

## YOU WANT A PIECE OF ME?

Eris knew she was in trouble when she found the severed finger in her mailbox.

It lay, innocent and unassuming, on top of the gas bill. A woman's finger, the third finger of the left hand, obviously, with a chewed nail and the wedding band still clinging gruesomely to the ragged stump. At the sight of the tattered, pinkish-gray flesh, with the bone gleaming in the center, Eris gagged, struggling to keep her double caramel espresso inside. Icy water poured down her spine and into her heels. Her next thought was what to do about it. Gingerly, she lifted the gas bill by the edges, folding it slightly to keep the finger in place. She carried it inside, set it on the dining room table, and sat down, facing it, wondering what to do next.

She reached for the phone and dialed 911. The line rang and rang, and Eris drummed her nails irritably on the tabletop. Come on, idiots! She had a real emergency here!

Finally, a bored voice said, "911, what is your emergency!"

"It's about time! I could be dead by now for all you care!" Eris slammed her hand down on the table. "Look, I need the police here immediately."

"Ma'am, what's going on?" The woman still sounded bored, and Eris wanted to scream.

"Someone left a finger in my mailbox!"

"A finger in your mailbox. And you want the police?"

"Yes, I want the police! What do you think I called you for, you moron? I want the police here right away, because I found this finger in my mailbox! It's an emergency."

"Please hold, I'll transfer you to police dispatch."

The line clicked before Eris could say anything. She sat, rattling her fingers furiously on the tabletop. She waited and waited, listening to silence on the other end of the phone. "Hello? Hello?"

Jesus, it's a good thing this wasn't a real emergency. Eris wished she'd gotten that woman's name and operator number so she could complain about her later.

Finally, in disgust and irritation, she hung up the phone. To hell with the police. Anyway, she was in enough trouble with them. Although it hadn't been her fault she'd yelled at the officer who pulled her over for speeding. He'd been so rude, and taken so much of her time. Then impounded her car on top of it, because of unpaid parking tickets. Okay, maybe she shouldn't have threatened him after that, but really, what was a person supposed to do?

The finger rocked slightly on the gas bill envelope as she pulled it towards her. The diamond on the wedding ring winked temptingly, but she'd have to touch the finger, and Eris wasn't sure she could do that. Just the sight of it made her stomach churn. Why would someone leave a finger in her mailbox? Who could be sick enough to do something like that?

Then she remembered the last time Mama Sharina had read her Tarot cards. It had been last week. The old gypsy had looked dubiously at the upturned cards, with Swords predominating, and said, "Your cutting ways are returning to you. You have treated too many people ill, and one now seeks revenge. You will die by the edge of your tongue unless you make restitution."

Whatever that meant. How could leaving a dead finger in her mail be considered revenge? It was gruesome, but it didn't really bother her. She decided to take it to Mama Sharina's and see what the old lady had to say about it. Eris picked up the finger with salad tongs and dropped it into a plastic sandwich bag. She sealed the bag, and popped it into the freezer. Then she went to the phone, to call Mama Sharina.

"You have a piece of news for me," Mama Sharina said, without even saying hello or asking who it was, as she always did.

"Yes." Eris wasn't surprised. Mama Sharina always knew who it was when she answered the phone. But her use of the word piece gave her chills. Did the old gypsy really know what Eris had?

"I saw you would be cursed. I warned you, but you would not listen," Mama Sharina intoned. "Bring me the item in one hour, not more, not less."

Eris hung up and set her microwave timer for 45 minutes. She checked her watch to make sure it told the same time as the microwave. Mama Sharina was always saying things like that, but Eris thought she must have her reasons. Maybe the vibrations would be right at that time.

She thought about the curse. She doubted she would die by the edge of her tongue. She snapped at nearly everyone, but it wasn't personal. At least, she tried to keep it from being personal. It was just that people were so stupid all the time. Like yesterday. She had been standing patiently with a six-pack of Coke and three bananas in the "10 Items or Less" line, vaguely annoyed at the sign because it should have been fewer, not less. The line seemed to be moving slower than usual, and Eris looked up at the woman standing in front of the cashier. She was a little old lady, with thick glasses and hearing aids, with a huge mountain of stuff piled on the conveyor belt. Eris counted the items quickly, and groaned in annoyance. The old woman had fifteen items.

"Oh, for God's sake, can't you count?" Eris said, in the loud meant-to-be-heard voice she used when people were being stupid. "This is the ten-or-less line!"

The old lady didn't look up from dodderingly counting her change, but the cashier looked at Eris with a frown.

"It's just a couple items, honey, and she's already checked out."

"I'm not your honey," Eris said cuttingly. "And you're not supposed to take extra items in this line, it just slows the rest of us down." She slammed her hand down on the conveyor belt for

emphasis. She looked around at the other people in the line, but none of them looked back at her.

"Come on, get the old woman out of here."

After the old lady was gone, it was Eris's turn. She glared at the cashier. "What's your name?" It was right there on the woman's nametag, but she wanted the cashier to know someone was monitoring her.

"Athena," the cashier said. "That's \$4.95."

"Well, Athena, do you think you could be any slower? After taking those extra items like you're not supposed to?"

"That'll be \$4.95."

Obviously, she couldn't get anywhere with the idiot. Eris slapped down a five, and left before getting her change. She went to the manager's station to make a complaint about Athena, but no one was there, and Eris couldn't wait. She went home, and called the store's business office, to complain generally about the store. Someone had to keep these people up to the mark.

Eris yawned at the memory. She thought briefly that maybe she shouldn't have been so emphatic, but what was she supposed to do? That old woman had kept her waiting in line at least ten minutes longer than she should have. Time was money, her mother always said, and Eris didn't have much of either. She hadn't worked in a month, since her mother had died and left her the trust fund. That was starting to run low, though. Maybe it was time to rethink her strategy.

Exactly forty-five minutes later, Eris lifted the frozen finger out of the icebox, and tucked it into her purple beaded bag. She put on a blue suede coat, which clashed with the bag and the yellow outfit she had on, and went out into the street. The sun was coming down from noon, and the day was blisteringly hot. She immediately broke out in a heavy sweat, and she ran her fingers through her over-teased blonde hair. She put on a very old pair of Ray-Ban sunglasses, and set off

on foot to Mama Sharina's. The gypsy had warned her never to drive or arrive by bus. The spirits would be offended. Well, driving was out, thanks to that stupid CHP officer; but she would have liked to take the bus. It was more than a mile to Mama Sharina's.

Eris checked her watch anxiously as she reached the dilapidated front door. Mama Sharina rented a dingy loft on 3rd Street, with nothing but a glass door bearing her name, "Mama Sharina, Psychic", in fading black capitals. Eris opened the grimy door, and ran up the steep stairs, arriving in the chamber of the spirits exactly one hour after she'd called Mama Sharina.

The old woman squatted behind her cloth-covered table, the flames of the black candles flickering in the breeze of Eris's arrival. Mama Sharina peered up from beneath her brocade turban, then glanced at the tall grandfather clock in the corner. "Show me the piece."

Eris dropped the frozen hunk of meat and bone on the green cloth. Mama Sharina drew a circle around it with holy water, sprinkled it with herbs, and gazed into the flame of the nearest candle.

"It is as I warned you," she intoned. "You have been cursed by the sharp edge of your tongue. You must find the owner of this finger within twenty-four hours, and make restitution, or worse things will befall you."

"How can I find her?" Eris asked.

"The owner is known to you, and you will find her in a place of food and comfort." Mama Sharina took the finger and dropped it into a glass of clear liquid. "Now go, and do not contact me until you have found the owner of this finger."

Eris placed a creased twenty on the table, and obediently left the room. It didn't matter what Eris asked, Mama Sharina always charged twenty dollars. A lot of her mother's trust fund had gone into Mama Sharina's pockets in the last month.

Released from the disapproving gaze of the spirits, Eris went to the bus stop on the other side of 3rd street, and waited for the bus. And waited, and waited. She looked impatiently at her watch. The bus was supposed to arrive at twenty-five after the hour, and here it was already half-past. Finally, nearly seven minutes late, the bus pulled up to where Eris waited, tapping her foot irritably.

"Well, it's about time," she said, climbing up the steps. "You're supposed to be on time, aren't you?" She flashed her bus pass at the driver. "What's your name, anyway?" The driver turned away, but Eris saw his nametag. "Bruce? Well, Bruce, you've wasted my time this afternoon, and I don't think I ought to have to pay for this ride. In fact, you probably owe me for this trip, don't you think?"

The driver pulled out onto the street, turning away from Eris, but she could see the discomfort on his face. "I'm going to call your supervisor, as soon as I get home," she went on, bracing her feet against the movement of the bus. "They better repay me, or I'll sue their asses. Yours too, for making me late."

"Sit down, lady," the driver said, an edge to his bored tone.

"I won't sit down, we're not finished yet. I want you to explain to me, and to the rest of your passengers, why you were so late today. You've made me late, and you're making them late, too. You're obviously an incompetent, inconsiderate-"

The driver slammed on the brakes, nearly throwing Eris through the windshield. "Listen, lady," he said, and she was startled to see tears in his eyes. "I don't have to take this! Where do you get off telling me what to do?"

"Hey, I pay your salary," she snapped back. "I pay so you'll do your job, and being almost ten minutes late isn't doing your job! I think you ought to apologize, or get out of this business!"

And I'll bet your boss will think so too, when I get through telling them how rude and unprofessional you've been! I'm going to-"

The driver threw open the door. "You haven't even seen what rude is!" He stumbled down the steps, leaving the bus parked in the middle of the street, with traffic backing up behind it, horns honking.

"Nice job, lady," an elderly woman said sarcastically. "Now we'll never get to Santa Monica." She stomped down the steps to the bus, as Eris stared after her.

"Well, you saw," she said to the rest of the bus. "He wasn't being a bit cooperative with me."

No one said anything. Feeling foolish, Eris left the bus, and began the long hot walk back to her apartment. To her irritation, she couldn't help thinking how sad the bus driver had looked, crying as he scurried down the bus steps and away from her lashing tongue.

Eris spent the rest of the afternoon trying to think what a "place of food and comfort" might be. A hotel? She didn't know anyone who worked in a restaurant. Maybe someone at the McDonald's down the road. Frustrated, Eris went to the grocery store to buy a six-pack of Coke.

The checkout line was long, but this time there was no doddering old lady with a thousand items holding them up. Eris amused herself by making up stories about all the people ahead of her. There was a man buying ten frozen dinners; he'd just had a fight with his wife. An old woman buying canned cat food and celery; she couldn't afford anything else. Eris put her Coke on the conveyor belt and glanced at the clerk. To her annoyance, it was the same woman she'd yelled at yesterday. And she was even slower today, ringing things up one at a time, holding the items between her finger and thumb. She had a bandage on her left hand. Eris felt her pulse suddenly

slow, and her breath catch like a fishhook in her throat. It looked like clerk's third finger had been cut off.

"What happened to your hand?" Eris asked, struggling to control her voice. She slid her Cokes awkwardly over to the woman's maimed hand.

"So you came back," the woman said. "I suppose you're going to tell my manager again how I slowed you down." She ran the Coke across the laser scanner. "I don't mind people being rude, but you could be a little compassionate today."

"What happened?"

"Oh, something weird," the woman said, almost indifferently. "Some guy mugged me last night, and when I wouldn't give him my wedding ring, he cut my finger off." She took the money from Eris's trembling hand, and waved her on.

A neat brown paper package was waiting for her, resting on the doormat. Absently, Eris picked it up and carried it into the house with her Coke, and dropped it on the table. She wasn't thinking about much, except the checkout woman's missing finger. Should she call Mama Sharina? Was this the woman she was supposed to make restitution to? And how was she supposed to do it? Give her another finger? Eris popped open a Coke and took a swig.

Eris picked up the parcel and undid the strings. She unfolded the paper, and a hand dropped onto the tablecloth. Eris recoiled, the mouthful of Coke surging back up her throat.

It was the left hand of a woman, a different woman, with long shapely nails and rosy pink nail polish. The third finger had been removed. Eris looked at the clock on the microwave, but it was too late to call Mama Sharina; the old woman never answered the phone after six o'clock. Eris wrapped up the hand in its brown paper package and put it in the freezer. She had to think.

She was horrified, but not surprised when the arm arrived the next morning, folded up in the Sunday paper and fastened with blue rubber bands. It was the arm of a third woman, with dark skin and a tattoo on the elbow. The hand, of course, was missing. Eris put the arm in her freezer with the hand, and waited until she could call Mama Sharina.

The old woman didn't answer her phone, even though it was only ten a.m. Eris listened to it ring and ring, but finally gave up. She gathered the parts into her purple beaded bag, and walked the twelve blocks down to Mama Sharina's loft.

For the first time Eris could remember, the door was locked. She rattled the knob, and rapped loudly on the glass door, but no one answered. Eris shouted up at the window, but no broad-cheeked, brocade-turbaned head showed itself under the draperies. At last, Eris gave up and went home.

A pair of feet, still in their shoes, rested on her doormat when she got back. Women's feet, one in a red spike-heeled pump, the other in a bloody Birkenstock sandal. They sat side by side on the mat, toes pointed toward the door, as if waiting for her to open it so they could walk in. Wearily, Eris collected these latest parts and put them all in the freezer again. It was getting crowded in there.

Eris fell asleep on her couch, watching "America's Most Wanted", hoping perhaps there would be some news about a maniac going around cutting body parts off women. There was nothing. Although at least five women had been mangled, maybe killed, there was nothing on the TV show or the late news. Eris slept, and dreamed of what would happen when the rest of the body showed up. In the dream, Mama Sharina clucked and nodded: "I warned you this would happen." Eris fled from her, pursued by shambling, crawling body parts; hands that clutched at her ankles, feet that tripped her, a head that rolled after her like a bowling ball, chanting "As ye reap, so shall

ye sow." Eris mumbled and twisted, finally falling off her sofa. Bleary-eyed and confused, she went to bed.

The right arm and two legs lay stacked like cordwood on her balcony the next morning. Eris had to cut them up with the meat cleaver to fit them in the freezer. She called Mama Sharina, and to her surprise the old lady answered, as if the day before had never happened. But when Eris asked where she'd been, the old gypsy said curtly, "I have other clients besides you." Then she went on with her directions.

"You must wait until you have all the pieces. They will arrive by this evening. Then bring them to me at midnight, and meet me at the entrance to my shop."

Eris found a woman's torso propped up in her apartment storage space; she wrapped it in green plastic garbage bags and wedged it into the refrigerator. She didn't dare look in the hatbox that the UPS man delivered later that day. She put it in the fridge with the rest of the pieces, and waited for midnight.

The day had never been so long or hot; Eris wished for the first time she had gotten a job after she was fired from the telemarketing company, instead of trying to live off her mother's trust fund.

As the sun set, Eris began preparing for her nighttime visit to Mama Sharina. She loaded the pieces into a gym bag, and at eleven p.m., hauled them down to Mama Sharina's. The oldest piece, the hand, had begun to stink in the festering heat. Eris was five minutes early, but the gypsy was waiting, wearing green robes and her brocade turban. She did not speak to Eris, but merely set off down the street. Eris panted after her, lugging her groaning bag.

They came at last to a cemetery. Mama Sharina intoned, "Now you must dig. Dig a grave for these pieces that have come to you."

"I don't have a shovel," Eris protested.

"Nevertheless, you must dig a hole. It must be big enough to lay all the parts out in their proper places."

Eris dropped to her knees, and began digging a hole with her hands. She tried not to think that she was in a graveyard, and God knew what she might be digging up. Dirt caked under her fingernails, and her hair grew matted with sweat.

"Are you sure this will lift the curse?"

"Dig."

The moon slid down from the top of the sky, and Eris finally finished the oblong, rough-sided hole. She unwrapped the torso from its plastic bags, and tumbled it into the grave.

"Be careful," Mama Sharina admonished her.

The arms and legs were next, then the feet, still balanced precariously in their shoes. And finally the hands. "What about the finger?"

"That is of no concern."

Eris reached for the hatbox, and slit the tape holding it closed with her filthy, chipped fingernails. But when she opened it, the box was empty. "I can't finish it. There's no head."

"You have finished."

Relieved, Eris heaved herself out of the pit and sat on the edge, trying not to look at the grisly parts sprawled at the bottom.

"Now you must pour holy water on the grave." Mama Sharina passed her a quart bottle of water. Eris poured the water over the body, wishing she dared drink some. "And now, cover the body."

Wearily, Eris shoveled the earth back into the pit, smoothing the top, so that no one could see a hole had been dug. Once she was finished, and with dawn lurking at the horizon, Mama Sharina told her to stop. The old gypsy drew a circle around the grave with more holy water, then with a whitish gray powder. She lit two of her black candles and set them at the head and foot of the grave. She sprinkled more powder onto the corpse, and stepped back. Eris watched, weary and longing for her bed.

"You must come here every morning and evening," Mama Sharina instructed her. "You must buy holy water, which I will sell you, and saturate the earth morning and night for a month. Then you must come here at midnight on the thirtieth day and wait, and the curse will be lifted."

A month later, her bank account depleted, Eris stood at the foot of the grave and waited. She didn't know what she was waiting for, only that Mama Sharina had reiterated she had to be here. Finally, bored, she turned away and leaned against a tree, humming a little and tapping her feet irritably. Maybe it was time to finish with Mama Sharina. Maybe it was time to give up her lifestyle of laziness.

A hand poked up out of the earth of the grave.

Eris stared, frozen in horror. It was the left hand, and the third finger was missing. The second hand joined it, and with a thick groan, the whole mismatched, decayed corpse lifted itself free of the loose earth of the grave.

It had no head, of course, but somehow it saw Eris standing rigid under the tree. It shambled towards her, dripping bits of flesh. Eris ran, blindly, unable to scream, until she tripped over a gravestone and fell. She lay sobbing against the grass, hands scrambling in the dirt and unkempt grass, wildly wondering if the curse had finally gotten her. She smelled a hideous sewage

stench, and then it was upon her, clawed hands groping for her wrists, decayed knees digging into her back.

Eris screamed, not in pain, but in terror. She kicked and fought, but the thing was strong, and it lifted her, still screaming, and threw her over its shoulder. It hauled her grimly back to the open grave. Mama Sharina and another woman stood by the half-empty pit. "Put her inside," Mama instructed the thing.

Eris screamed and struggled, but the thing held her easily, lifting her by the neck and knees as lightly as if Eris was a rabbit. It tossed her into the grave, and Eris rolled onto her back, raising her bleeding hands. "Please, the curse is lifted! You don't have to do this!"

"Fill it in," the old woman said calmly.

The thing began digging with decayed, bony fingers, flinging lumps of earth and grass down onto Eris. She struggled to her knees, only to catch a mouthful of soil, which made her gag and retch. The thing paid no heed, but kept piling dirt on top of her, until all that could be seen of Eris was her head and one hand. Her left hand.

She raised her dirty face to Mama Sharina, and then saw the other woman standing next to her. It was the grocery store clerk, head back and laughing. --I have other clients.

"No! I was your best client!" Eris screamed. "How can you do this to me?" But she remembered the cashier and the bus driver; the doctor and the bank clerk; and others, how many others? Which ones were Mama Sharina's clients? "Please, don't let them do this to me!" But she was cursed. She was dying by the sharp edge of her tongue.

The cashier stepped forward, carrying a pair of box shears. Ignoring Eris's screams, she leaned over, and cut off one of Eris's fingers. The ring finger. Eris was beyond pain now; she moaned in pure animal fear. The cashier spit on her as she stepped back to her place.

"Are you satisfied?" Mama Sharina said to the grocery store clerk.

"Oh, absolutely," the woman said, cradling her maimed hand. "Little bitch, she got what she deserved." She put the finger in her pocket. "And this squares us?"

"We are even."

The cashier didn't look back. She turned and sauntered out of the graveyard.

"What about me!" Eris screamed. "You can't leave me like this! I can't breathe! I'll die this way, get me out of here!"

Mama Sharina turned back to Eris. Her face was dark and inscrutable. There was something long and shiny in her hand. "I have to take my payment," she said and nodded to the headless thing beside her. "She promised me your head."

"No!"

But her scream was cut short as the machete blade flashed down.