

Lucy had said that the best time to catch the feuding professors at home was early in the afternoon – so promptly at one o'clock the next day, Max climbed the steps to the door of a squat apartment building in the Parione district and pushed the button marked 'John Vanderspeigel.'

There was a moment of silence, then the speaker crackled and a voice asked, "can I help you?"

"Dr. Vanderspeigel?" asked Max. He'd been expecting the professor to be German or Dutch, but the voice spoke English with a broad Boston accent. "My name is Max Tully. Lucia Fabrizio said you might know something about the sewer ghost."

"The sewer... you mean Octavia?" said the voice.

"The ghost's name is Octavia?"

"Probably not," the voice replied, "but it's the only name we have for her. Please, come in."

The apartment building was six storeys and Dr. Vanderspeigel was, naturally, on the top. There *was* an elevator, but it had a yellowed 'Out Of Order' sign affixed to its iron grille with dried-up scotch tape. Max stood staring at it for a few seconds, then sighed and pushed open the stairwell door. He *knew* he needed to lose weight. The universe didn't have to rub it in his face all the time.

He arrived, huffing and sore, to find the professor there waiting for him. John Vanderspeigel turned out to be in his late fifties or early sixties, with thin beige hair and a face that seemed to be dangling rather precariously from his skull. This man greeted Max and shook his hand, then showed him into his tiny office.

"Mr. Tully," said Vanderspeigel, pouring coffee into a kitschy-looking mug with a faded cartoon of the Colosseum on it, "what can I help you with?"

"Well, I work for *Sights* magazine," Max began, figuring he might as well start at the bottom and work his way up. "They've got me looking for Italian ghost stories, and I ran across your haunted sewer."

Vanderspeigel looked skeptical. "Begging your pardon," he said, "but I don't think a ghost in a sewer is the sort of thing one of those atrocious travel magazines wants to feature. How do you like your coffee?"

"No milk, lots of sugar," said Max. "And I don't think the magazine will be interested, either, but I... that is..." he swallowed, suddenly reluctant to admit that he could hear the ghost's voice. After all, Lucy had never actually *said* that either of the professors could hear it. What if Vanderspeigel thought he was nuts? "It sounds like an unusual story," he finished, knowing it sounded lame. "I'd like to know more about it."

"Ah." Vanderspeigel said knowingly. "You can hear her, can't you?"

Max nodded, relieved. "Yes!" he said. "Can you?"

"I can," said the professor. "I thought the whole story was nonsense until I heard it for myself." He handed Max the coffee and poured a second cup for himself. "I've been hooked ever since. What would you like to know?"

"Anything you can tell me," said Max. He opened his notebook and flipped through the pages. "You said the ghost's name is Octavia?"

"No," said Vanderspeigel. "I said that's what we call her for lack of anything better. I'll show you the associated record." He set down his coffee cup and turned to open a filing cabinet. "Let me see if I can find it here," he muttered to himself. "I hope this is the right drawer."

Max hoped so, too, because if it wasn't, then finding whatever Vanderspeigel was looking for might well take all day. The entire back wall of the office was lined with cabinets and shelves, all of them stuffed like turkeys with folders, books, and an assortment of classical paraphernalia. The particular cabinet the professor was looking through was topped with a replica Roman bust, identified by a little brass plaque as the emperor Augustus.

Max eyed the thing cynically. So this was the man who'd built himself that giant hill of a tomb that tourists wrote their names on, was it? He didn't look particularly great and mighty as far as Max could tell. The bust was of a man in his fifties with a strong nose, furrowed brow, and receding hairline. Except for the obligatory laurel wreath around his ears, he looked more like somebody's foul-tempered grandfather than like any sort of emperor.

“Ah, here we are!” Vanderspeigel pulled a folder out of the cabinet, and fished out a static-speckled photocopy. “This is the incident most historians connect with the ghost.”

Max took the paper and looked at it, but it meant nothing to him. It was a photocopy of a photograph of a page covered in very dense Latin, the letters written tall and thin so as to cram as much as possible into the limited space. There were no spaces between the different words, or even little dots like the ones Gnaeus Tullius had thoughtfully included in his graffiti – Max couldn’t even be sure which end of the page was the top. He looked up at Vanderspeigel for an explanation.

“It’s part of the *Actum Diurnum* for February seventh, 12 BC,” the professor said.

That wasn’t any better. “What’s that?” asked Max.

“You can think of it as the Roman equivalent of *People* magazine,” Vanderspeigel explained. “News, gossip, and announcements used to be posted daily in the Forum for the populace to read. This one,” he took the page back and tucked it into its folder, “is a copy sent out to Laetorius Faustus, Governor of Cisalpine Gaul. It describes how late at night, three days before the Nones of February – come to think of it, that’s today, isn’t it? Is it the third?” He didn’t wait for Max to reply. “We have only half of the report, but it says that the murdered woman’s body was pulled out of the sewer on that spot where people have to stand to hear the ghost. The trial of her killer was held two days later, and the man was condemned to be fed to the beasts in the circus. Augustus himself presided – hence many historians have assumed that the murdered woman must have been a relative, and accordingly refer to her as Octavia.”

He clearly expected this to make sense to Max. It didn’t. “Sorry,” said Max, “but I think I missed something. Why would her name be Octavia?”

“It wouldn’t be, necessarily,” said Vanderspeigel. “Are you familiar with Roman naming conventions?”

“I’m not a ‘history’ person,” said Max. “I’m a photographer.”

“Roman women in the first century BC did not have personal names,” the professor said.

“A woman was known by the feminine form of her father’s family name – so all the women in the Julius family were called Julia, women in the Hortensius family were Hortensia, and so forth. Their families probably gave them nicknames, but those don’t get recorded in legal documents.”

“All right,” said Max.

“A man,” Vanderspeigel went on, “on the other hand, had at least three names. The first was the *praenomen*. There were only about a dozen of those in common use: Gaius, Gnaeus, Marcus, Tiberius... I used to remember them all.” He waved a hand indifferently. “Old age. Next was the *nomen*. That was the name of the clan or extended family, such as Julius, Cornelius, Claudius... there are hundreds of them. And last was the *cognomen*, which was kind of a nickname for a particular family or household. So Gaius Julius Caesar was Gaius, of the Caesar family of the clan Julius.”

“And Augustus’ sisters would have been Octavias?” Max interrupted, hoping to get the conversation back to the point. Vanderspeigel sounded as if he’d forgotten who he was talking to, and was simply reciting an old lecture.

This may have been the case. “Yes, yes,” said the professor. “Augustus came from the Octavian clan, so all his female relatives on his father’s side were called Octavia.”

“I see,” Max said. He was starting to vaguely remember his high school Latin teacher, who’d been much more interested in history than Sister Hazel had, talking about something like that. “So what happened to this Octavia in the sewer, then?” he asked. “I mean, you said they condemned the man who killed her – who was he?”

“Nobody knows,” said Vanderspeigel. “That one page is all we have of the report, and it’s only the first two lines that describe the case. There were probably further details on the previous page, but that’s been lost. I do have a theory,” he added, “but I can’t share it yet. I don’t have proper documentation. A lot of ancient legal records are still in the Vatican library, but they’ve never been eager to share their pre-Christian possessions.”

“What’s the theory?” asked Max. “I promise I won’t publish it,” he added, “I’m only curious.”

Vanderspeigel gave him a dry look. "Considering you've already told me you work for a magazine," he said, "I'd rather not. I'm afraid I've had some bad experiences with journalists."

"I see," said Max. "Well, thank you very much for your time." He'd certainly learned a lot about Roman names, even if he hadn't learned a thing about ghosts.

"You're very welcome," said Vanderspeigel. He paused a moment, thinking, then asked, "you said Signora Fabrizio recommended me?"

"That's right," said Max. "I asked her if she knew anybody else who'd heard the ghost, and she told me to come see you."

"She didn't mention Hector Waldemar at all, did she?" asked Vanderspeigel.

"Actually, yes, she did," Max said. "I was going to go see him next."

The professor snorted. "Don't bother," he said. "The man is an idiot. He'll do nothing but fill your ears with supernatural bullshit."

"I'll keep that in mind," Max promised. He stood up, hitched his camera bag up his shoulder, and shook Vanderspeigel's hand. "Thanks for the coffee."

"No trouble," Vanderspeigel replied.

Max hesitated. "Er... if I can ask: you said you'd heard the ghost yourself?"

He saw Vanderspeigel stiffen. "Yes," he said carefully. "I have."

"Do you know what she's saying?" Max wanted to know. "I thought there were words, but I couldn't make them out."

Vanderspeigel closed his eyes. "*Desine, sis,*" he recited. His voice was clipped and precise, without emotion. "*Precor, in nomine Herculis, desine. Aliquis me iuva.*" He paused a moment, then opened his eyes and gave the translation. "Stop, please. I beg you, in the name of Hercules, stop. Somebody help me."

Max shivered. "Thanks," he said.

He trooped down six flights of stairs again, wondering what to do next. Lucy and Vanderspeigel had both described Dr. Waldemar as being a bit crazy, but the idea of being able to stand on a manhole cover and hear a voice from two thousand years ago was pretty crazy, itself. And even if it didn't *help*, talking to Dr. Waldemar probably couldn't *hurt*, either. Max pulled out his map and Lucy's note with the addresses, and consulted both as he pushed the front door of the building open. Hector Waldemar was going to be his next stop.

Waldemar offered Max coffee in the exact same stupid Colosseum mug as Vanderspeigel, and was about the same age, but other than that the two men could hardly have been more different. Waldemar was short, stout, flushed, and bearded, with a haircut reminiscent of Einstein. He wore a tweed jacket with patches on the elbows, and big horn-rimmed glasses that had gone out of style in the 70's, and spoke English with a German accent so thick it made him sound like a Hollywood pirate. *His* office contained fewer filing cabinets but no less paper... and in the middle of it, Max noticed the same replica bust of Augustus, sitting on a shelf. Somebody had drawn a pair of eyeglasses and a mustache on it in black felt pen.

"And you are?" Waldemar asked, pushing a stack of magazines off the sofa so Max would have a place to sit down.

"Max Tully." Max sat very carefully. The other end of the sofa was still piled high with books and papers that looked ready to collapse at any moment. He was worried that if he moved, he'd be buried.

"Are you a detective?" asked Waldemar.

"Huh? No," Max assured him. "Just interested." Remembering what Vanderspeigel had said, he figured it would be a bad idea to mention that he worked for a magazine.

"Ah, pity," said Waldemar, grinning. "A name like 'Max Tully' really ought to have 'Private Eye' after it! That's a Latin name, you know."

"It is?" asked Max.

"Oh, yes." Waldemar shifted some more papers and sat down on a corner of his desk. "'Max' is short for 'Maximilian'..."

“Actually, it’s ‘Maxwell’.”

“... which is a diminutive of ‘Maximus’. And ‘Tully’ is from ‘Tullius’. How about that, you could be a descendant of Cicero! How can I be of assistance, Mr. Tullius Maximus?”

So far, Waldemar seemed enthusiastic and eccentric, but hardly crazy. Max took a deep breath. “Lucia Fabrizio,” he said, “suggested you as a person to ask about Octavia’s ghost.”

“Ah, Lucy!” Waldemar grinned. “Wonderful woman! She still refuses to marry me. I’ll wear her down someday!” He stroked his beard. “Did she say anything to you about John Vanderspiegel?”

“Uh... a few words, maybe,” said Max cautiously.

“Well, she won’t marry *him*, either,” Waldemar said cheerfully.

Max decided that whatever was going on *there*, he was probably happier not knowing. “What can you tell me about the ghost?”

“The ghost.” Waldemar nodded. “Can you hear her?”

“Yeah.” This time Max had no problem admitting it. “I was on my way to Lucy’s last night and stepped on the manhole cover.”

“Must’ve scared you half to death,” Waldemar said. “I know it still terrifies me, even when I’ve gone looking for it. She can only be heard by men,” he added. “Isn’t that curious?”

“Is it?” asked Max.

“Oh, yes,” said Waldemar. “It’s usually women who are more in tune with the psychic world, but every person I’ve ever met who could hear Octavia was a man. I think it’s all got to do with what she wants.”

Ah, *there* was the crazy. “What she wants?”

“Well, you know what ghosts are, don’t you? The Romans believed that ghosts were the spirits of people who died leaving something unfinished. A lot of ghosts just wanted a proper burial, but I think we can be pretty sure that if Augustus were seeing to things personally, our Octavia got that and more. No, what she wants will be what *any* murder victim wants.” Waldemar paused for dramatic effect, grinning toothily. “*Revenge!*”

“Oh?” said Max. And he thought he’d felt lost listening to Vanderspiegel...

“After two millennia, it’s a bit of a lost cause, of course,” Waldemar added sadly. “But I think that the man condemned for Octavia’s murder wasn’t actually her killer. She wants the real culprit caught and sentenced. Bit of a lost cause after two thousand years, of course. I fear the poor thing’s doomed to wander unavenged for the rest of time.”

He sounded quite honestly unhappy about it. Max tried to change the subject. “So could you tell me...” he began.

“I tried to talk to her once,” Waldemar broke in dreamily. “I went and sat on her manhole cover with a speech I’d prepared – all in proper Latin – and tried to tell her that whoever killed her died a long time ago and she ought to move on. Didn’t do the poor creature a lick of good, obviously, but I think she appreciated the effort. I keep winning free sodas in the bottle lids ever since!”

Max looked at him blankly. “What?”

“Those contests the soda companies have,” Waldemar explained. “Where you turn over the lid and it’ll say if you won a prize. I keep winning free sodas.”

“What does that have to do with ghosts?” asked Max.

“Oh,” said Waldemar. “The ancients used to believe that ghosts could intervene in human affairs if asked. You know, to bring you good luck or curse your enemies, in exchange for you doing something to help them. Usually it was appealing to the gods to help the ghost pass on to the next life... perhaps I ought to go sacrifice a cow in the Pantheon for her, although I doubt the pope would be too pleased about that.”

Max was starting to wish he’d taken Vanderspiegel’s advice. Hector Waldemar might not be quite an *idiot*, but he was definitely daft. “Right,” he said, as tactfully as he could. “Do you have any idea who Octavia actually was? Or who might have killed her?”

To Max’ surprise, Waldemar shook his head. “None. The documentation simply doesn’t

exist. The only way to find out would be to ask her, but she doesn't seem to want to talk to me. Someday I'm going to go spend a night down there and see if that helps."

"Sleep in the sewer?" asked Max.

"Yes. Most ghosts are seen when the person doing the seeing is just falling asleep or just waking up," said Waldemar. "The mind is more susceptible to paranormal influence when it's not fully conscious. Maybe I'll do that tonight, even – that would be the time to do it, three days before the Nones of February. If there's any day a ghost is going to talk, it'll be the anniversary of her death."

"Right," Max repeated. He no longer wanted to ask questions – Waldemar was clearly a bit of a lost cause, himself. Time to escape. He closed his notebook and grabbed his camera bag. "Thanks very much for your time and the coffee, Dr. Waldemar."

"No problem, no problem, glad to be of assistance, sorry I couldn't be more." Waldemar smiled apologetically. "I'm afraid if it's wild speculation you're after, you'd be better off talking to John Vanderspiegel."

"Oh?" Max stopped and looked back. "Er... you don't happen to know what he wildly speculates about, would you?" Did Waldemar know what Vanderspiegel's unmentionable 'theory' was?

Waldemar rolled his eyes and sighed theatrically. "He believes that 'Octavia' was one of the daughters of Priscus Aegypticus. There's nothing at all to connect her with Octavia; nothing even to say that she was murdered. Her monument does record that she died three days before the Nones of February, but that's hardly a case!" Waldemar shook his head. "He thinks he'll be supported by documents in the Vatican... they probably don't exist. John was a good scholar once, but he's given himself over to flights of fancy in his old age."

Max made a mental note that he was hearing this from a man who thought spending the night in a sewer would make him able to talk to ghosts. "I'll keep that in mind," he promised once again.

He was definitely and distinctly disappointed as he walked back towards Lucy's from Waldemar's apartment. Max was a journalist at heart; faced with a mystery, his instinct was to dig deeper, talk to more people, keep prodding until the secret gave itself up. But that wasn't going to work this time. All the people who could have told him anything had died thousands of years ago. Whoever Octavia was and whatever had happened to her had been well and thoroughly forgotten long before Max was ever born.

It was probably just as well – he shouldn't be wasting his time pursuing a dead end – and an *exceptionally* dead end that that – while he was supposed to be working. He ought to be looking into something like the Vatican's punctual Cardinal. Octavia's sewer was not a place the sort of people who read *Sights* were going to want to visit.

By now it was nearly five, and the wind was getting chilly again. Max buttoned up his denim jacket and hunched his shoulders, trying to conserve body heat. Time to go have a laugh with Lucy over how fruitless the whole thing had turned out to be, and then tomorrow he had to get back to work.

But first, he decided, he was going to take some pictures of the street where Octavia's sewer was. Max had never encountered an undeniably *real* ghost before. He wanted to be able to show people pictures and point out where he'd been standing when he heard it. His sister would think he'd finally lost his mind, but her boys would *love* it.

So he stopped in the side street where the sewer was and took a couple of snapshots, then, just for his own satisfaction, stepped back onto the manhole cover to hear the ghost again. This time he heard her immediately, crying out just as Vanderspiegel had described: *desine, sis! In nomine Herculis, precor, desine!* It sounded far away, as if it were echoing down a long tunnel... and yet it was absolutely *real*. Max shivered. No wonder Vanderspiegel had sounded so curt describing it. The idea that he was hearing some woman's dying words did more to chill him than the wind possibly could. He quickly stepped off the cover again.

But then he turned and lifted it to look down into the darkness again. Lucy had said that nobody *saw* Octavia, and neither of the professors had mentioned anything but her voice; but then, if the ghost was *in* the sewer, how often did people actually climb down to look? If he did... would he *see* her?

It was a terrifying thought – but now that he'd had it, Max couldn't possibly just walk away. He took his camera back out and hung it around his neck. There was a small LED flashlight on his key chain. He turned that on and shone it down into the hole. As he'd expected, there was a metal ladder to climb down. It descended twenty feet or so, and then the flashlight beam glinted blue on a trickle of liquid in the middle of a brick floor. There was an unpleasant impression of scurrying creatures just beyond the light, but as sewers went, that didn't look too bad. It clearly wasn't part of the main system anymore. Max clipped his flashlight to his belt, pulled his t-shirt up over his nose to filter out the smell, and started climbing down.

As soon as he stepped onto the ladder, he heard the voice again – and this time it was near and clear.

*Desine!* she begged. *Sis, sis, desine, precor!*

The air in the sewer was cold, but Max found himself sweating as he climbed down. If he *did* see Octavia, what would she *look* like? Hell, what if somebody came alone and put the manhole cover back? What if he got trapped down here with a screaming ghost?

*Sis, in nomine Herculis, desine! Aliquis, me iuva!*

It seemed suddenly odd to Max that Octavia was pleading with the murderer to stop, rather than just screaming for help. Did that mean she knew the person was somebody she knew, somebody she thought might listen to her? Or had he just read too many mystery novels?

The lower he went, the louder the voice became, until he could hear it echoing all up and down the tunnels. Sweat was soaking into his clothing, and his hands were becoming slippery on the ladder. He had to remind himself that Octavia was *dead*. If Waldemar was to be believed, the worst she could do to him was a bit of bad luck, and Max' luck had never been that good to begin with. All appearances to the contrary, this was perfectly safe.

*Me iuva, adiuva, te amabo!*

He stepped onto the last rung, which was about four feet above the sewer floor – whoever installed this ladder had expected anyone climbing down to have a nice, deep layer of shit to land in. There he stopped to look around, but there was no sign of a ghost; just the creepy, echoing voice... and an unhappy metallic groaning sound.

About half a second too late, Max realized that this was coming from the ladder. He grabbed at it as it began to give way, but wasn't fast enough. Something snapped with a painful-sounding 'twang', and Max fell backwards onto the brick floor.

His breath flew out of him in a rush. His flashlight went out, and there was a soundless, lightless explosion inside his head as the back of it hit the bricks. For a moment he could see a circle of cloudy gray sky through the manhole high above him, but that quickly faded to black.