

Don't mess with the PTA

A short story starring Gretchen Fortunato, aka @gothic_nosering

No good deed goes unpunished. This was the first thought that crossed Gretchen Fortunato's mind when she came too chained by her ankles upside down in a walk-in closet. The light from the door crack illuminated the shadows of the closet just enough for her to make out a few details. Stacks of purses from the ongoing handbag arms race sat piled in a corner. Overflowing boxes of scrapbooking supplies lay next to multicolored rolls of yarn. A small obsidian and bone altar carved with the names of obscene gods sat under the window piled high with dried hearts harvested from small animals. The whole room smelled like a candle shop in the mall that had decided to sell desiccated corpse scented candles.

Twenty minutes earlier, she had crashed a Concerned Parents Association meeting downstairs in the suburban mini mansion at the behest of a friend, Megan, who taught at the local middle school. Amateur supernatural shenanigans among the soccer mom set had grown nasty, expressed via low level curses and minor mystical attacks. When one of Megan's eighth graders had been stung by a swarm of wasps in the girl's bathroom the day before cheerleading tryouts, she called Gretchen to look into things. Magical assault was hard enough to prove, and getting the cops to look into it properly would take weeks. Enter Gretchen Fortunato, blogger, darling of the Twitter sphere, and mage.

It had been easy enough to slip into the party and mingle unnoticed. Another parent deciding to be active in their child's education was nothing new. She walked through the crowd feeling for errant magical energy. She also helped herself to the spectacular finger food set out in the well appointed kitchen.

Gretchen had moved further into the house to investigate, prepared to give the excuse that she was looking for a bathroom if she was found. What she didn't expect was the red eyed apelike apparition that knocked her upside the head and into a wall hard enough to crack the sheet rock.

After she had been knocked out, someone or something had taken the time and effort to chain her upside down in a closet. The altar had confirmed her suspicions about the scale of magic being thrown around. That and the manifest spirit powerful enough to get the jump on her. None of this information would be any use in her current position. First priority was escaping certain death.

Her first reaction was to use magic. When all you have is a hammer, as the man said. She closed her eyes and focused on the chains. She released a small burst of power directed at shattering the chains. Instead of the expected *kaboom* and sudden drop to the floor, the chains wrapped tighter around her ankles, cutting into the skin beneath her jeans. She winced at the pain, holding back a yelp that could have drawn attention from the wrong parties.

Crap, she thought as the blood began to soak the tops of her socks. She was in deeper than she had expected. Not many amateur practitioners kept rare and powerful anti-magic artifacts in their knitting baskets. The magician responsible for this was more than a kitchen witch tree hugger.

Gretchen started to go for the next option-call for help. She kept two phones on her person at all times in case of situations like this. If one phone was taken, her second phone would probably be overlooked. Her hands were bound behind her back with cable ties, which she slipped out of by dislocating her thumbs. It was by far the most the most useful skill she had learned in Girl Scouts.

Hands free, she dug into her front pocket for her first phone. It was still there. She pulled it out only to see that the screen on her iPhone was shattered. The phone shaped bruise on her thigh would be sure to follow. Dropping the broken phone, she reached down the front of her shirt. Her second phone was tucked in a travel belt she had wrapped around her midsection. She pulled at the Velcro straps and managed to drop the phone just out of her reach. It was not her night.

She began to rock back and forth, trying in vain to reach her phone. She stopped swinging as it was making the blood rush to her head. It was making her headache worse. She cursed herself again at her own stupidity at having been caught in such a mess. It was then that she noticed the ghost in the room.

Pale blue eyes glowing with a faint light looked out at her from beneath a pile of decorating magazines. They floated out from the shadows connected to the outline of a small dog. Animals rarely left a shade behind, but the ghost dog had probably had a sense of self importance far beyond that of normal canines. The little dog was a victim of its former master's unhealthy hobby. One of the hearts on the altar likely belonged to it. Sacrificing something that you love was powerful magic. Dark, terrible magic, but powerful none the less.

The little ghost dogged approached Gretchen with a curious glint in its eyes. It circled the hanging woman, sniffed at her, then turned three circles and lay down beneath her. But the dog gave her an idea that just may save her pert behind.

She looked around the room at the various boxes and piles of crafting and sewing gear. She saw a knitting needle that she thought was within her reach and began to swing. The ghost watched in amusement as she went back and forth, pumping her arms to propel her closer to her target. She reached, grasping the needle and pulling it free. She slowed her swing and stopped. The ghost sat up and gave her face an insubstantial lick as it hung above the floor.

Gretchen bent her head so she could see the floor beneath her. The floor was hardwood, and ideal for what she had in mind. Reaching down with the needle, she began to carve and ancient Greek prayer in the wood. The needle dug into the wood leaving clear letters beneath her head. She then began to dig a deep furrow above the prayer, carving out a small trench.

Finishing with the floor, she then took the needle and made a cut across her hand. Blood began to flow. She reached down and began to drip her blood into the trench. She intoned the words of the prayer, pouring enough magic into them to give them meaning beyond their words. The chains dug at her again, but stopped as soon as they started.

The dog stood and walked over to the trench. It began to lick at the blood, growing more substantial with each taste. When it had eaten the last drop, the dog was no longer transparent. It had a weight to it, substantial and real.

"Good doggy," said Gretchen, grinning at her success.

Gretchen gestured at one of the open boxes containing scrapbooking materials. She had her eye on the wood etching kit sticking out of the side.

"Fetch," she said, chains digging deeper into her legs at the pulse of power. The ghost dog hurried over to the box, leapt up, and pulled it over. It landed in a horrible crash, one that was going to draw attention to the room before long.

Gretchen swung back and forth again, stretching for the steel tools scattered on the floor. She reached for the engraving set. It brushed her fingertips, and she swung back in the other direction. She kept going, intent on reaching the tools. The hair on the back of her neck was starting to stand on end. Something was coming.

As Gretchen swung forward the last time, the doggy pushed the tool toward her. The last bit of effort caused it to fade again, making it an insubstantial shade once again. Tool in hand, Gretchen set to freeing herself from the chains.

The chain itself was thick, wrought from cold iron and who knows what else. The lock was a different story. The pink and green plastic shell would be better suited to a locker than a death trap. Gretchen pulled herself up, swinging the steel tool at the cheap lock. She fell back, took a few deep breaths, and swung up again. She reminded herself to renew her gym membership when this was over as her stomach ached at the repeated actions.

She managed to catch the tool in the lock on her sixth try. Wedging it tight between the u-shaped locking mechanism, she let herself fall back making the lock take the weight. An anticlimactic snap later, Gretchen slammed onto the floor. It knocked the wind out of her. As she lay there crumpled up, she felt the presence again. Putting aside the pain, she crawled free of the chains that had bound her physical body and mystical power. Gretchen used her anger and pain as a catalyst and gripped her power from the depths of her being. The room shuddered as if a giant had taken a deep breath. She stood up and gathered her power. This time, she would be ready for the ape-thing. Sparks dripped from her outstretched hands as she prepared for round two.