

# THE CABIRI

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It was laundry day, and Kasi could not shake the dream of dwarves. The dream had come in the vague hour before waking, and in the aftermath of a small earthquake. (KCLA had confirmed this: 3.8, with an epicenter near Long Beach.) Just enough to rattle the china figurines on her dresser. The dream had lingered through her coffee, disturbing but not unpleasant. The dream dwarves had been licking her like little kittens gathered around a dish of warm milk.

Kasi was undergoing psychoanalysis for the first time in her thirty-three years, and had been told by Dr. Beck that the process would “stir things up.” Childhood memories, repressed desires, that sort of thing. So she supposed that a dream of horny dwarves must somehow come from the basement of her mind, and looked forward to telling the doctor about it on Tuesday. In fact, she wanted to tell him right now. Would he take her on a Saturday?

She began to think about her choice of words. Kasi was no prude, but still, it was a little cringe-making. She shuddered at the lingering image and felt it way down deep. She decided that the least embarrassing way to relate the dream would be ‘in character,’ and chose one of the bit parts she’d played in a *Lifetime* movie some years back, a murderous schoolteacher named Alice Klebold. Kasi was an actress who got hired mostly for her body. In her twenties, she’d been okay with that, but now, at thirty-three, it was causing her some anguish and three-hundred dollars an hour each week to Dr. Vincent

Beck, because she could already feel gravity's pull on her flesh and knew that the juicy parts would stop coming soon. She closed her eyes as she sipped her coffee, and instantly regretted doing so. The face of one of the dream dwarves filled her mind's eye. He looked up from between her legs and wagged his long, red tongue at her.

Kasi shuddered again, and this time the shudder felt like the agonizing onset of an orgasm.

The dwarf was a monstrous infant with an old man's wrinkles and a little red hat. Hideous and adorable at the same time.

It wasn't his ugliness that she found disturbing, so much as the uncertainty of his age. Eight months or eighty years? We are frightened, Dr. Beck had told her, by things and people we can't readily identify. *Neither/Nor things. Male or female? Mommy or Daddy? Human or animal? Dawn or dusk?* Dreams mix them all up.

She picked up the phone and punched the speed dial for Dr. Beck. As it rang, she strode to the balcony door and opened it, letting a wave of wiltingly torrid air into her air-conditioned apartment. September in Los Angeles. Earthquake weather. She left a message with his service, requesting a four o'clock appointment, and then proceeded to the laundry room with a week's worth of dirty clothes.

Vincent Beck was on professional probation. The APA and the medical board had come down hard on him as a result of Susan Coyle's charges, but they could have come down harder. They might have recommended that his license to practice in the state of California be suspended, but fortunately, the sole woman on the disciplinary committee had voted against this sanction. Vincent had screwed up with Susan Coyle in two ways. He had prescribed

morphine for imaginary pain (specifically, the pain from a phantom limb that she'd never actually lost). And he had slept with her.

He had been seeing Susan for nine months in the Tuesday afternoon slot now held by Kasi Paar. She'd come in that day on crutches, as always, and complained that the pain had become unbearable. Susan believed that she had lost her left leg to a shark while swimming in the warm waters off Cabo San Lucas. The shark, she said, had removed the leg in one bite, at the upper thigh just below the inguinal ligament. Her limp and her use of the crutches was well-practiced. Susan, too, was an actress, as were many of Vincent's clients. But it was no act. No matter how many tests, x-rays, or physical therapy sessions he ordered, she refused to believe that her left leg was entirely intact. She could feel it only as a phantom.

The pain was real for her, too, and that was why he'd finally prescribed the morphine. It was the only thing that worked, and on the day that changed everything, she'd come in with a soft smile and more than a little languor of movement. With the frown lines and panic missing from her face, he'd seen how alluring she was.

"How's the pain?" he'd asked.

"Much better," she'd answered. "Thanks to you. And I think I've finally decided to get a prosthetic. I want to walk again."

"You will."

"Maybe...but I'll never work again. Nobody wants to look at--"

"Susan," Vincent said, holding up his right hand. "Tell me what you see."

"I see your hand, Doctor Beck."

"Good," he said, scooting close enough to put his hand on the arm of the overstuffed chair she sat in. "Where is my hand now?"

“On the arm of the chair. This is a silly game. Shall we play Simon Says?”

Over those nine months of treatment, Vincent had tried any number of approaches to dismantling Susan Coyle’s delusion. He knew that she would accept only a truth that was *evident to her*, or to that place in her psyche she now inhabited, not to him or any number of specialists, technicians, or colleagues. Nothing had worked. And so, finally out of tricks and exasperated, he breached both the code of ethics and the regulations governing his trade. Impulsively, he put one hand on Susan’s blue-jeaned knee and the other over her eyes.

She raised her chin and pressed into his hand a little.

“Where is my right hand now?” he asked.

“It’s where my knee used to be.”

“But you can’t see it, can you?”

“I can feel it, Doctor. You know about phantom limbs. That’s why you gave me the morphine, right? Your hand is warm. There’s energy from it. It even helps with the pain.”

“No, Susan,” he said, in a firmer tone than he’d taken with her before. “You feel my hand because you have nerve endings in your skin. My job is to treat you, not to indulge you. There is a lot of good work we can do. Need to do. But not until we get past this.”

She pulled his left hand away from her eye, but tellingly, let the other one stay.

“I shouldn’t have to tell a psychiatrist that we feel in our brains, not in our skin. And I don’t need your indulgence.” She began to get up. Even in a huff, she was careful to put the weight on the right foot.

Vincent had never committed an act of malpractice. He was forty-three, divorced, and knew he was attractive to women for any number of reasons, but his record was clean. A case might be made that a doctor whose practice consisted in large part of film and TV actresses might have a hidden agenda. But until this moment, with this patient, he'd never pictured himself as a transgressor. It was therefore with some self-surprise that he found his hand had moved from her knee to that place just below the groin muscle where she claimed the shark's teeth had sunk in, and that he was exerting pressure to restrain her movement.

"Now where is my hand, Susan?"

Her voice dropped into her chest.

"You're getting warmer." Her legs parted almost imperceptibly, but the effect was instant and electric. "That's where he—Where it—Now, yes. You're very close to the bite. It hurts." She slipped forward, and her hand floated down to his. She lifted her hips and he felt the dampness and heat in his fingertips.

She'd laid a curse on him in so many ways. There were, of course, the legal and professional issues. But beyond those, he would no longer be able to regard a female patient in his big, overstuffed chair without seeing Susan Coyle's legs in the air.

It had happened only that once. The least he might have hoped for was a breakthrough in her treatment. But her pain continued, and foolishly, he kept prescribing the morphine. He now realized that he'd done it in part to keep her quiet. After three more sessions, he told her that he was referring her to a colleague and would no longer be her doctor. It was after this that she'd filed the report.

He noticed the voice mail light blinking on his telephone receiver and checked the message. Kasi Adams, asking to move up her appointment. Something urgent. A dream she couldn't shake. He checked his calendar. Other than his Saturday hike from the Griffith Observatory to Old Mulholland, which was something of a ritual, he was clear until dinner. He phoned her back and then tied the laces on his running shoes. Once around the Silver Lake reservoir before breakfast.

It was hot. By the time he left for his run at 9:20, the sun had already bleached out the stuccoed façade of his bungalow on Tesla Street. Even in Los Angeles, it was hot at 9:20 only in earthquake weather. And hadn't there been a tiny one just before dawn? He took off at a canter and was sweating by 9:25. Coming around the bend onto Silver Lake Boulevard, he saw a flash of red in the tangled brush on the banks of the reservoir. A scarf. A cap. What went through his head was, "went for a dip and left something behind."

Jack Powell was due at the Kodak Theater at 3 to receive his "Spirit of Hollywood" award. Of all the trophies he'd received, this one seemed the least legitimate. What the hell was the spirit of Hollywood? All he could think of was Jacob Marley dragging his chains. It was all part of the wrap-up of this year's Hollywood Film Festival. *Hollywood Film Festival*. Talk about selling coal in Newcastle. Hollywood was for making movies, not honoring them. Anyone on the inside knew how little honor there was about it.

But he would get through the ordeal, wear his white tux, smile broadly, maybe get a little drunk. And when it was over, he'd have Kasi for a *digestif*. The limo would bring her at nine, and she would

come bearing gifts. White powder and pussy. A strawberry tart frosted with confectioner's sugar. Now *that* was the spirit of Hollywood.

Jack peeled off his hoodie and dove into the pool. Six laps in the morning and he was good to go, even at nearly sixty. The sunlight, already white hot, blinded him as it glinted off the surface of the water. September fucking sun. This time of year, he ought to be in Tuscany. From his aerie in the hills high above Mulholland (nobody's house was higher than Jack's), Los Angeles looked a little like Italy. If you squinted. But it was a fake--*ersatz*, like everything else here. He opened his eyes mid-lap and was blinded again. In the midst of the white-out, there was a transient flash of red just outside the security fence.

*Goddamned papparazzi*, he thought.

He thought about his speech. Old actors never die, they just collect trophies.

Vincent's office was in Larchmont Village, an enclave within the greater enclave of Hancock Park, where the old money lived. The houses were big and stately, but not Beverly Hills ostentatious. And Vincent liked the fact that his patients had to travel east from their gilded palaces on the west side to see him here, in "old" L.A. It was as if they were traveling from present to past, from what they'd made themselves to what they'd been, and that served their therapy well.

Before the Susan Coyle incident and the ensuing damage to his reputation, Vincent had had some very famous clients, women whose fame was exceeded only by their terrible fear of falling. Now, most of them had left. It wasn't what he'd done, or even the taint of scandal, that had driven them away. These things could be turned to pro-

fessional advantage. It was that his stock had been devalued, and that in order to restore its worth, he might have to trade on the secrets they told him. This was a line he would never, ever have crossed, but he understood their caution, and accepted their abandonment as his penance. His income had dropped fifty percent in less than a year.

Kasi Adams wasn't famous, except on the internet, where a raunchy photo spread she'd done at twenty-two was a cult item. At this point, it was likely she never would be famous. 28 or bust was one of Hollywood's brutal truths. If the big role hadn't come before your thirtieth birthday, it probably never would, and Kasi was thirty-three. She was also self-destructive, duplicitous, and presented signs of borderline personality disorder--though this was a diagnosis easier to make than to defend. He liked her because she was willing to dig into herself despite the ugliness of much that was buried there. Her education had stopped with high school, but her curiosity hadn't. She was looking for a woman she could be comfortable being at forty.

"So," he said. "Tell me about the dream."

"It's a little embarrassing."

"Dreams often are. That's why they're hidden in sleep."

"I googled 'Jungian.' You're a Jungian shrink, right?"

"You know what Jung said? 'Thank God I'm not a Jungian.' But yes, I'm a fan of his work. I practice depth psychology. Why?"

"Well, this whole idea that the things we dream come from some big, deep well that everybody drinks from. Does that mean that the same dream could be dreamed by more than one person?"

"Yes, but not like the same video playing in everyone's head. It would be colored by your own experience. And it might or might not mean the same thing. Why? Did someone else have your dream?"

"Maybe," she said. "I'm not sure."

"Well, tell me your version of it," Vincent said.

"I was on my back, on some kind of wooden table. Like a picnic table, but bigger and heavier. Much bigger. Much heavier. Oak, or something. And I was naked. My arms and legs were, like... Well, like I was tied down, only I wasn't."

He had noticed her voice drop and her posture change, as if she were affecting a different persona. She had also developed a little tic. A twitch of the nostrils. He'd seen this before, and made a note.

"Did you feel like a captive?" he asked her.

"Yes. No. *No*...but I couldn't get up. I couldn't leave."

"Why not?"

Kasi giggled and averted her eyes.

"Because it felt too good. What they were doing."

"*They?*"

"The midgets."

Vincent scrawled '*midgets*' on his pad. Then, as an afterthought, he wrote '*digits?*'

"Go on," he said. "Tell me about them."

"There were dwarves. But smaller than real ones. Little tiny wrinkled men no bigger than babies, with little pointed red caps and long, pointed red tongues. Lots of them all around me, licking and sucking me. Like kittens."

Vincent cocked his head. "Red caps, you say?"

"Yeah. Pointed and kinda saggy, like-" She laughed.

He smiled at her. "Like what?"

"Like the seven dwarves, almost, and me as Snow White!"

“When you say, ‘like kittens,’ do you mean you got the feeling they were hungry? That they wanted nourishment?”

“Yes. No. Not really. I got the feeling they were really horny.”

“Okay. And how about you?”

“Weeelll... It wasn’t exactly the worst dream I’ve ever had. The weirdest, but not the worst. There were three of them...down there...doing it. Three rough little tongues. I’m pretty sure I had an orgasm, but it might’ve been the earthquake. And then later, when I was awake, just thinking about it gave me another one. That, believe me, has *never* happened before.”

“But you have told me it’s easier for you to orgasm on your own than with a lover, right?”

“Right. Unless—“

“Unless it feels like you’re a captive.”

“Yeah.” Her chin dropped a little. “Is that bad? Does that mean I was...’abdicating my will,’ like you said before?”

“Feeling pleasure isn’t ever ‘bad’ in and of itself. It only becomes a threat to society—and to the psyche—when we do ‘bad’ things to get it. Like stealing to get a fix. We’ve talked about the abdication thing. Why you might feel this way. The experience with your father. And being object rather than subject is a sexy thing for most people. I’m curious about something.”

“What?”

“Well, first...can you remember what sort of space you were in? You’re on a table, right? Look up toward the ceiling and tell me what you see.”

Kasi rolled her eyes heavenward, then closed them.

“Wooden arches. Like in an old building.”

“Uh huh. And how about the lighting? Is it bright and sterile, like an operating room...or dark and mysterious?”

“Definitely dark. Not pitch dark. There are...candles.”

“Candles.”

“Yeah. Like in a church. I wonder-“

“Who’s the god of this church?”

Kasi took a shallow breath, closed her eyes briefly, then fluttered them open again and said, “I am.”

Vincent nodded, made a note, and let a moment pass.

“Sooo,” Kasi said softly. “Does this mean I have a thing for little boys or something like that?”

“I don’t think so, Kasi. I know your dream life pretty well, and children don’t figure into it much. The *Snow White* idea is interesting. So’s the fact that you’re not really a prisoner. It might even be that you’re asserting your strength and sexuality after years of feeling dominated and roped in by men.”

“Wow,” she said. “Ya think?”

“Let’s go back to the place. If it’s a church, and you’re the object of worship in this church, what does that make the dwarves?”

“I dunno. *Priests?*”

“And if they *are* your priests, and the table is an altar, that puts a new spin on what they’re doing to you, doesn’t it?”

Kasi made a smile, then crossed herself.

On the trail in late afternoon, with little more than a half-hour of daylight left, Vincent sat down on a boulder to rest. From here he could see the Pacific. Santa Monica Bay and Catalina Island beyond. He felt the rock and the ground beneath his feet tremble. An

aftershock, he supposed. The shudder subsided quickly, and in its immediate aftermath, there was a disturbance in the brush on the far side of the path. It was likely a family of quail, or if something bigger, possibly a deer or coyote. Whatever it was, the little temblor had animated it. The scrub oak trembled again, and this time Vincent saw a smear of crimson amid the tangled undergrowth.

Like blood on a mule deer's brown flank.