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Featuring
Karina Fabian



Amateurs

From the Case Files of Dragon Eye, PI

Karina L. Fabian

I *f an immortal, soulless Faerie dragon can have one sin, it's pride. I know that, and I figure that's why God's called me to be a down-and-out private detective to an unappreciative world populated by a single species of non-magical humans and some Faerie immigrants. Take a simple case of Pixie troubles, toss in a little pride, and you've got a recipe for a disaster of Biblical proportions. Yeah, literally. 'Course you find a way to "Let go and let God," as the Mundane Born-Again types put it, and He can fix it in His own divine and spectacular way, making even the most magically powerful and conniving of Magicals look like amateurs.*

She'd found her way to my office this morning, saying her name was Sarah and singing a ballad of woe. My Faerie-human partner, Sister Grace, was across the Gap on Church business, so I was the lucky drake who got to listen.

Her down-and-out song didn't match her looks at all. She wore a peek-a-boo hairstyle and double-breasted raincoat that went perfectly with her Lauren Bacall sullen pout. She even managed to slouch like Bacall, sitting with her profile to me and occasionally gazing at me with big brown eyes. Quite a feat, actually, considering she was doing it in a cheap office chair with wheels. Only her earrings, which were dangling hieroglyphs I used to know long ago, broke the illusion. I figured we watched the same movies.

Of course, I was no Bogart to her Bacall. Hard to be when you're a quarter-ton, seven-foot, scarlet North African Faerie Wyvern. It didn't say "Dragon Eye, PI" on my door for nothing.

Although, my stomach was reminding me, some days it felt like nothing.

She was saying, "It started day before yesterday. I tried to capture a Pixie—"

"You didn't really think it'd give you treasure?" That was the standard thing I heard in cases like these. Totally erroneous, but Mundanes never learn.

She gave me an insulted glare, but quickly looked away, and not because of my scarlet complexion and amber gaze. "No, I...I wanted it to clean my house."

I sighed. I guess I couldn't blame her too much. There was still plenty of ignorance about the Faerie, despite the fact that it's been a couple of decades since a combination nuclear accident and magical mishap opened a gap between my world—now known as Faerie, save the jokes—and the Mundane world—joke all you like. The Mundane world, where I now live and keep my office, had no native magic, and not a little trouble has been started by such mishaps as thinking it'd be a good idea to capture a Pixie. Faerie Pixies, unlike the Tinkerbell version, are doll-sized but dangerous. They have limited magic, primarily for shape-shifting into various insects and small rodents, but you've no idea how much trouble a swarm of angry, intelligent rodents can cause. Well, maybe you do—I think I've seen that movie—but none of you Mundanes believe it.

The government ought to issue a handbook or make a class or something.

"That's Brownies," I informed Sarah, "and I wouldn't try catching them, either. That stuff about cleaning house for milk? Mundane myth. The truth is they'd eat you out of house and home. Better to get a human housekeeper. So what'd they do to you?"

"I'm under a geas. I have to deliver a message to some other Pixie group. They said if I'm lucky, the other group will have an answer that I must bring to them. And if I'm not, they may play with me like I used to play with Barbie dolls."

"How'd you treat your Barbies?"

Suddenly, she turned to face me, placing both hands entreatingly on my desk and looking up at me with desperate, watery, fear-filled eyes.

"Please, Mr. Dragon, you've got to help me."

Truth was, she struck a nerve. Eight centuries ago, I was your typical Faerie dragon: an immortal, intellectually supreme, five-ton flying mass of glory and magic. Then St. George, the most powerful Church Mage of the time, trapped me in a holy spell. By the time he was done, I was little more than a Gila monster with a human's amount of knowledge and only one way back to my former self: serve God and his creatures under the direction of the Faerie Catholic Church. Inexplicably, that service has brought me to the Mundane world, where most of my abilities, past and present, are underappreciated and the government refuses to grant me personhood status. The result: I'm a professional problem solver for people who are still on the right side of God's laws but don't have anywhere else to turn. At least it's interesting work, and even fun now that Grace had joined me.

Still, there were limits to what problems I could solve.

"I can't remove a geas. Not even my partner can do that. Some rules of magic must be obeyed."

"Then help me fulfill it! I can give you the message and you can deliver it. That'd be the same, wouldn't it? And they wouldn't dare hurt a big, strong dragon like you."

I made a skeptical snort. Dragon I am, but since my run-in with St. George—God bless him, the magically overpowered pain-in-the-tail—I was operating at way below my previous "big, strong" dragon self. Still, most Mundanes didn't know that, and I can put the fear of me into just about anyone I chose.

"I can pay you—twice your normal wage. Five times. Dragons like treasure, don't they?" She spilled out the contents of her purse onto the table. Among her wallet and lipstick was a tangle of jewelry, mostly rhinestone and colored glass, but a few good pieces. "Take them all, just help me."

I almost laughed as I picked through the tangle with my claw—until I saw it. Buried under the bling-bling was an object of perfect beauty and form: spherical, the color of desert sands in the moonlight. I pushed it out of the pile and the friction of it moving over my desk made music in my ears.

"Where did you get this?" My mouth was both dry and salivating; it was hard to get the words out.

"That?" She shrugged. "The Pixies were playing with it when I caught them. They said I could keep it as a 'souvenir.' If you like it, you can have it with the rest of the jewelry."

A dragon stone. A creation of magic and earth forged from the dawn of time. I hadn't seen anything so beautiful in 800 years. I wanted to grab it and press it to my heart. I was afraid to touch it.

"Keep the jewelry," I said hoarsely, and she shoved everything, stone included, into her purse. I felt torn between the urge to cry and the urge to leap over the desk and snatch that purse, biting her head off in the process if necessary. Instead, I prayed for patience and said, "I'll deliver your message, for my regular wages and the stone."

"Thank you, Mr. Dragon. Gods bless you."

Great. One of those. "There's only one True God, lady. Believe me, I know."



Sarah was to deliver her message to the roof of an abandoned building in a run-down but still reputable part of town. Los Lagos was a farming community whose claim to fame before the Accident was a nuclear power plant. Now the plant is gone, but the Gap has caused a boom in retail and trade. Unfortunately, the crops haven't been doing as well, so the economy was still topsy-turvy. Even so, the place was a step up from where I had my office/lair, and I wondered if I'd ever be able to rate a place like this. I was comfortable enough in my big, drafty warehouse, but I had to wonder if Grace wouldn't prefer a place where the stairs didn't clang with each step and her room was something better than a converted manager's office on the second level. Sure, Grace was a nun, but sometimes I think we're taking our vows of poverty too far.

Sister Grace of the Order of Our Lady of Miracles was one of the premier Church Mages in Faerie; she helped contain the accident that caused the Gap, preventing our dimensions from simply swallowing each other up. Don't ask me what that means. I've still haven't regained enough wisdom to

understand the physics and magic, and only a handful of humans will ever get it. But with such power comes heavy responsibility, and even the most devout psyche has its limits. She'd been sent to the Mundane world on sabbatical to research Mundane religious music, but circumstances brought us together, and I felt kind of responsible for her. I probably should have taken Sarah's offer of double-plus wages so I could have gotten something to surprise her when she got back. Curtains, maybe, or a heavy blanket. Nights got cool in Los Lagos.

'Course what I'd really like to get her is something to stop her nightmares.

I put Grace out of my mind as I cased the building, then settled on the roof. The entrance seemed to be chained, but there was an air vent. I wandered over to it, poked my nose in it and closed my ear flaps.

"Got a delivery for 'the Don!'" I shouted into the vent. Hey, no one said anything about being discreet.

As the echo died, I opened my ears and listened to the shrieks and complaints. Not only was it gratifying, but it gave me a fair idea of how many people were in the building—and who or what they might be.

Pixies. Lots of Pixies.

A tiny creature, half human-half butterfly, flew out of the vent, narrowly avoiding my face. A Pixie, partially changed to insect form. I wondered for a moment if her magic had run out before she could finish the transformation.

She landed on my nose, forcing me to look cross-eyed at her. "Give me the message," she demanded. Her voice was scratchy and harsh. She must have been at least a century old.

"Sorry, Respected Elder. I was instructed to give it only to the Don."

Yeah, I'm huge and scaly, but I can charm. My honorific did the trick and she gave me a warm smile as she started back to the vent.

I hesitated. Not that I had anything against tunnels, but I know human buildings. I did not want to get stuck.

"We have a portal," she said over her shoulder as she flew in. The air before her rippled like water and she disappeared.

"Why didn't you say so?" I muttered and dove in.

The portal took me right into the Don's office, so I had no idea where in the building I was. Portals take a lot of magic to maintain, and the farther they take you, the more magic they need, so I assumed I was in the building. It smelled the same, down to the scent of magic I'd noticed earlier. It was strong, too, and where I sensed it most, there was also an absence of noise. A shield, then. There was a small cadre of Pixies of both sexes around me, wary for any false move. Most of them were wearing clothes that looked like they came from the "Nightlife Barbie" aisle. I wondered if they were starting a retail service to Pixies across the Gap. If so, they didn't need to shield their merchandise from me.

The Don was sitting on top of a cheap government-surplus desk like I'd seen in police HQ, so they either weren't doing well, business-wise, or they were keeping a low profile. His suit, however, was properly made and didn't look like it came off the rack for \$1.99 at the toy store. 'Course who ever paid to dress a Ken doll in a three-piece suit? The Don. Huh. Guess these guys were watching a lot of gangster movies.

"Hear you got a message for me?" His mouth twisted with humor.

Giving him my "mostly harmless" smile, the one that showed only half my canines, I handed him the scroll. He looked it over, and his face grew a shade of red you never see on a Barbie doll.

"They tell you what this was about?"

I shook my head. "I'm just the messenger."

"I've heard of you—the great dragon brought low and forced into Human servitude."

"I serve God and all His creatures."

Don snorted. "I'm sure St. George meant for his kind to come first. Still, I've heard the good things you've done for us Magicals. I appreciate your bringing this, despite what it means for us." The Don snapped his fingers. A new scroll appeared in his hand. "Take this to them. And take this for your trouble." He produced a fat pile of the only really magical items in Mundane: American greenbacks. I counted them while checking for authenticity: \$500. I was starting to like the guy. I pocketed the money and the message, walked through the portal, ended up on the roof. I took a deep breath of air and smiled.



The next day, I met Sarah at the Colt's Hoof, a little bar that catered to all types Faerie and Mundane. I was a regular there, though I don't drink much—when I want to get snockered, a couple-five gallons of ethanol straight is my preference. Not that I can do that much anymore, now that I have my fire back. One wrong belch and I could put a dragon-sized hole in the blacktop, not to mention the inconvenience to me. I'm still immortal, but it's a long, slow healing process when you explode.

I was a little early, so I took my usual post at the end of the bar where there wasn't a stool anymore and amused myself watching Charlie the

bartender search for his missing paring knife. He'd just given up and gotten another from the drawer, when she sidled up to me, a cigarette in her hand.

"Got a light?"

"As a matter of fact...." I blew a narrow, brief puff of flame on the end of her Virginia Slim, startling the half-dozen males of various races who had jumped up to offer their own fire. She took a long drag, settled on the stool next to me and ordered a Bloody Mary. I ordered the same.

"Did you get it done?" she asked as Charlie moved off to fix the drinks. I passed her the message I'd gotten from the Don.

She looked at it pensively. "Sure you wouldn't consider delivering this yourself?"

"Not if you're certain he said you had to return with his reply. It's your geas. I got my own problems. Got my pay?"

She slid me a zippered cosmetic bag. I peeked in; nestled among the bills was my stone, and I felt a twinge of excitement like I hadn't felt in centuries.

Meanwhile, our drinks had been delivered, and Sarah finished hers in an impressive series of swallows. "Well, thanks again, Mr. Dragon."

"A pleasure. If you ever need help again."

"Not a chance. I've sold everything I own and I'm on the next bus to as far from magic as I can get." She slid off the barstool and sauntered out, the eyes of every humanoid male following.

Except one pair. "Where the hell is my paring knife?!" Charlie shouted.



I could have spent a week just savoring my new treasure, but unfortunately, the next morning started with an old lady hiring me to find her cat, then I had to meet Rita at the linen shop so she could help me pick out something nice for Grace. I wanted to get a cheap TV and DVD player, too, and she said she'd drive it over if I promised that Grace and I would come for Sunday dinner. Angela, her third child and oldest daughter, wanted to do a science project on dragons for her 6th grade class and had decided to see if she could take shameless advantage of our friendship. Naturally, I agreed. Angela's a good kid, and her family's always good to me. Besides, Rita's chili is as close as you can get to breathing fire without having the actual organs for it.

On the way to the linen store, I noticed a group of cops standing in front of a hobby shop and flew down to pay my respects. It pays to stay on good terms with the heat.

"What's going on, Kel?"

"Here? Break-and-enter, though it's kind of weird. Took the cash—not that there was much—but mostly went after supplies: needles, leather cord—"

"A stitch in crime?"

He gave me a sour look but didn't interrupt his list. "—rubber bands and exacto-knives. Penny-ante stuff."

"Anything I can do?"

"Probably not. You know how the commissioner is."

"Santry's going to have to start putting some Magicals on the squad sooner or later."

"Bet on 'later.' I'm with you, though. You know this morning I had to break up a fight between an evangelical-type and some pagan who kept screaming that Usire was back? I don't even know who Usire is."

"Egyptian pantheon. You'd probably know him as Osiris—god of vegetation and the underworld. Just be glad it wasn't Sekhmet or Am-heh. They're the bloodthirsty ones."

"They're real gods—I mean, over in Faerie?"

"Relax. There's only one True God."

"Hopefully, he was a nutcase. Said the Usire's bee-people had made him his champion and he's fighting for them. Guess he's anxious to get to the underworld."

"Or the mental ward."



Grace returned the next day to find me gamboling about like a kitten—gamboling with a kitten, in fact, or at least an aging cat with fantasies of youth—and playing with my new pretty. I'd have been embarrassed if I hadn't felt so incredibly pleased with myself. Cases had been pouring in—missing animals, mostly, but, hey, whatever pays. I sent her upstairs, leaping up to the walkway myself. I had to hover since the structure wasn't meant to take my weight (found that out the hard way on my first case) but it was worth it to hear her soft gasp and see her surprise as she saw her newly made-over room. She turned to hug me, and for a moment, the worry lines between her eyes were gone.

Back downstairs, I directed her to sit in our "new" office chair that Rita had picked up for me at Goodwill and updated her on my week while

Speckles, the cat I'd finally found this morning near the linen shop, rubbed against her legs. I'd hoped she would have come home in a better mood, but that hadn't happened. She watched me absently roll my bauble between my paws, and her frown returned.

"I don't know, Vern. Dragon stones are very rare. They can channel and direct huge amounts of magic. Why would they give one to a Mundane? They're not trifles."

"They are to Pixies."

She didn't look convinced. "You know St. George used a dragon stone in the spell that captured you?"

"Hey! Bling-bling with irony." When she didn't even crack a smile, my own grin faded and I settled the stone in my vest pocket where it was safe and close. "What's wrong, Grace? What happened at the mother house?"

She sighed. "There's something going on, here, on this side of the Gap. There's more magic than can be accounted for with current immigration. I thought when I first noticed it that it was just my imagination, paranoia, maybe, but my Sister-mages confirmed it. But we can't pin it down. I don't trust magic that hides."

Before I could press for details, the warehouse door banged open. Rita rushed in, towing her oldest son and another young man. Both were wearing the white pajamas Mundane martial artists seemed to prefer, and both had black belts.

"Vern, Grace! Gracias a Dios! Ayudanos!" she said, and she and Jerry Jr. began speaking at once, her in Spanish, he in English, while the other boy just stood there looking like he wanted to faint or cry. I was able to make out that someone had been kidnapped, someone had a note, and someone wanted someone named Kevin.

"Slow down," I said as Grace went to the boy and led him to her seat. I noticed that the back of his do-bak had "STATE CHAMPIONSHIP" on the back along with several patches.

I turned to the boy. "Are you Kevin? O.K., Kevin. Why don't you take a deep breath and tell us the story from the beginning."

Kevin, who turned out to be 17, had been left in charge of his little sister while his parents were away at a conference. He'd taken her to his Tae Kwon Do class, where she had often gone with him, staying in the audience chamber, watched by the adults and screaming "HAI" with the students. Halfway through class, they changed to weapons work, and he'd dashed to the back of the room to get his staff. When he'd returned, he'd taken a second to look—and she was gone. He'd dropped out of line without permission to check on her, even dashed outside to look, although she was too little to open the heavy door. There had been four adults in the audience chamber, but no one had seen her leave. She'd been out of his sight about a minute and a half, tops, and yet she'd completely disappeared. The police had been called; his parents were on the way home; and he'd been told to go home with Jerry to wait for them. But he found a note in his gear bag, and when Jerry saw it, he told his mom, and she brought them here.

The note was a standard cut-and paste scheme that put me in mind of exacto-knives. The message was simple yet confusing: WARRIOR. YOU ARE THIS STATE'S BEST. TO SAVE YOUR SISTER, CHAMPION US. WHEN YOU ARE VICTORIOUS, WE WILL RELEASE YOU BOTH. WE WILL COME FOR YOU. DO THIS FREELY.

"Why didn't they just take me in the first place?" he moaned as he buried his head in his hands.

"Do this freely?' Is that a usual request for Mundanes?" Grace wondered. Rita, her arms around Kevin, shook her head.

I lifted the note to my nose. Beneath the smell of newsprint and Elmer's, there was a faint but unmistakable scent of Pixie.

"Where's your do jamb?"

Rita answered. "We were near it yesterday. By the linen shop."

And the hobby store. Knives. Needles. Perfect weapons if you were the size of a GI Joe.

The cat bumped itself against Jerry's legs, yowling. He picked it up and stroked it absently. I noticed now that the fur on its nose looked rubbed down.

Leather cord to make reins for small animals.

I glanced again at the note and at the words on Kevin's back. I remembered Kel's nutcase and his bee-people.

Human champions chosen to fight alongside them.

I thought about the message I'd delivered two days ago, and the Don's angry but determined look.

God forgive me. I'd delivered a declaration of war!

Then, just as these pieces fell into place, Jerry added another to the puzzle that twisted the picture into something even more terrifying. He was rubbing the cat's neck under her collar, making the charm on it catch the light. My eye was drawn toward it, and I realized the symbol was the same one that had shone from a behind peek-a-boo haircut.

Suddenly, I remembered what that hieroglyphic stood for. Not Usire, like that idiot had been shouting about.

Sekhmet, Egyptian goddess of war and destruction.

"Oh, no. No, no, no—".

"What?" Grace demanded.

I explained quickly in Faerie Gaelic. "I got played—and I'm not alone. What's your best protection spell?"

"Lend me your dragon stone and I can protect you against Armageddon."

I felt a terrible twinge. I'd rather face Armageddon than lose my lovely stone. "It won't get that far. At worst, a hundred or so angry Pixies—and that's only if I can't get a good lungful of fire off first."

"I'm going with you."

"No way. If they see a human—a Church Mage, no less—they won't listen to me."

"You really think you can stop a Pixie war single-handedly?"

"Blessed are the peacemakers." Grace hurried to her workshop while I turned to Kevin and switched to English. "Call your parents and tell them where you are, and stay here. I'm going to get your sister back."

Grace gave me the St. Francis medallion, glowing with holy energy. I slipped it in the same pocket as my stone for luck and took off back to Don's place.

The sun was already starting to set as I landed on the roof, and I knew the light playing off my scarlet scales made me look brilliant and fierce. I wanted the Pixies to see me that way. I roared into the air vent. "DON! I know you have the kid. Unless you want me, the police and the Faerie Inquisition on you, get out here NOW!"

The echoes hadn't died down when Don himself came out of the gaping maw of the air vent. "You know, that trick is only funny once."

"What do you think you're doing, starting a war in the Mundane world?"

"That's Pixie—"

"—Business. Not anymore. The other side is sponsored by a nasty piece of evil that calls herself Sekhmet. And if I know her, she's playing them for fools, too. There won't be any war—just a sacrifice of your champions followed by a lot of bloodshed she can drink herself silly on. She won't let you stop until there's no one left. That what you hoping for, Don?"

"The declaration is made and accepted. We'll deal with this treachery."

"'Deal' with Sekhmet? Come on, Don! Denial is not just a river in Egypt! She is way out of your league. And even if you did handle her, if you start dealing with false gods, you start dealing with the Faerie Catholic Church—and the Inquisition isn't going to take kindly to your cavalier attitude. But then, that's why you're on this side of the Gap in the first place, isn't it—to fight your war where the humans don't know better?"

Don turned a new shade of angry red. "What are you going to do, dragon? I thought you were one of us, that you understood."

That did it. I'd already been duped by the "you're a dragon" line this week. They wanted a dragon, they were going to get a dragon. I raked my claws against the air vent, curling up pieces of metal and making the Don wince at the sound. "No. You don't understand. I have claimed this territory! It is mine for farther than your magic can reach, and the humans are mine. *Maybe* I'll let you have your little war, but we're going to find a way to do it without sacrificing humans or feeding the blood lust of a jumped-up demon with delusions of grandeur. Summon your counterpart on the other side. We're going to set the rules of war—and then you're going to give me the girl."



Several hours later, I flew home with the little girl struggling furiously in a carrying sack the Pixies fashioned for me. She screamed her head off most of the way—first over being forced to leave the Pixies, whom she'd seen as living dollies, then about me. I'd had to close my ears and fly high to avoid attracting attention. Fortunately, the sack held. It wasn't until she was in her brother's arms that she cried herself to sleep.

"They treated her fine. I'm the one she's screaming about," I reassured her worried brother while Grace examined her for any hidden spells or latent suggestions they may have placed on her. Rita called their parents then the police to tell them she was safe.

After they'd left, I settled on my rug, cat nestled against my belly, and pulled out my stone. I'd wanted to take it out on the way home, to see it in the moonlight and hear it in the winds, but Katie's screaming nixed that idea, and I had a big day tomorrow. Maybe, if all went well, tomorrow night...

"Are you going to lounge there with that silly grin all night or are you going to tell me what happened? How in the name of the Beatitudes did you stop the war?"

I shrugged as I rolled the stone idly between my hands. "I didn't. There was too much bad blood between the tribes, and the right to emigrate to Mundane is at stake. But they're releasing their champions and returning the animals and stuff they stole—and they agreed to *cogadh na bhfeithid*. Now there'll be no human blood for Sekhmet to chug down, no animal blood either. Just a bunch of grasshoppers battling it out with Yours Truly to make sure they stay in their designated area. Even better, their magic will be so

depleted by the changing they won't be able to use it on me or each other—and there won't be any for Sekhmet to siphon off. They've acknowledged that this is my territory, and that there will be certain restrictions. So? Come on. Tell me I'm brilliant."

"They let you keep the stone?" she asked instead.

"Never came up. I don't think they even know about it."

"So Sekhmet gave it to Sarah to influence you?"

"That dame was a better actress than Bacall." I twirled the stone with one claw and smiled fondly at it.

"Would you stop playing with that stupid thing?!" Grace suddenly yelled. "If it hadn't been for it and your acting like a stupid dragon, we wouldn't be in this mess!"

I reared up and shouted back. "I am a dragon! But thanks to St. George, I spent a century as a sentient lizard, and seven more centuries being told to act human! I think I'm entitled to a little dragon-style indulgence!"

"'Indulgence.' There's an irony for you!"

"And what mess? I took care of it! The Pixies can have their war, the humans are under my protection, and Sekhmet gets nothing! I earned this! So what is your problem?"

She collapsed into the chair. "It's just too easy."

"Easy? Because I haven't been shot, mauled or tortured by magic? Well, for once, I could do without the mortifications of the body, thank you, Sister."

"There are worse things," Grace whispered, and her eyes filled with tears. She dashed up the stairs and slammed her cheap metal door.

Even with my treasure snuggled close against my chest, I had a fitful night.



The next morning, I awoke to find Grace in full Church-Mage regalia. "I'm going with you. I just called Father Rich, and he'll have Steve bring his car down for me," she said.

"You don't have to."

"Yes, I do. We're partners."

I hesitated. I didn't expect trouble, but if there was, I didn't want Grace to be in the middle of it.

"And," she took a shaky breath, "you're the best friend I've ever had."

"Call Father back and tell him forget the car. I'll get the riding gear on."

As I donned the harness and saddle so I could play horse for Grace, I explained the plan. The Pixies were taking the form of locusts—plains and desert, so as to tell the armies apart. They'd selected a meadow in the Santo Bernando valley, away from any populated areas. They would fight until the sun was overhead, and the tribe with the most survivors wins. My role was just to keep them contained. As she clambered onto my back, Grace promised to back me up, but otherwise not interfere.

We were silent on the flight. I thought about pulling out my stone, to see it reflect the sunrise, but decided not to. I didn't want Grace angry again.

When we got to the field, however, what I saw made me angry enough for the both of us. The war had started—and the field was an undulating

mass of battling insects, more appearing every minute. Already they were spilling out of the designated area.

I banked and landed on a hill just outside some nearby trees. "All right. You told me so," I said as I struggled out of my gear.

"Apologies later. Right now, we have to contain this mess. There must be thousands of them." She crossed herself, murmured a prayer spell, then scanned the field. She groaned. "Portals—one on either side. They must be summoning in allies through the Gap! But that's beyond Pixie magic."

"Sekhmet!" I didn't need to see her to know this was her work.

"Vern!"

I followed Grace's pointing finger and saw an old truck barrel its way into the field. It stopped dead center and a man eeled himself out the back window onto the truck bed. He reached down and pulled on a backpack tank with a long hose. He pointed the nozzle in the air and shouted. "In the name of Usire, I come! I, who would once be your champion, will now be...your...*Exterminator!*" He began swinging the pump gun wildly, showering the swarm with pesticide, oblivious to the fact that there were too many of them and too few of him.

"Get a shield up! I'll get the Spray-niac," I told Grace and launched myself in the air.

In the short time it took for me to get to him, the locusts were already up to his shoelaces. I swooped down, grabbed him by the tank and headed toward the edge of the field. He and the tank were almost too heavy for my present strength, and he was kicking and screaming worse than the kid had, but I only had to get him past Grace's barrier. Already I could sense the thin line of magic forming around the field.

"Let go, you stupid dinosaur! I am doing the work of Usire! I am his right hand!"

"You're some part he's missing," I grunted. Dinosaur? Mundanes definitely needed a handbook. "Listen, you high priest of Loon-town," I panted. "Those aren't real bugs and even if they were, you don't have enough poison to kill them before they kill you."

"Die, Barney!" He pointed his gun up and shot me in the face with pesticide.

I gagged, sputtered—and dropped him at 70 feet.

I heard the scream and the dull thump, but by the time I could do anything about it, it was too late. The locusts had swarmed over him. There was nothing but a low hill to show where he'd landed.

I made a dive for him, anyway, and felt myself slammed back and out of the barrier. I smacked a tree then hit the dirt. Inside my vest, my St. Francis medal glowed, its magic light piercing even the heavy fabric. I looked up and saw a humanish figure with its back to me. Female. Her body was sheathed in a flowing gown of sheer linen. A lion's mane tumbled over her shoulders and back. Sekhmet.

She paid no attention to me, and from the way my medallion glowed and how my body ached, I figured she thought her magic had knocked me out. I tried to rise, found I couldn't. I set my head down and through hooded eyes surveyed my surroundings.

Grace had managed to knit a shield around the battleground. By the changes in the shimmer, I could tell she had it strongest from the ground up to about two feet; the rest was there but weak. Enough force or strong magic would punch right through it, which was exactly Sekhmet's plan.

She was concentrating her energies on cutting a hole in the weak part of the shield. On the other side of the field, Grace fought to keep the shield intact, and I could tell from the tremor of her voice just how much it was costing her.

The shield finally ripped and the tear widened. Sekhmet growled with pleasure and reached out. Within the field, a mound of locusts rose and thinned, and Pixinator's body floated to the gap. Despite everything, he stirred feebly. She pulled him into an embrace.

I realized she was going to feast on his blood. "That is just gross," I called to her.

She turned slightly, but if she was surprised to see me coherent, she didn't show it. "Should have been content to deliver your message and take your Precious," she said.

"So what are your after-dinner plans? Destroy the human race?" I asked to keep her distracted. Behind her, Grace had repaired the hole and raised the strong shield another foot. Locusts were still pouring in through the portal, straining the barriers in their mindless blood-lust.

"Actually, I was thinking a cigarette and a Bloody Mary," she said in a familiar voice, and I felt my cheek crests flare. Deep behind my belly, chemical processes were starting.

If a lion could grin, she would have. In the back of my mind, I wondered how she spoke so clearly. "Frankly, if I could have held that human form long enough, I would have simply kept it and gone someplace more violent."

"Couldn't get near a murder fast enough, so you decided to engineer one? You're not getting away with it."

"I already have, thanks to you." She turned back to her now-limp prey and sighed. "Now you've made me miss my moment. They're so much better just at the point of death. Ah, well, perhaps I will slate my thirst on your friend later." She opened her mouth wide.

So did I, releasing a long, heavy stream of fire that engulfed her and her victim.

She screamed, but with rage rather than pain. When I stopped to breathe, she was unscathed, though her victim was ash and her spell on me was broken. She turned on me with a roar and I reared up, wings unfolded, teeth showing. I hissed a challenge in a language even older than her, yet a part of my mind was warning me what had happened the last time I'd taken on a false god.

It didn't matter. I would keep her from Grace.

I had some magic, and I used it on defense while I kept up a barrage of physical attacks. Most rebounded off her shields, but a few got through—a burst of fire here, a tail sweep there. She was weaker than I'd thought, and for a moment, I envisioned myself winning this duel.

Then a curse made it through my defenses and my world turned inside out.

When I was aware of anything besides blinding pain, it was that the only thing that had saved me was Grace's St. Francis medallion, and it had drained itself doing so. I regretted not letting Grace ensorcel my stone. I wondered how long it would take me to heal once Sekhmet was done with me. Months or years? And would Grace be around to apologize to when I did?

I couldn't even get the breath to hiss defiance as Sekhmet raised her hands for another spell.

Suddenly there was a bright light and a mummified form with a golden painted mask appeared behind Sekhmet, grabbing her hands and stopping her spell. Usire and Sekhmet struggled against each other. Behind them, a line began to appear in the shield, like a tear about to come open. It gave a hum like a scream, and with the noise of the gods' fight and the Pixies' battle, not to mention my own injuries, it made a din in my ears. Yet I thought I heard Grace shouting.

I shook my head to clear it and forced myself to focus.

"Vern! Push them in, Vern! Hurry! Push them in!"

I saw the tear open just behind them, summoned my fading strength and rammed right into them. With dual shrieks, the two tumbled into the shield. Immediately, they were covered in raging locusts.

How poetic. I looked across the field at Grace, wanting to laugh with her.

Even with the haze of the shield and blur of my vision, I could see she was in trouble. She was on her knees—and not in prayer—her face sweating and completely pale beneath her dark habit, trembling with the effort of channeling God's power and containing the seething mass within the shield.

"Grace!"

"Vern! Help me!"

Help her? I had no magic left. My medallion was spent—

The stone!

Impossibly, or perhaps simply with God's help, I found enough strength to fly to her. I thought it would be harder to give up my treasure, but one look at the blood coming from Grace's nose and eyes and it was nothing to pull it from my pocket, place it into her hands and hang on, shouting the first prayer I was taught.

"Kyrie eleison!" The shield grew bright as a nova.

"Christi eleison!"

Grace screamed. There was a flash.

"Kyrie eleison!"

Silence.

Where there had been a battleground, there was now only a trampled field.

Grace collapsed in my arms, and I dropped the stone to hold her.



We both sat on that hillock for most of the day, too exhausted to move, but apparently God's grace and the sacrifice of my now-ruined stone meant that we both recovered rather quickly, all things considered. That only left the unpleasant deed of reporting Pyramid Boy's death, and that meant talking to Santry. Fortunately, we caught him at the end of a good shift, and he was in the mood to be impressed by our efforts.

"So where did they all go—the gods, the locusts?"

Grinning, Grace quoted Exodus: "They invaded all Egypt and settled down in every area of the country in great numbers. Never before had there been such a plague of locusts, nor will there ever be again."

I laughed, and Santry, a good Baptist, laughed with me. "You're telling me the Plague of Locusts was your doing?"

"Not mine. God's. We were just the instruments."

Santry, a stickler for spelling things out, worried over this like a dog with a bone. "So with a psychologically depressed mage—a woman, no less—an underpowered dragon, and Moses, of course, who was a stutterer—

with these God defeated not once, but twice in two different times, two of the most powerful gods in the Egyptian pantheon?"

My neck arched angrily. He can call me underpowered, but no one talks about my partner that way. Grace, however, set her hand on my shoulder and I deflated, slightly. She spoke before I could say anything.

"And in at least two dimensions, Captain. God works in mysterious ways."

"Ain't that the truth, Sister Grace. Still, it's awfully disturbing to think there might be other gods."

"There's only one True God," Sister Grace retorted and glanced at me, expecting a punch line. I couldn't let her down. It was good to see her smile.

"It's true," I agreed. "All the rest are amateurs."



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Karina Fabian has written everything from radio news stories to personality features to science fiction. She's been in over 50 periodicals and has four books published. Her latest, *Infinite Space, Infinite God* (August 2007, Twilight Times Books) has driven her into the world of marketing. As she learns the tricks of publicizing her book, she's also tried to share her knowledge with others by teaching courses, offering "primers" on her website, answering questions and offering unsolicited advice. (Did we mention she also wrote how-to pieces? She's good at unsolicited advice.) In addition, she's shopping a fantasy trilogy, publishing a newsletter, writing a Catholic science fiction novel. She's written other stories about Vern and Sister Grace, including the award-winning serial "Magic, Mensa and Mayhem," which she's novelized. Meet Vern at < www.myspace.com/dragoneyepi >.



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