.”

“Not a problem, Mr. Morrow.”

“Thanks.” I clicked off the phone, waited. After what felt like hours, but was probably actually little more than a few minutes, I received another message from Coyote. I squinted at the text on my phone. “I'm in.” was all it read. So, he had made it to the service room. Now it was my turn. I couldn't wait.