

Heartbreaker

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“Look at this strange little figure I found,” said Penny, holding it up so that her fiancé Bill could see it more closely. Indeed, the little figure was shaped like a human but the proportions were all wrong. The arms were much too long, the legs crooked and not the same length, one foot had 8 toes, the hips were very wide but it had a big barrel chest with some kind of scarring or tattoos in a pentagram design, the neck was stubby but the head was long and narrow with big slitted eyes and a giant grin.

Bill took the figure from Penny to examine it. Penny immediately became agitated and somewhat upset. She really wanted to take the figure back but stopped herself. She and Bill had been together for 3 years, three wonderful years, and now on this cruise Bill asked Penny to marry him. She knew it was coming and jumped into his arms to say yes. The brand new engagement ring sparkled on her finger. She loved it, she couldn't stop looking at it and then at Bill. Now she was more interested in the figure. Bill looked at the expression on the face of the figure.

“It really looks like this thing is laughing at you, or gloating, or sneering at the same time being very concerned and happy to see you,” said Bill. “I've never seen anything like it. Where did you say you found this?” Bill sort of half-turned away from Penny with the figure. This made Penny genuinely upset.

“Where are you going with that,” she wanted to know, ignoring Bill's question. “Please give it back. Now.” Penny held out her hand.

“Whoa, wait a minute, I'm not done looking at it,” said Bill, surprised by Penny's tone and actions. “You know I'll give it back to you.” He smiled. He didn't want to return it to her for some reason he could not quite grasp.

“Oh I'm sure you will,” said Penny, her tone of voice thick with sarcasm, “I'm just not sure when.” Penny herself was surprised by the words coming out of her mouth. She trusted Bill with her life. For some reason she could not explain, she didn't trust him with the figure.

“What happened to share and share alike? What's mine is yours?” Bill now challenged her. “Out the window it seems.” Bill heard the words he said and couldn't believe it.

Penny suddenly lunged for the figure and grabbed it out of Bill's hands. “Mine!” she hissed. Just as swiftly, she opened the cabin door and went out, nearly running down the deck. Bill came storming out after her yelling “Now I see the true you!” He was also shouting some unloving names at her.

“Well if it means that much to you, then here, you can have it!” Penny screamed, and threw the figure at Bill as hard as she could. She turned and stomped away down the

deck toward the forward lounge. Bill caught the figure and threw it back in the cabin, then went after Penny.

Vera only saw the cabin door suddenly open and the woman Penny come storming out, followed by the man Bill. She stood in surprise on the deck behind them as the two had words and threw something around, and then they both moved quickly away down the deck and turned into one of the main hallways of the ship. Vera could hardly believe what she was seeing. She had seen that couple together for the last week as the ship cruised the islands. They were about as happy a couple as she had ever seen.

Then she saw something that nearly caused her a heart attack. A figure, shaped like a person but draped in a long coat and cape so it was hard to tell if it was a man or a woman, came out of the cabin door. He or she stopped and looked around. The face turned toward Vera and stared at her. It had the most horrible satisfied grin on its face, a grin that immediately changed to a scowl as the person saw Vera.

Vera felt a jolt of electricity go through her entire body. She knew, she knew exactly what this was and she didn't want to believe it, but she had to believe it. She was staring right into the eyes of the reincarnated Heartbreaker, the evil spirit that had been trapped and buried on the atoll the ship had just visited.

The Heartbreaker's stare burned into her eyes; it was trying to erase her memory of it but Vera could not forget. Suddenly it turned and disappeared down the deck.

Vera knew now she didn't have much time. For as long as she had been the meteorologist aboard the ships of the cruise lines visiting these islands - almost ten years now - she had heard the legends of the locals referring to the talisman of the Heartbreaker, supposedly buried on an atoll near Huahine. Right next to it or near it was supposed to be the talisman of the Heart Doctor.

According to the legend, an evil spirit, born in one of the volcanos, roamed the region, breaking the hearts of people in love and feeding off of the hate and loneliness that resulted. The Heartbreaker took human form, either male or female, but when it was at rest, it was just a cloud of energy.

For many generations the Heartbreaker circulated only in the islands, as there was no way for it to get very far. However, a day came when the first large European ship sailed into view of the harbor at Maitai Lapita village on Huahine Nui. The Heartbreaker was lurking in one of the temples in the mountains and saw this ship coming. It knew this ship could carry it away to places where it could never be caught.

One of the temples was dedicated to the Lapita goddess of love and abundance. For generations the temple was cared for by the descendants of the first child born of the union between the goddess of love and the king of the Lapita people, a girl named Verahuane.

Verahuane's daughter also saw the ship and knew she had to prevent the Heartbreaker from getting aboard. She went to the son of the shaman for help, who was her lover.

Together, according to the legend, they were able to lure the Heartbreaker out into the wilderness, to give it the chance to break their hearts. The Heartbreaker did not have

the power to overcome the magic of the shaman or the love of Verahuane as long as they were near the temples.

A great battle took place, according to the legend, and the Heartbreaker was turned into a stone figure, unable to escape without help. In the process, however, Verahuane was also turned to a stone figure, encasing the great love of the goddess. The shaman's son buried the two figures and then escaped the islands forever, his heart broken.

Vera had been told by her great grandmother that she was descended of the family line charged with protecting and caring for the temple of the goddess on Huahine. Vera thought this was a very quaint tale and never actually believed it.

Now, staring in the eyes of the Heartbreaker, she knew it was true. She knew she had to find the talisman of the spirit of Verahuane and awaken it or the Heartbreaker would sail right off to New Caledonia and from there to anywhere in the world at the speed of a jet airplane.

She pulled out her cell phone and dialed the bridge. "When do we weigh anchor?" she asked, "are all the guests back on board?" "We weigh anchor in twenty minutes" was the answer, and no, not all the passengers were back on board. "Thanks!" Vera nearly shouted into her phone. She ran for the forward lounge as fast as she could. She needed to find Penny.

She was not in the forward lounge, but Vera could see her on the foredeck, standing with her back turned to Bill, who was apparently pleading with her. As much as Vera did not want to break into the middle of that conversation, she had to do it. She went out and walked right up to the couple.

"Excuse me," she said, gingerly, "I need your help." Both Bill and Penny were taken aback by Vera, in part because Vera was wearing her ship's crew uniform. Both Bill and Penny asked if they had done something wrong and then how they could help. They were both, it seemed to Vera, very glad she interrupted them.

"I happened to see you examining an artifact you found on the atoll there," she began, "I need to know where you found it. It's very important." Vera looked in Penny's eyes and she could see the pain and heartache there. Penny was arguing and pushing her fiancé away and she wasn't sure why. Bill, meanwhile, was confused and angry but his heart was not yet broken.

"I thought it was allowed to collect things from these islands, the guide told us..." sputtered Penny.

Vera held up a hand. "You haven't done anything wrong," she assured Penny, "really, you haven't. If you found what I think you found, people have been looking for that for decades. I just need to document the place you found it."

"Well, I already did," said Penny, suddenly smiling. "I took pictures. See." She held out her smartphone so Vera could see the photos. Vera was very excited.

"And what part of the atoll is that? Do you remember?" asked Vera.

"We walked away as far as we could from the landing point," said Bill, "toward the sun. I stopped to look at something and Penny kept going."

"Yes," continued Penny, "I wanted to see if I could get to the far shore. I found a rock outcropping before that, which is where I found it." Penny's voice changed dramatically as she said the word "it", as if "it" were something she'd never seen.

"Thank you, thank you very much," said Vera. "Whatever you do, please don't leave the ship. Thank you."

It took Vera twelve minutes to get to the place on the atoll where Penny had found the talisman. Fortunately Vera had seen the markings in Penny's photo of where the other talisman should be. She found that rock and moved it: nothing there. Vera stomped her feet in frustration. She started rapidly digging through the rocks that had fallen off the top of the outcropping. Nothing, nothing and nothing. The ship's whistle blew. She had five minutes to get back and it would take her five minutes to get to the landing point. She couldn't leave without the other talisman that held the spirit of the Love Doctor.

She stood and stared hard at the outcropping, her gaze going up and down the rock. Then she saw it: the symbol from the temple of the goddess of love and abundance. She grabbed at that rock and it fell away in her hand to reveal the other talisman. The ship's whistle blew two quick notes. It was leaving. She ran as hard as she could through the jungle and arrived breathless at the landing point. There was the launch and two ship's crew, one the Officer of the Day, who promptly yelled at her and promised disciplinary action. Vera bowed and said "yes sir yes sir" as they returned to the ship. The entire ship had waited for her. As a result, she was confined to quarters for the remainder of the day.

Vera returned to her quarters as ordered, which was fine with her because this is where she needed to go anyway. She pulled out the talisman and cleaned it off. It was a small figurine of a pregnant woman who had a serene smile on her face. Vera rubbed the big round belly until it became warm. Vera closed her eyes and repeated some of the chants she had heard from the local Lapita descendants. She fell into a trance.

She saw the Lapita goddess of love and abundance before her, arms open wide. Are you prepared for my embrace? asked the goddess. If you accept me, you will be changed forever.

Vera was both afraid and filled with joy. She very much liked her life as it was; she had worked hard to get where she was. She also felt at her deepest core that this was what she was born to do, that really she had no choice and even if she had no idea what it would bring to her life, she had to do it. Yes, she answered the spirit of the goddess, yes, yes, yes.

Vera felt herself be surrounded and then immersed in the energy of the goddess. She experienced a sudden bursting of white light, then her mind went completely blank. The next thing she knew, she heard herself repeating the prayers of the goddess in the original tongue of the Lapita.

Vera opened her eyes. The talisman was gone. Vanished. Instantly she remembered

Penny, and nearly fell down with the pain of heartache she felt from her. A new feeling welled up inside Vera, a feeling of great serenity and power, along with the certain knowledge that she could heal Penny's broken heart if only she could find Penny. A hug, a touch, or even just Penny accepting Vera's gift of love through prayer would heal her. She had to find Penny.

She was also confined to quarters. If she were caught outside her cabin she might be suspended if not fired. If she didn't heal Penny's heartbreak and capture the evil spirit now loose on the ship much worse things would happen. She might be able to move about the ship and find Penny if she were disguised somehow; she didn't own a lot of makeup or clothes because she was always in uniform. But she knew of a woman who worked in the formal dining room who did have all of that stuff and she would not know about Vera's orders.

Vera put on the most unremarkable clothes she had, put on a large sun hat and sunglasses and went quickly to see the woman. Vera made up some story about wanting to attract a particular male passenger without him knowing she worked aboard ship; the woman Cindy just loved this idea and within half an hour had Vera looking nothing like she normally did. Vera promised to return with all the details about how it went and set out to find Penny.

No sooner did she turn the corner into the central corridor of the ship than she ran into one of the ship's officers. Vera just kept walking; the officer noticed her and looked at her but not, Vera quickly realized, because he thought she was Vera; rather, he was *checking her out*. That's when Vera knew for sure her disguise worked. He said hello and she smiled and nodded and kept going.

Vera went first to Penny's cabin but she was not there. A very distraught Bill opened the door when she knocked; she told him she was a new friend that Penny had just met. "Well, you won't find her here because she went and got her own room," said Bill bitterly. Somewhere on C deck, he thought.

Vera could see Bill's heart was now broken. Pretending to just be one of those people who was very touchy, she threw her arms around him and let the power of the goddess move into him. "Oh I'm so glad to meet you, Penny has said so many great things about you," she said at the same time, "she says you are the most loving man." Vera let him go and stepped back.

Bill was completely surprised by the actions of this slightly weird woman and at the same time he felt somehow better, somehow restored and back to normal. "Well thank you," he said, not sure what else to say. "If you see Penny please tell her I miss her." Bill looked like he wanted to cry.

"Don't worry," assured Vera, "I will." Vera turned and headed to C deck.

On her way there she passed by the juice bar. Vera was filled with a sense of loneliness and unhappiness and it got stronger the closer she got to the entrance of the bar. There was a small man with long black hair sitting alone in the corner of the bar, staring intently at a young couple standing at the counter ordering drinks. Vera had never seen that man aboard before but she did recognize the couple as guests on this cruise.

The couple seemed to be getting into some kind of argument about the value of the juices and which were better and what people should do to take care of themselves. Vera could see and feel that man in the corner soaking in every word of the argument and enjoying it. As Vera decided to step into the juice bar to see if she could somehow calm the couple down, the man trained his gaze on her. She knew, immediately, this was the incarnated spirit of the Heartbreaker, here to break this couple's hearts. She turned her own sights on him.

He immediately got up and walked quickly out the other entrance. The couple, meanwhile, were in the throes of the heartbreak spell cast by the evil spirit. Vera raised her hands and spoke her prayer of love and forgiveness loud enough for the couple to hear. They stopped arguing and turned to her. The shroud of the evil spell around them was strong but the light of Vera's prayers slowly drove it apart until finally it disappeared. The couple looked at each other and hugged.

Vera left the bar and resumed her search for Penny and now also the evil Heartbreaker, whom she now knew had taken the shape of a small dark-haired man. How much more heartbreak had he caused, she wondered. What would happen if it got off the ship? The ship was sailing for New Caledonia now; in two days it would dock at one of the smaller islands near there to let people enjoy the pristine beaches. There were plenty of ferry services from there to New Caledonia. Vera knew she had to find the Heartbreaker and stop it before then.

She went up to C deck hoping to run into Penny but there was no sign of her. Where would she go if she didn't want to be couped up in a cabin but still be left alone? Vera went down to the veranda deck where the lifeboats were kept.

There she saw Penny, leaning over the rails watching the water flow past the hull of the ship. Then she saw a man with her, a man in dark clothing. Vera had a bad feeling about this man. She hurried. The man said something that made Penny laugh and turn toward him. Vera hurried more. The man put his arms around Penny's waist and gently pulled her toward him. No, thought Vera, no, no, no. Don't do it Penny.

Penny kissed the man. Instantly, he disappeared, leaving a pile of dark clothing on the deck. Now Vera ran, and coming up to a startled Penny, started projecting the love of the goddess around Penny.

At first Penny was frightened of Vera, then angry, then confused and finally calm. As Vera gently took her hands in her own, Penny seemed to wake up. She had a look of complete surprise on her face as she looked at Vera.

"Who are you? How did I get here? What are you doing?" Penny stammered.

"Oh I was just walking by and I thought you might need some help," said Vera. "I thought maybe that man was bothering you."

"That man?" asked Penny. Then she seemed to vaguely remember. "Oh yes him he wanted to hear about where I was from because he was a tourist. I told him about the little town I grew up in." Penny looked around. "But where did he go?" She looked at Vera. "Where is Bill? Oh no, what have I done to Bill." She turned and ran away.

Vera was filled with joy that Penny's heart had been healed. She knew Penny and Bill would get back together now. She also knew now that this place on the ship was a portal between places. She concentrated her mind and allowed herself to pass through the portal to the place where the Heartbreaker had gone. Instantly she found herself standing on a street in the small town where Penny grew up.

Vera looked around. It was a little fishing village. There was a big church right near the docks, no doubt where the fishermen went to pray before going to sea. Vera was certain the Heartbreaker would not go in there looking for the next victim. There were several cafes dotted along the commercial front street, good places to look for people in love. Vera started to walk toward the cafes.

Then she realized first that she had no money at all and even if she did it might not be the right kind of money and second that she needed to change her appearance. She didn't want the Heartbreaker to see her coming and run away as he had the last time. She walked around the village a bit, looking for a consignment store. It was clear that the fishing industry had collapsed here just as it had everywhere else and the chances were good that people needed that kind of store. She found it several streets back from the main street.

Vera entered the store and started to look for clothes her size. The shopkeeper, a middle-aged woman, came over to her. "Kia ora, how are you," she said.

Vera recognized the phrase as Maori, and the accent was slightly British. "Hello," said Vera. "I'm just looking to change my wardrobe today."

The shopkeeper smiled. "Any special occasion? We have lots of clothes for girls." She waved her hand toward several racks.

Vera heard the way the shopkeeper rolled the sound in girl and guessed she was in the south of New Zealand. "No, nothing special, just some casual clothes." Vera followed the shopkeeper over to the racks of women's clothing. It only took her a few minutes to find a suitable set to replace what she was wearing.

"Ka pai," said Vera to the shopkeeper. She had been sailing around this part of the world long enough to learn local phrases. "I'll take these."

The shopkeeper brightened and stated the price, then looked expectantly at Vera, waiting for her to produce some money.

Vera involuntarily frowned. "Tu meke?" said the shopkeeper, agitated and a little surprised. It was hard for her to believe that these very inexpensive used clothes could cost too much.

Vera explained that she wanted to trade the clothes she was wearing for the clothes she wanted to buy. This made the shopkeeper smile. Vera was wearing a set of fine clothes her friend on the cruise ship had purchased in Hong Kong. They were worth quite a lot more than what Vera wanted to take. After a few minutes of bargaining, Vera went into the changing room and changed clothes. She handed the shopkeeper the clothes she had been wearing and the shopkeeper gave her a little bit of money in

return.

Vera was just about to walk out the door when she saw a big floppy hat that would be perfect to hide her hair and much of her face. She picked out the hat and put it firmly on her head, then turned to the shopkeeper. The shopkeeper just smiled and waved her out the door.

Appearance altered, Vera now went to the first of small cafes she'd seen on the main street of the harbor. She had to rely entirely on her newfound instincts to find the Heartbreaker; he or it could look like anything now.

The first cafe was pretty much empty. The man behind the counter watched her every move as she came in and sat down at the counter. His one customer sat at the end of the counter furthest from the door and also watched her every move as she came in.

She smiled at the man behind the counter, a middle-aged man with glasses, and said how do you do and ordered a glass of juice. Even though the man said we only have apple and she nodded yes, he might as well have said 'you're not from around here are you. What are you doing here and why are you wearing the jacket that Elouise Hanson always used to wear?' But he didn't; he just brought the juice and then sat back on a stool behind the counter.

Vera struggled to think of some way to ask these two people where couples were likely to be found, if anywhere. The Heartbreaker needed to find hearts to break. Or anywhere women were likely to congregate. Women were the most likely targets.

"Say," she said to the man behind the counter, "is there a grocery store or laundromat here in town?" The man looked a little bit surprised by her question, and stood up off the stool. Just then two men and a woman came into the cafe, distracting the man.

The three new people sat down at the counter on either side of Vera, leaving no empty seats next to her, even though there were plenty of seats at the long counter. The man behind the counter just said "Coffee" and all three people nodded silently. The man bustled to get their orders.

Within just a few seconds, Vera began to feel a chill creeping around her. Even though the two men who had just come in were sitting right next to her, they did not acknowledge her even when she turned to look at them. The woman took two sips of her coffee and got off her seat to come and stand right behind one of the men and Vera. The chill got even colder; she felt like somebody was trying to wrap her in an ice blanket.

That's when Vera realized what was going on: these people had already been turned cold as ice by the Heartbreaker and now they were trying to isolate her, turn her cold too. Vera focused her attention on warming the hearts of these people but they were too many and too cold. Vera wished she had an ally, somebody just to help with the balance of love in the room. She felt the cold get even greater. She was starting to think that maybe she might have to run out of the cafe, even go all the way back to the ship so that she wouldn't be trapped here with a cold heart forever.

Just then the owner of the consignment shop came in, suddenly brightening with great

smiles when she saw Vera. Instantly Vera was able to drive the cold out of herself. The three people turned and looked with annoyed and irritated expressions at the shop owner, who was very much taken aback by this reception. The shop owner frowned and took several steps into the cafe toward Vera, who was now able to radiate heart healing. The three people suddenly got up and left the cafe in a hurry.

Vera too got up and took the shop owner by the hand. "Oh thank you so much!" said Vera warmly, and she too left the cafe. She looked in both directions and saw the three people moving rapidly away down the street toward the next cafe. Vera was sure they were going back to the Heartbreaker.

This, Vera realized, was not going to be so easy – or so safe. She might be able to counter the Heartbreaker alone by herself, and she might be able to heal the broken heart of one person by herself, but she was not so sure she could take on the Heartbreaker and even one of the lonelies he created at the same time. She would need help. Nonetheless, she started to follow the three people. Behind her, the shop owner had also come out and started to follow her.

PLAY THE GAME TO FIND OUT WHAT HAPPENS NEXT!