



THE PRIMORDIAL FEAST

AN ANTHOLOGY FOR

BEAST

THE PRIMORDIAL

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IT GETS EASIER

By Christine Beard

She was trembling as the key scratched at the lock. Twenty-five years, all leading up to this moment, two and a half decades of confusion, fear, rejection, and finally — *finally* — understanding.

It could have come sooner, she knew that much. It just hadn't been time. She hadn't been ready yet; things had to be perfect before she could truly get the satisfaction she needed from tonight. So much of her time had been carefully curating things and arranging them just so. No fumbling first attempts, no learning curve. No, it couldn't happen until she knew exactly what she was doing, until she could squeeze every last drop of absolution from this moment. The maddening itch had been growing in her mind for years, yearning for her to scratch it. At this point, it was more a scab to finally be picked and rid of, a moment of bittersweet pain and so, so much relief.

She could hear her cursing outside, as the key wouldn't turn, and then the clatter of a dropped phone. The door finally swung upon, and her target entered, distracted as she searched for cracks on the screen until the door creaked shut and darkness swallowed the entryway.

Clara watched the initial fear of an old, familiar dream seize her mother as she realized the blackness was too thick to see through. It was one that had plagued her for years before she recognized it for what it was, one she learned quickly to recognize. The visceral fear as she walked darkened, inscrutable landscapes was something she remembered well, betrayed by eyes that were useless in such absolute dark.

They weren't useless to her anymore, and she silently stole forward, feet bare on the hardwood floor. No more anticipation. The moment was here, and any nervous suspense had escaped, exhaled into the dark. When the screen of her mother's phone refused to offer any light, she stowed it with another muttered curse in her bag, groping about for the wall and the light switch.

She passed within inches of her daughter, who reached out to brush a few wayward strands of her mother's hair back into place.

For just a moment, she tensed at the touch that almost wasn't. Clara could sense as her heart began pounding, ice-cold fear radiating off the older woman more strongly now. She tried to brush the idea that she wasn't alone aside, groping a bit more desperately now for the wall, and finding it with a sigh of relief. A moment of scrabbling later and she found her prize, already laughing at herself for being afraid of the dark, and flipping the switch.

"Oh god *damn* it."

Clara couldn't help but giggle as light yet again eluded her mother, who whirled in the darkness toward the sound.

"Who's there?"

Her fingers danced over the wall with a skittering sound and she watched the effect it had, her mother twisting about in the dark that was too thick to be natural, looking for some alien creature she surely wouldn't find. Backing up slowly, her eyes training just to the left of where her tormentor was standing, she shrieked as she bumped into an open closet door. Turning and flailing helplessly at her "attacker," succeeding only in getting tangled in the coats hanging inside, she allowed Clara the opportunity to brush by again, this time pushing her into the closet and slamming the door shut behind her as she continued to the dining room.

She settled happily near the heavy drapes covering the windows, the unnatural darkness receding just a bit. From the closet, there was a series of loud bangs and wails, her mother forgetting to try the unlocked doorknob in her hysteria. Clara was more than content to wait as she calmed down enough to come to her senses. It didn't take long before she tumbled out into the hallway again, her previously neat hair a mess, one shoe left behind. Clara had already anticipated where she would go next, and watched as her mother stumbled into the dining room, turned away from where her daughter was standing, and groped along the counter for a weapon. Clara stepped forward again, opening one of the doors to the china cabinet; the force it took always made everything inside rattle. The darkness still too much for her to clearly see through, she couldn't make out her daughter standing against the side of the cabinet, but flinched as she took a step and noticed what little light there was glinting off the glass in the cabinet door.

"I know you're there. I'm calling the police!!"

It was an obvious bluff, and Clara grinned to herself at the muffled, whimpering sounds as the inscrutable darkness offered no response. She was fighting the mad urge to laugh again, gleeful as she watched the results of her efforts. The realization that there was no way to get help was sinking in, and Clara couldn't hold back another laugh. Though quiet, it echoed around the room, seeming to come from everywhere at once.

"*What do you want!*"

There was an undeniable note of terror in the other woman's voice now, a shrillness that sent a delightful shiver down Clara's spine. She was feeling better every moment her prey felt worse, and the echoing laughter grew louder as she allowed herself a moment to truly enjoy the experience.

Her laughter abruptly died as her mother turned and fled the room again, arms outstretched to try to avoid obstacles. With a capering leap, Clara took the shorter route to what she assumed was her mother's ultimate goal of the staircase. The stumbling sounds of her progress confirmed her suspicion. As she crossed in front of the hall that led to the stairs, Clara knelt and stuck a leg out to neatly trip the woman, who fell with a cry. Standing over her before the front door, Clara grinned down as her mother turned into a sobbing wreck, curled about herself, and begged to be left alone. Little more than a looming silhouette, she crouched over her mother's form and reached out, hands closing around her collar, and remained silent for a long moment, as the shrieks grew louder. They reached their highest pitch as eyes and teeth glinted in the darkness and hot breath hovered inches from her face; when her ears began to ring, Clara shifted her grip, pulling the fabric to secure a choke and holding it until the woman went limp.

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"Yeah, I'll be there in just a second. Thanks."

Clara finished switching the circuit breakers back on as she ended the call from her cell. It had taken some work to set the stage for her antics that night, but all in all, the preparation was absolutely worth it. Returning from the garage, she opened the front door to a hulking figure, somewhere over six feet tall, and gestured to invite him in.

"Her bedroom's on the second floor." She stood on tiptoe to plant a kiss on her guest's cheek, smiling. "Thanks for being my muscle."

"What, exactly, did you do to her again?"

"Nothing yet. Not really." She followed a step or two behind as he hefted the unconscious body with disarming ease and began up the stairs. "Just...used atmosphere to my advantage. The heavy stuff comes later."

Her companion smiled over his shoulder at her, oddly proud.

"So what took you so long to get to the door, if she was right in front of it?"

"I was in the garage, had to turn the power back on. I cut it to help...facilitate things. You know me." She smiled merrily, pointing him in the right direction at the top of the stairs. "Most at home alone, in the dark."

"Borrow anything?"

She smiled as he dropped the body on the bed, taking a little tool out of her pocket and focusing on the mirror. Darkness and isolation were hallmarks of her Horror, but the giant in him enjoyed the way his voice and footsteps echoed and disoriented prey.

"Just a little bit."

They both cringed at the scratching sound of the metal on glass, but Clara pulled back after a few short moments. The man snorted after reading the message she'd carved.

"How'd you sleep?' A bit overboard, don't you think?"

“A little melodramatic. But I want her to know it wasn’t a dream.” She pocketed the tool again, turning to wrap her arms around his neck and pouting. “Unfortunately, nothing else I’ve done so far leaves evidence.”

“Then let’s get out of here before she wakes up, hm?”

“You’re no *fun*, Aiden...”

With a crooked grin, he hefted her in a firefighter’s carry, prompting a surprised squeal and a laugh. Halfheartedly squirming as her carried her to the stairs, Clara eventually wormed her way free and descended on her own. Aiden’s eyes lit in a grin.

“Not running away, are you?”

“Oh, *never*...” She laughed again, opening the front door. “You like chasing too much.”

As the laughter welled up in his throat, she vanished out the door, darting across the street as he gave chase. As she scurried around the back of his car, he simply vaulted over it to beat her hand to the passenger side door, a feat at odds with his wiry build and the touches of gray in his hair. Realizing she’d arrived seconds too late, Clara tried to backpedal enough to get around to the driver’s side, but found herself pinned to the side of the car. Accepting her fate, she smiled, wrapping her arms around Aiden’s neck.

“You win.”

He grinned back, wrapping his arms around her waist with a laugh.

“And yet you always try.”

“You can’t expect me to lay down and roll over.”

There was a rumble in his voice as he spoke.

“And I wouldn’t want you to.”

“Come on. Let’s go home,” she laughed, reaching for the car door. He drew back, closing the door after her and crossing to the driver’s side.

“Bed once we get there. I have work in the morning.”

“I know, I know. You have to be *responsible*.”

Aiden tried and failed to suppress a smile.

“One of us has to be.”

She rolled her eyes at that, resting her head on his shoulder for a moment before turning her attention to the radio. Not long later they were home, shuffling inside.

“Is Erin back yet?”

“Doesn’t seem it. She doesn’t usually get in until later.”

“Mmm...” Clara turned to help Aiden remove the coat, her hands sliding over his chest. “Then —”

Whatever she had intended to say was lost in a yawn, and Aiden lifted her again, more gently this time.

“Bed, sweetheart.”

She nodded reluctantly, settling into his arms as he carried her up the stairs and into their room. Curling up together after shedding a few layers each, the pair was quiet for a moment before Aiden spoke again.

“How did it feel tonight?”

“...Good. I’ve never...brought it out like that before.”

“Never?”

“I never had to.”

He smiled gently, kissing her forehead.

“It makes it...much more fun.”

She laughed softly, nuzzling her cheek into his chest.

“Seems like it.”

He was asleep moments later, and she was quick to follow. At first, it seemed she wouldn’t dream at all that night, but soon enough there was the pull of an old dream, one she hadn’t had in a long while. It always began roughly the same way, the nightmare that had plagued her as long as she could remember; walking through some quiet setting — sometimes a forest, sometimes an abandoned boardwalk, sometimes a sleepy street. Others, if there were any, would peel off or fade away, until she was walking alone. Her footsteps would accompany her for a time as she ambled along, content with having her shadow with her. Then the light would begin to fail.

It was never a natural sunset. When the darkness descended, it was in a wave that swallowed everything around her, inky blackness roiling forth and consuming the world, leaving only a void behind. Still she was propelled forward, into a world made only of black, her friendly shadow and footsteps gone. The longer she spent walking, the tighter her chest began to feel, as the initial tendrils of fear crept about her and led the way for apprehension and panic. By the time dread entered the mix, there was always a certainty in her mind; she was not alone, and whatever was out there was biding its time.

Still, her feet never failed her and she continued forward, unsure of if she was getting anywhere. There were no landmarks to go by, no horizon to approach, only endless, empty black. Sometimes she would walk for hours, sometimes days. The worst nights were the ones that only lasted minutes.

She learned to how to tell it was close when her momentum finally slowed. When her gait finally faltered, it was close behind, though she could never sense it until she finally stopped moving. It never announced itself, the only indicators of its impending arrival the whisper of cloth and the sound of hushed, far-away voices. With it came an icy cold, creeping over her inch by inch as whatever it was loomed over her shoulder. Frozen in fear, all she could do was wait until its claws sank in deep and seized her, hauling her away, shrieking, and groping desperately at the empty air. Pulled down forever, she felt as the darkness around her gained

mass, pressed in from all sides, crushed the air from her lungs, and broke bones with its weight. She always woke just as she felt her eyes pop with the pressure, useless as they were in the dark anyway.

Nowadays, the dream ended differently. She was stalked, as always, found and followed until she waited for it to catch up. Instead of waiting to be hauled away, she turned to the darkness, greeting it like an old friend. The first time she had done so — when she had finally embraced her true calling as one of the Begotten — the roiling mass of shadows was almost underwhelming. Smoky, shifting forms in the dark, guided by eyes she more sensed were watching than she saw glittering above her head, reached for her as they always did, embraced her, and pulled her away. Now, instead of fighting, she returned the embrace, allowing herself to become one with the unfathomable dark, folding and flowing into its undulating core instead of being crushed to its breast.

Normally she woke at that point, but tonight the dream continued. Voices floated up from the dark, agitated and loud, the half-remembered amalgam of a hundred fights between her parents. The shrill pitch of her mother always drowned out her father's almost desperate tone, pleading with her to calm down, to be rational. Eventually the words resolved into an entire scene, one she had witnessed from a doorway, her mother pacing and her father sitting at the table, telling her again that they could find someone who could help. Bless his heart; her father had tried so hard. He had never condemned her the way her mother had, never ceased to acknowledge she existed, and never tried to force into something she wasn't — at least not beyond sending her to a dozen or so psychiatrists. She had terrified them all one by one, and eventually he stopped making appointments, refusing to believe that the only solution would be to have her committed. For his sake, she had begun to learn to be more careful and discreet when she hunted, and for his role in protecting her, he had never earned her ire.

It was her father on her mind when she woke up; grumbling as she checked the clock and saw it was still before dawn. Leaving Aiden asleep, she stumbled downstairs to the kitchen, blearily going through the motions of making coffee and slumping into a chair.

“Just waking up?”

Clara scrubbed at her face as her second roommate entered the kitchen, her heels clacking loudly on the tile floor.

“Some of us don't mind dawn. Doesn't burn.”

“Please. You hate it just as much as I do, Miss Darkness-and-Shadows.”

Clara sipped at her coffee as the vampire fussed with her hair and began shedding layers, beginning with her shoes and sheer jacket.

“Almost as much as I hate conversation in the early morning.”

“I prefer my strong, silent types to be men, really.” Erin slid into the chair opposite Clara and reached to caress the arm she had lying on the table. “But hey, when hunting's thin...”

Clara's eyes flashed as she yanked her hand away and flung what remained of her coffee in the vampire's face. Erin immediately recoiled with a shriek, grabbing for a towel after realizing the liquid at least wasn't boiling. After patting her face dry and moving to her outfit, she looked up, glaring, as she heard Clara begin to snicker.

"You think this is *funny*?"

"I think you deserved it." She regarded her empty mug. "And you're lucky that's all you're getting, considering you made me waste my coffee."

"I didn't *make* you waste your coffee." Erin faded into grumbling, not up to rehashing an old argument.

"I don't care who you drag in here to drain, but I've told you before not to even try." She stretched with a smug little smile, looking over her shoulder at her disgruntled companion. "I won't *argue* with you trying, but I'm going to react the same way every time."

Footsteps sounded from further inside, and Aiden entered the kitchen, favoring the cruelly chipper young woman with a look that was at once affectionate and gently admonishing.

"Clara..."

His voice was a gentle warning even as he ran a hand through her hair and leaned down for a kiss.

"What? I was just reminding her that we have rules, and I don't take talk of breaking them lightly."

Erin whirled, exasperated and furious. "Like I was ever going to—"

"*Girls.*"

The vampire shrank from the finality in Aiden's voice, the way his presence had suddenly filled the room in a way his frame could not; Clara dropped her gaze to the tabletop, sullenly doling out the last word.

"Your makeup's running."

Erin, grumbling under her breath as she stripped off her stained shirt and deposited it in the sink to rinse later, tensed at the jab but eventually let it slide. Clara's grin began to return, an unpleasantly early morning having turned for the better.

Sitting beside her, Aiden gave another warning look — he and Erin had co-existed in relative peace for plenty of time before taking her in. The vampire was still fuming at the sink.

"Why do you have to keep up with your mother for days if you enjoy shit like that just as much?"

"Punishment to fit the crime." Clara pouted as Erin deposited a fresh mug of coffee on the table in front of her, effectively taking the fun out of toying with her further. "And I live with you. If we really got into it, things would just escalate until one of us killed the other." Anticipating Aiden's flat glare, she teased the back of his neck with

her nails, a placating gesture. “Rather not deal with that. Besides, don’t you like having your devoted little blood bags instead of having to find new people every night?”

Having moved to the doorway, Erin conceded after a moment with an allowing tilt of the head.

“But still. That long?” She glanced to the window and retreated down the hall a step. “Seems a little much for the intensity of it.”

“I don’t think it’s going to last much longer.” She watched Erin take another step back and glanced at the window. “We’ll talk after sunset.”

With a half-hearted wave, Erin vanished further into the house. Exactly where she went, Aiden might have known, but Clara had no real interest in knowing where her second housemate spent her days. It was somewhere in the basement, luxuriously finished as it was, but she had never cared to venture past the neutral first floor, and spent most of her time at home on the second.

“You shouldn’t antagonize her, you know.” Aiden’s voice was mild as he took the mug from Clara’s hands and sipped from it. “She’s older than you.”

He was opening the floor for an argument, hoping to be able to have the last word. It was in his nature, the same way punishment was in hers. Slighted by another lost cup of coffee, she denied him the satisfaction, shifting into his lap and laying her head on his shoulder.

“You’re right. I just can’t help myself, especially when she crosses the wrong line.”

He regarded her for a moment, her sudden submissiveness every bit as calculated as his goading comment, and broke out in gentle laughter as he wrapped an arm around her waist.

“You’re far too clever for your own good, you know that?”

“Mmm. I learned it by watching you.” She nuzzled her face into the curve of his neck, content with calling it a draw for now. “What’s got you up so early?”

“I could ask you the same thing.” He was idly stroking the locks of her hair that fell across her chest. “You’ve never exactly been an early riser.”

She snorted in response. He was right. After a luxurious stretch, she shrugged.

“Had the dream again. First time in a while. Usually keeps me up.”

He smiled gently, kissing her cheek and relinquishing the coffee to her.

“It’ll come and go, especially when you’re more active.”

Clara nodded, sipping at the coffee and snuggling a little deeper into his lap. They sat in companionable silence for a time, until the sun finally began to peek through the kitchen window. Shifting with a sigh, Aiden nudged Clara out of his lap and stood.

“You don’t need me until tonight?”

She stood as well and stretched with a yawn, nodding. “Erin’s helping me, too. Mom’s meeting up with the new boyfriend.” She gave a wicked little grin. “So I’m using him to make sure I can open the path.”

“You’re worried you won’t be able to?”

“I like having backup plans.” She calmly sipped her coffee.

“You are hell-bent on cornering her, aren’t you?”

“I want her in that house. I set it all up already. I want to use that atmosphere.”

“Why don’t you just bring her in?”

“I’m going to. And I kind of want the house, you know?”

“Fair.”

They were interrupted by the sounds of Clara’s phone ringing. She groaned and reached for it, making a face at the name on the screen, and answering.

“Dad?”

Aiden’s expression of puzzlement matched her own as she listened, then sighed.

“All right. Yeah, I’ll see you there.”

The call ended, she returned Aiden’s quizzical look with a smile.

“Can I get a ride before you go to work?”

• • •

“I wasn’t entirely expecting you to show up.”

Clara offered a half-smile as she sat down across from her father.

“I told you I’d be here. And I don’t see you that often anymore.”

He nodded slightly as he sipped his coffee.

“Who was that man that dropped you off? He looked like he could be my age.”

For half a second, she regretted kissing Aiden goodbye as he dropped her off at the coffee shop.

“He’s not,” she cheerfully responded, electing not to inform him that he was instead far older. “So what’s up? We’ve lost touch a bit since I moved out.”

At that, her father fetched a deep sigh, rubbing the back of his neck.

“Your mother called me this morning.”

“Oh?” Clara sipped her own cup of coffee, keeping her expression carefully neutral. “I didn’t realize you guys still talked.”

There was no missing the pointed tone in her father’s voice.

“We don’t.”

“Oh.” She dropped her gaze to the table, fiddling with the sleeve around her cup. “Well, what did she want?”

“She said someone terrorized her house last night and tormented her in her sleep.”

Clara arched an unimpressed eyebrow.

“In her sleep. She had a nightmare.”

“She insists it wasn’t. She very clearly remembers getting home as it started.”

“And did she tell you what happened?”

The hardest part as he recounted the garbled details of her night was holding back her smile. It was immensely satisfying to know she had made such an impact.

“...insists it really happened, no matter how bizarre it sounds.”

“So...after being divorced for over a decade and not talking, she calls you because she had a bad dream. Guilt tripping herself after all these years?”

“Then she sent me this.”

He nudged his phone across the table to her, displaying a shaky photo of the mirror and the carving. Noting the haggard, pale appearance of her mother’s reflection, Clara again barely held back her grin, sliding his phone back over to him.

“So why did she call you, and not the cops?”

Heaving the second heavy sigh of the morning, he was quiet for a moment, considering his coffee as she had.

“You weren’t anywhere near that house last night, were you?”

His voice held both hope and resignation, as if he was prepared for either answer but holding out hope for the better of the two options.

“She really blames me for this? I haven’t said a *word* to the woman since she took everything from you and we left. That was when I was...twelve?”

“Ten,” he quietly, pointlessly corrected.

“Oh. I’m sorry. It must have just *felt* like an extra two years got tacked on. You know how time flies when you’re having fun? Yeah, it stretches out when everything’s gone to hell.”

“Clara—”

“How the hell do I catch the blame for this? Please, tell me how that makes sense.”

“Clara, I know how you can be...”

Her eyes flashed at him, hands tightening into fists.

“You ‘know how I can be’? What’s that supposed to mean?”

He was obviously trying to dance around it, to find polite words and neutral phrasing.

“I know how toxic that environment was for you. Which is why I took you out of it. But you never made it easy on us — me or your mother — with the way you like to...get even.”

“So you really think that after fifteen years of having absolutely no contact with her, I suddenly decided one day to go back and... carve a message in her mirror? What the hell does that accomplish?”

“Maybe you wanted to go back home.”

“Home? That house, that was never home. The tiny two-bedroom place we stayed in for a while right after she took the house and half your paycheck in alimony? That was more my home than that house ever was.”

“She didn’t take—”

Impatient and not sure how much longer she could mask her giddiness with anger, Clara interrupted him.

“I don’t know how thick those rose-colored glasses you have on are that you’d actually entertain this idea, but I don’t give two shits what happens to that woman, good or bad.”

“She’s your mother, Clara; you can respect her a little bit.”

“She lost that right around when I stopped having a name and turned into ‘that thing’ or ‘the demon child’. No, I really can’t.”

He sighed and leaned back in his chair, tired out already.

“So you don’t know anything about it.”

“I know she’s a psychopath who still manages to blame me for everything from her therapy bills to her hangnails. And, you know, the divorce. The number of times I heard ‘we were happy before you came along’...”

There was a quiet defeat to her father now, and he nodded silently.

“I just...had to make sure.”

She fell back in her chair now, the initial glee of the impact fading in light of her mother’s suspicion. Either she’d somehow gone too far last night and left an impression of her true nature on her mother’s mind, or the woman still was just willing to blame her for any misfortune after fifteen years of silence.

“So what are you going to do now?” She couldn’t keep the sneer from her voice as she continued. “Call her back and explain?”

“No need. I told her it couldn’t have possibly been you in the first place.”

She blinked in surprise.

“Thank you.”

“Do you need a ride home?”

“No, it’s just around the corner. I can walk it.”

He nodded, paused a moment longer and stood. She followed as he headed for the door.

“Dad?”

Outside, he stopped and turned to her.

“Change your mind?”

“Oh-no. Just wanted to say thanks.”

“What for?”

“For getting me out of there. I know it couldn’t have been an easy choice. Or an easy process.”

Her father was quiet for a moment, fiddling with his car keys and eventually nodding.

“Keep in touch. You never call home.”

Clara gave a little smile.

“I’ll work on that.”

“Stay out of trouble.”

Smiling more widely, she nodded.

“I’ll try.”

She watched him get into his car and pull away before sighing and beginning to walk home. She could do some work before Erin would wake up.

• • •

“You realize you owe me for this.”

The vampire used the full-length mirror to adjust the dress she wore; primping and fidgeting to make sure she looked perfect. Clara, standing close to the door that led to the stairs, was uncomfortable in the lavishly decorated basement.

“I told you I’d repay you.” She sighed heavily, much less concerned with the perfection of her own outfit, but fussing with it a bit nonetheless; the habit of preening, especially when other women were doing the same, was almost reflexive. “So relax.”

“How, exactly, do you plan on doing that?”

“One, I told you I can boost you a little to make sure we get him.”

“There’d better be a ‘two’ in that.”

“Two,” Clara continued, rolling her eyes, “I need blood to do that.”

“How does that benefit me?”

“Only mine activates it.”

Erin abruptly froze in her search for the perfect accessory, turning to face Clara more fully.

“You’re really invested in this.”

“No more than a drop.” Clara’s voice held a harsh warning. “But yes. I am that invested in this, and I need your help. I’m only unfair when it works in my favor.”

After a moment, Erin’s face broke out in a grin and she returned to sifting through her jewelry.

“Maybe you and I *can* get along.”

• • •

“Ew, he’s *that* one?”

“Look, I never said she had good taste, just that we need him.”

“And *why* do we need him again?”

“So I can make sure I can do what I need to do.”

“And that is...?”

“Do you *really* want to see that? I can show you if you want to stick around after we’re done. But it usually reduces people to gibbering heaps.”

“Okay, okay, point made.”

Ducking back into the bathroom where they’d been peeking out from to scope out the bar, Erin pulled a face.

“You didn’t tell me he was going to be *old*.”

“My mother’s in her fifties!”

“I was hoping for a cougar situation! Hot young thing to have fun with!”

“You’ve obviously never met my mother. She couldn’t hook something like that if she’d spent the past ten years trying.”

Erin’s lip curled for a moment.

“More than a drop.”

“You already agreed.”

“You didn’t tell me about that on purpose.”

The lights above them flickered and went out for a moment as Clara’s eyes flashed again, her patience quickly running out.

“Exactly. Yet you agreed. You do *not* want to back out of a deal with me.”

Erin hissed in the sudden darkness, retreating toward the door.

“Fine!”

The lights returned, though Clara still looked less than pleased and openly impatient.

“All you need to do is get him out to the car and asleep once we’re at the house. You don’t even have to touch him if you’re half decent at any of that.”

“I said *fine*.” She grabbed for Clara’s wrist, yanking her closer. “But you said you’d help me.” Without waiting for a response, Erin’s nails dug into Clara’s wrist, not quite hard enough to draw blood yet. “What, exactly do you have to do, besides bleed?”

“Just finish digging your talons in, you harpy.”

Erin’s face twisted at the insult, but her nails did dig in harder, piercing the thin skin beneath them. She heard Clara whisper something under her breath that sounded like her name. The effect was obvious and immediate; she inhaled at the sudden surge of power, eyes widening as her pupils dilated, lips parting in a little pout.

“*Oh*.”

Clara rolled her eyes at Erin’s reaction, reaching for a paper towel to wipe off her wrist.

“Does *everything* you do need to be ridiculously sexual?”

“No.” Erin lifted her hand to study the tips of her fingernails; they were tinged red, and she licked them clean. “Not everything.”

“Just meet me out in the car with him.”

Clara turned to leave, and Erin wasn't far behind. Clara paused at the door long enough to watch her sidle up to her target before returning to the car, where Aiden was waiting. He watched silently as she sat and stewed for a moment.

"Who started it?"

"She tried to back out."

He gave a low whistle.

"I can't imagine that went well."

"I changed her mind again. Quickly."

"Well, at least it was quick."

She didn't respond, still put off by what had happened. After a moment, Aiden elected to break the stiff silence.

"You're sure you want me there tonight?"

The tension in Clara's shoulders relaxed as she looked back to him.

"I've never let anyone else in before. You don't have to help if you don't want to, but...I like having you there. Just in case."

"I doubt she could do much damage."

"Still. You don't need to make yourself that vulnerable."

"It's fine."

They sat in silence again, Clara fidgeting with her phone and the radio until Erin emerged on the arm of the now-stumbling man she'd ensnared. She was laughing and weaving as well, an act carefully maintained until she had folded him into the backseat and joined him on the other side.

"There, are you happy?"

"Absolutely. Was it so hard?"

"Oh, shut up."

Aiden sighed, and even that had an air of finality about it. The two women fell silent as they moved on to their final destination of the evening. On the way, Clara fished the phone out of the other man's pocket, finding her mother's name in his contacts and sending a message stating it would be quicker to meet at the house than at the bar. They arrived in short order and set about previously discussed tasks; Aiden taking the mess of a man inside, Erin ensuring he was asleep, and Clara returning to the garage to once again switch off the electricity. Meeting again in the darkened dining room, Clara wrung her hands as she smiled.

"Now we wait for her to get here."

"I'm going home." Erin made the motion of wiping her hands clean and lifted them, showing open palms. "You do whatever you want, just leave me out of it from now on."

As the door closed behind her, they settled themselves in darkened corners of the room, the shadows growing thicker by Clara's will and obligingly concealing them. Before long, there was the sound of the front door opening.

“Ken?”

The sound the door closing, a light switch turning, and then a whimper of fear. By the grin on Aiden’s face, Clara knew exactly how the rattling of the doorknob would end. If he willed it, there was no way she would escape.

“Ken, this isn’t funny!”

Aiden watched with a glint of pride in his eye as Clara stood and crept forward, her motions sinuous and graceful; she was so at home, here in the dark. The shrill tone in her mother’s voice had provoked a cruel grin, but now her lips were a cold slash on her face, pressed into a thin line of concentration. She crept silently into the front room, barefoot again, and stood inches behind the trembling older woman, moving silently with her as she took a few shaking steps further into her home. Finally, they moved past the large mirror that was mounted on the wall, and the woman turned with a shriek as she caught the double reflection. When she turned to fully face the mirror, it showed nothing unusual. As she leaned closer to the mirror to study it for defects, another twitch of motion caught her eye; looking down to the table below the mirror, just visible through the gloom, was a lock of hair.

As she stared at it in confusion, another joined it, and seconds later shuddered at the slithering sensation of something sliding down her back. Horrified now, she looked up again, her mouth dropping open in a soundless scream as her hair continued to fall out in chunks. Soon her teeth followed, on display as they were with her jaw dropped wide, and as she grabbed the hunks of hair and teeth from the table and stared in mute horror, her nails began to drop one by one into her palm. Finally, she found her voice, loosing guttural, animal noises of terror, and reeling backward.

Clara, exerting a minor effort of will to fade into the dark and blend in with the wall, watched impassively from just next to the mirror as her mother wailed and stumbled about, bumping into things.

“Vanity just doesn’t pay in the long run, does it?”

Her mother’s voice had taken on the ragged edge of sobs as she whirled around, looking for the source of the voice.

“*You!* I knew it was you, you ungrateful, evil little bitch!”

She moved with easy grace again, confident in her ability to remain undetected and stepped behind her mother to croon tauntingly in her ear.

“Careful the things you say...children will listen,” she easily ducked the clumsily thrown fist and lashed out, seizing one of her mother’s legs and yanking on it, sending her crashing to the floor. “And see...and learn.”

“*What did you do to him?*”

“What’s-his-face? He’s asleep. Don’t worry.” Again, she crouched over her mother, eyes burning in the dark. “Nightmares can’t hurt, can they?”

Her mother let out an inhuman screech, reaching to claw at the eyes above her. Clara’s lip curled in disgust as she batted away her hands.

“Oh, you’re just digging yourself deeper and deeper.”

Seizing the front of her mother’s coat, she attempted to haul her away, only to make it a few inches. With a sigh, she slumped over.

“Little help, please...”

The terror in her mother’s eyes renewed as Aiden’s form loomed in the doorway. He stooped to pass through it, turning to fit the span of his shoulders, and straightened again.

“Is it time?”

“Oh, yes, my love.”

He seized her by the neck and threw her into the darkness of the living room. It was easy enough for him to see through, and she landed on the relative safety of the couch. The two Beasts stepped into the room after her, shared a look between them, and suddenly the world shifted slightly. Even if their victim couldn’t see it, she could feel it happening. The darkness lifted just enough, and instead of the man and woman that had been torturing her, there were two unspeakable *things*, one enormous, hulking, musclebound humanoid, and next to it simply a void. It roiled with motion at the edges, but beyond that was simply a dark place, its shape and size ever-shifting. The only constant about it were two gleaming pricks of light deep in the shapeless horror, focused intently on one thing.

The words, cold and poisoned, reached her somehow, though if she was hearing them or simply knowing they were intended was unclear.

Hello, mother.

With that, she was screaming again, running out of the room, tripping on stairs she wasn’t used to; they weren’t in her home anymore. The void took chase, streaking after her and into the Burrow just outside the living room door. It was a narrow hall, with only one door on the opposite end, and without looking over her shoulder or ceasing to scream, her mother plunged through it. She entered a vast library on the other side; the shelves uncomfortably close together and difficult to traverse quickly. The moment she paused, she could feel it behind her, the whispering void with her daughter’s voice, and so she plunged on, the hulking giant forgotten for the moment as she tried to navigate the shelves.

You were right, you know. Right all along.

She tried to stifle her shriek and continue to press on, hoping she could escape the cramped room and find a way out. No matter where she looked or where she went, the dark cloud was always at the edge of her vision, seemingly inescapable. The smoky form could easily navigate the thin spaces between the shelves, and when she stepped into an intersection it was there, filling up any other venue of escape.

You were so sure I was a monster, mother. I just wanted to let you see the truth, at least once.

There was a roar from behind them, and heavy footsteps. Bookshelves began to go flying as Aiden joined the chase.

Are you happy you were right?

She took off again, and Clara watched her go. There would be no escape from the library. She'd claimed it as hers after getting locked in one night after closing and terrorizing the night janitor. The living room had been a childhood acquaintance's, taken after scaring three girls to tears at a sleepover.

Run, run, as fast as you can...

After giving her a head start, Clara took off in pursuit again. She could pinpoint her mother's location easily, and without a truly corporeal form, the claustrophobic placement of the bookshelves was no hindrance to her. Behind them, Aiden was toppling the shelves as he crossed the room; he was moving more slowly than he needed to, and she appreciated that he let her have the chase.

Inches behind her mother again, she reached out, smoky tendrils curling around her.

You don't like this place? Let's go somewhere else.

The door suddenly appeared at the end of a row of books, and with a rough sob and tears running down her cheeks, her mother staggered toward it. Clara paced her easily, staying just steps behind as they travelled the Burrow out of the library Chamber. It was a city street with fewer and fewer street lamps lit on it, growing darker as they led to the core of Clara's Lair. There wasn't so much a door leading to it as arriving meant an abrupt loss of footing in the dark. Without a floor, her mother tumbled down with a cry as she fell forever.

Welcome home. Clara relaxed in the unfathomable dark, comfortable in the embrace of the all-encompassing black. Wait for the pressure to crush you bit by bit. And be glad that he didn't get the chance.

She waited a few more moments, grimly determined, until she could feel Aiden just outside her Heart. When she turned her attention to him he gave a grave nod, and she finally lashed out to strike the final blow. There was a dry snap, the sharp note of a voice suddenly cut off, and a low growl from the two Horrors sated by the final judgment rendered.

• • •

"...When do you think he'll wake up?"

"Sunrise?"

That was Aiden's best guess for the vampire's magic. When they reappeared again in the house, Ken was still an unconscious lump in a chair.

"Huh. Do we leave him?"

"Why not?"

Clara shrugged, tired by the night's antics. She leaned against Aiden, who smiled and pressed a kiss into her hair.

"That was wonderful to ride along with."

She laughed, the sound short and uncertain. Though her Horror was satisfied, her conscience was beginning to prickle uncomfortably.

“Thanks. Now let’s go home.”

“Of course.”

Erin was waiting for them when they arrived, curious despite herself about the rest of their evening. It wasn’t until a few days later that the news stories began showing up. A local woman had vanished, the prime suspect her paramour, who had been present at her home. Clara watched with cold satisfaction, knowing that they would never find any trace of her, until Aiden stepped up behind her to hand her the phone.

“It’s your father.”

For just a moment, her face fell, and she answered. His voice was heavy on the other end as he spoke.

“Clara, I...to my face?”

She shrank from the disappointment in his voice, curling up on the couch.

“Dad...”

He was quiet for a long time on the other end, the next thing she heard was a sob poorly masked by a cough and the sound of him wiping at his face.

“I still loved her, you know. At least the way I remembered her.”

“Dad, I—”

“Don’t.”

There was cold finality in his voice, and she was quiet until he spoke again.

“Nothing else after this. This is the last time I help you.”

She nodded before remembering he couldn’t see her, and swallowed hard before she answered.

“Yeah. Thank you.”

“Goodbye.”

Three short beeps and that was it. Aiden came to sit behind her, pulling her into his lap with little resistance. He understood enough about the unexpected consequences when things escalated, and how little her mind would assuage the sudden guilt now that her Horror was likely sleeping.

“It gets easier.” His arms tightened around her, and he ran a comforting hand through her hair. “Everything gets easier with time.”

MOUNTAIN DEVIL'S TRILL

By Myranda Kalis

I.

Even in the world between the worlds, the air smelt of smoke. Tendrils snaked their way across the dark waters of the Sound, mingling the perfumes of salt and ashen death, drifting past the Point to join with the early morning fog just beginning to roll ashore. Moonlight, yellowed by the smoke, gilt the wavelets as they washed ashore on the narrow strand of sandy beach at the base of the bluff, glittered on the darkened windows of the houses lining the far curve of Mystery Bay. Yet it signally failed to penetrate the darkness beneath the forest of scrub pine and madrona that almost wholly enveloped the headland beyond those well-manicured properties.

Beneath the trees, the shadows stirred, restless. *Something* gnawed at it, irksome and just beyond reach, as irritating as rubbing a cat's fur or a serpent's scales the wrong way. Frost glittered in its wake, an unseasonable rime on the rocky beach north of Griffith Point, as it loped with lengthening strides along the shore, past the homes of locals and tourist cottages alike.

(Henry Duvall, 51, CPA, slept like a baby in the honeymoon cottage next to the newest and youngest Mrs. Duvall. He dreamt of that pleasant assignation a week or two ago, the third such in which he required his even younger personal assistant to bend over his desk for easiest access during a “working lunch break” taken behind the locked door of his office. She was crying — he *liked* it when she cried, it made her shake silently in ways that were even more enjoyable than just his ability to have her any time he wanted her, because she needed that job, needed it desperately. Her ex was never on time with the child support payments and her kid needed food, clothes, and medicine, and oh, that desperation and those tears did make everything so much better. But there was something wrong this time — something terribly, terribly wrong, something grabbing hold of him, something *hard* and *sharp* and *strong* that clamped down tight and *pulled*. He fell backward, fountaining blood down his thighs, all over his chest and belly, trying to gather up what was left of himself while that thing he hadn't known she had, hadn't even suspected, chewed and *chewed* and *chewed*)

The flicker of darkness-not-night slowed nearly to a halt as the lights of Port Townsend came into view across the expanse of dark water. The moon was sinking low, the night waning, and the shadow was still edgy, every sense and instinct twitching, searching for it knew-not-what. Just off the Point, the water rippled and shimmered, something enormous moving beneath the surface, against the current to meet the shadow as it came to stand at the very edge of the tide, frost spreading across the wet sand.

I know what your problem is, the voice echoed up, soundless to any conventional sense, *it's all this fucking grazing*.

I'm not grazing, the shadow replied, resisting firmly the urge to roll more than one pair of eyes. *I'm—*

Hungry. You are hungry and you need to eat something more substantial than the castration fears of middle-aged assholes. The water swelled, lambently glowing eyes the size of serving plates opening just below the surface. *You know it, I know it, so for fuck's sake just go into town and find some douchecanoe who deserves it. I promise I'll help you hide the body*.

I am not that hungry. The shadow replied, baring a rather impressive number of teeth in the direction of the water. *And this isn't...don't you feel it? Something isn't right. Something's...*

What? The surface of the water shivered as something larger than an orca though no less sleek briefly pierced it, then subsided again.

Something's coming. The shadow lifted its muzzle, scented the air. *And I'm not so sure I like the smell*.

II.

“You are literally the only person I know who loves the great outdoors who isn't a morning person. I just want you to know that.” Sonny Tselihye poured the coffee, pushed the condiment caddy across the table, and expeditiously got his hands out of the way.

Kevin Ashmun-McCray refrained from responding to this obvious provocation until after he sugared and creamed his morning refreshment, and then took a few, urge-to-kill-taming sips. “It's not that I'm not a morning person. It's that I have a specific idea of what ‘morning’ is. It is the period of time between seven and eight A.M; anything before that is *too damned early*.” The kitchen clock chimed six in the psychotically cheerful way it had. “Why am I awake at this godforsaken hour again?”

“Because you wanted to be functional and completely human by the time Sam and her mother got here today.” Sonny's smile was an irritatingly beatific crescent of white in his deeply tanned face. “And on Monday that requires at least three hours.”

“Nnngh.” Unable to argue with this logic, Kevin leaned over his coffee cup and let the fumes and chemical constituents work their magic on him.

Sonny, exercising rare mercy, let the matter lie there and turned back to making breakfast. Twenty minutes found a plate of scrambled eggs, sausage, and toast deposited in front of him and twenty more found him scraping the last into his mouth.

“See? Hungry. In every way.” Sonny sat and applied a spoonful of salsa to his own eggs, dark eyes narrowed.

“Oh, please. Please, let it rest. It’s not like I can go out right now — half of Whatcom and Skagit and Okanogan are *on fire*.” Kevin scrubbed his hands over his face. “I won’t even make the visitor center before—“

“In two weeks, Seattle is going to be overrun with freshly returned frat-rats. It is even now overrun with at least a few tourists who nobody is going to miss.” He spread his hands. “The joy of living next to a major population center. You might try taking advantage of it.”

“If it gets any worse, I might. *Might*.” Kevin pushed to his feet and reached for his cane. “Just. Don’t push me on this, okay?”

“Pinkie swear, as Sam might say.” A wry smile. “I only nag because I care.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

The worst part of it was, of course, that Sonny was right. He’d waited too long after the spring thaw opened up the mountains, caught up in things that probably could have waited, or could have gone with him up to the cabin if he’d really felt it necessary. And now he was stuck, with not one, but *three* massive complex wildfires burning in his favorite hunting grounds, the place he could go when the need — the desperate, hungry *need* — for flesh and hot blood and a chase beneath the cold stars welled up and could no longer be pushed aside. It sat inside him now, a constant, gnawing ache worse than his leg in the nastiest, dampest, northwestern winter weather, chewing bloody chunks out of the edges of his focus, his self-control.

“Being a frat rat is not *prima facie* evidence that someone deserves to die,” He reminded himself, and hoped it stuck at least through the day. “Tourists are not inherently evil. Neither are people who drive Escalades. Keep it together.”

“Do you *have* to wear a tie today?” Sonny asked as he limped back into the house’s common area, still slightly damp from the shower, trying to work one of the regularly occurring kinks out of his leg as he went. “Because if not I’d seriously consider avoiding anything that might cause violence to become an attractive option while you’re here all day with Pip.”

“Technically, no.” Getting the point, he stuffed the tie he was holding back in the pocket of the blazer he also wasn’t going to need, and dropped both on the rack next to the front door. “I don’t think we’ll be going anywhere out of walking distance but if you wouldn’t mind leaving the Jeep...”

Sonny, flipping idly through six local stations of nonstop fire-related disaster coverage, made an approving noise. “The pickup’s better for me today anyway.”

“What’s on the agenda?”

“Supply run into Port Angeles this morning, kayak tour on Freshwater Bay this afternoon. I probably won’t be back until late.” Another flash of his startlingly bright smile. “It’s your turn to cook.”

“Chinese take-out it is then,” Kevin paused, and glanced back over his shoulder. “If you feel anything out there let me know, okay? Something’s still itching at me and it’s not just my stomach talking.”

“Mmm.”

Kevin opened the patio doors and stepped outside into the early morning cool, Sonny’s level, assessing gaze an almost physical weight between his shoulder blades. Beyond the thick, naturally occurring stands of evergreen and the rather more cultivated bits of garden ringing the house, the restless waters of Mystery Bay were visible, sunrise shining on the rollers as the tide came in, still somewhat misty from the overnight temperature change. No rain in the night, and there hadn’t been for more than a month and a half, an unnatural state of affairs for the northwest almost-coast, one that kept an already terrible fire season burning merrily-on upstate.

That smoke never made it as far as Marrowstone, thanks to the strength of the prevailing winds off Puget Sound and the Pacific Ocean beyond, but he still *smelled* it — a smell not at all like burning wood, or even burning flesh, but something hotter and fouler, industrial almost, metallic and oily. It left a slick of itself on his tongue and in the back of his throat that almost nothing could wash away, made his insides thrash and every instinct turn feral and hypersensitive, his teeth wanting to be fangs, his hands wanting to be claws. He drew a deep breath, found what he was looking for, and only barely restrained a snarl as Sonny came up to his side, leaning on the patio balustrade.

“You’re right,” Sonny finally said, after a long moment. “Something’s there. I didn’t smell it until just now.”

Kevin let his breath out in an enormously satisfied hiss. “You recognize it?”

“No.” A strong, callused hand came to rest on the nape of his neck, stroked down his spine to the small of his back. “Easy.”

“So.” Kevin forced himself to breathe normally, the muscles in his back and shoulders to relax. “What do we do?”

“Figure out what it is.” Another long, soothing stroke and this time Kevin’s back arched involuntarily into it. “Deal with it if it needs to be dealt with. Sometimes it doesn’t — some things are above our pay grade. And some things aren’t really threats, remember that. *You* weren’t a threat, and that’s why the Old Man took you in. It might be something that needs help.”

“Does that smell like needs help to you?”

“No.” Sonny admitted. “But, then, neither did you. Pip and her Mom are coming up the driveway.”

Kevin smiled wryly and pulled away, taking the patio stairs with his cane in one hand, the railing beneath the other, the caution of a man whose left leg was more titanium support braces, and pins, and reconstructed joints, not to mention scar tissue, than bone and cartilage any longer. Clarinda Weston's elderly sedan pulled around the corner of the house as he reached the ground and she barely managed to stop before the passenger door flew open. Samantha Weston was fourteen, tall, gawky, made almost entirely of various burning enthusiasms, the most significant of which was dying her hair an assortment of colors not usually found in humans and playing the violin better than nearly anyone whom he had ever taught before.

This morning, however, did not appear to be one of her best days — unusual, since they were scheduled to spend all of it together, first for standard lessons and then working on an original composition they were putting together for the Port Townsend Fiddle Festival later in the summer. She slammed the car door with more force than was strictly necessary, banged her violin case against the side as she spun around, and stalked past him with a stony look and barely a nod on the way to the downstairs door to the music room in the house's lower level. She did not bother to look back over her shoulder at her mother's remonstrations about treating the car and her instrument with more respect, nor did she wave goodbye. Not normal Sammy behavior at all.

Kevin made his way to the driver's side window and leaned down. "Dare I ask?"

Clarinda Weston, fortysomething, handsome in that careworn way that single mothers sometimes had when they weren't scrambling to live paycheck to paycheck, sighed and rubbed her eyes. "I'm sorry, Mr. Ashmun-McCray — "

"Kevin. Really. You *can* call me Kevin. Everyone does."

"Kevin. I'm sorry. I... Well. I had to tell her something she really didn't want to hear this morning." A tired not-quite-smile. "You know how it is."

"That I do." He did, after all, both teach violin *and* regularly herd high strung artistic musicians from behind the conductor's podium. "Is it anything I can help with?"

The look Clarinda gave him sent a curl of cold down his spine, made his mouth water so hard he had to swallow, the look in her eyes a fear so bone-deep and primitive he could almost smell it. "N — No. I really have to get going — don't want to be late for my shift."

Kevin stepped back. "Just let me know if I can help."

"I will. Thank you."

Sonny joined him as he stood watching her pull away. "Dare I ask what that was all about? Pip is in a mood. I've never seen her in a mood before. It's unnatural."

"I'll let you know as soon as I find out." And, so saying, he made his own way inside.

Samantha already had her practice folio open on the music stand and was applying fresh rosin to her bow with smooth, firm strokes, her hair hiding her face

from view as she worked. Wordlessly, he retrieved his own instrument from the case on the far side of the room, rosined his bow, and set it to the strings. Mendelssohn seemed to be the order of the morning, *andante*, Samantha's shoulders and back relaxing from their tight, angry clench under the caress of minor chords.

"Ready to play?" Kevin asked, mildly, as she looked up.

Her normal ebullience was still nowhere in evidence, but she nodded gravely and tucked her violin into place to begin her practice piece, Vivaldi, the second movement of the Concerto in G Minor, *allegro*.

Five minutes showed him that her heart wasn't in it, not even a little. "This is supposed to be *quick* and *cheerful*, my *piccola stella*. *Accelerando*, and keep your elbow out of your stomach; wrist straight, if you please." It obviously didn't please her, because her elbow and her wrist and even her *grip* were all over the place. "Here's the problem we're having today, *stella* — that's supposed to be the climax of the movement and you're giving this all the *oomph* of overcooked noodles. You get enough sleep last night? Are you even awake now? Drink your Geri—"

Samantha lifted her bow off the strings, put down both it and her violin, and burst into tears. She usually responded to good-natured heckling by straightening up and working it out. He moved to the chair next to hers and gingerly put a comforting arm across her shoulders. "I'm sorry, *stella*. I didn't mean to hurt your feelings. Are you—"

"It's not *you*." She gulped out, scrubbing her hands over her face. "It's not you. It's not. I'm—"

"Okay. I'll accept that it's not me." He gave her shoulder a squeeze. "Let's go upstairs and have some tea and we'll talk."

A quarter of an hour found them at the kitchen table, with a mug of cocoa for her and a cup of peppermint medley for him. Samantha drank in small sips, in between blowing her nose and wiping her face and apologizing at length. He made her eat some toast, too, and after a few minutes she had calmed down enough to talk.

"I'm sorry," Samantha began. "I'm not upset with you."

"But you are upset," Kevin replied. "So out with it. What's chewing your guts, *stella*?"

"My mom thinks we're going to have to move again." Samantha mumbled into the surface of her cocoa and then looked up, eyes bright and fierce. "*Again*. I'm *so* tired of moving — so tired of running every time she gets scared. I love it here! I love my school, I love my friends. I love *having* friends! I love coming here." Her voice cracked and she grabbed a handful of tissues as the tears spilled again. "I *hate* this. I'm so mad at her, and at *him*."

The small hairs on the back of Kevin's neck lifted and for the second time that day he felt his teeth sharpening, involuntarily scenting the air, searching for a threat. "Him?"

Samantha nodded, wiping her face. “My Dad. My parents divorced when I was way little. I don’t even really remember him. He went to prison for something before I was even born, Mom had a restraining order out against him, but he won’t leave her alone. *Us* alone. We’ve moved like six times since he got out but he keeps *finding* us.” She took a sip of cocoa. “He called my Aunt Melissa in Bellingham last month. She told him she didn’t know where we were, but I don’t think he believed her. My Mom doesn’t, either. And now she wants to run again.” More tears, and he rested a comforting hand on her shoulder, the one that wasn’t trying to turn into rending talons. “I can’t do this anymore. I can’t. I just...want things to be *normal*.”

“Thank you for telling me, *stella*.” He gave her a little shake. “Look. Let’s bag the morning; we’ll take a ride into town, pick up some sandwiches, and head up to the park. We’ll take along our stuff and if we feel like it, we can practice and maybe do some more composition work on the *Mountain Devil’s Trill*. What do you say?”

She nodded and, to his enormous surprise, threw her arms around him and hugged him hard. “Thank you, *Maestro*. This just...just sucks so hard and all I want to do is cry.”

“Then we’ll have to make you want to do something else. C’mon.”

He did not, in fact, get her to laugh — she was too upset for that — but he did manage to lighten her mood enough that, by the afternoon, she was able and willing to play. Nothing bright or cheerful, of course, and the sound she coaxed out of her instrument had the sadly elegiac tone of something beautiful coming to an end. They wrote it down as the provisional final movement of the sonata they were composing together. In between, they walked the beaches below Marrowstone Point and ate their lunch in the squat, square shadow of the lighthouse, and Kevin interrogated her as delicately as he knew how. Her father’s name, she knew, was Nicholas Palladino. Weston was her mother’s maiden name, legally changed after their last move. Her aunts, Melissa and Wendy, lived in Bellingham and Wenatchee respectively. Only one had heard from him. He promised he would talk to her mother later that week, and when she arrived to pick Samantha up, she was at least willing to be civil. The scent of burning teased his senses as he watched them leave, as it had all day, strong enough to overpower even the tang of salt in some places, elusive as a lover’s perfume in others, making him grind his fangs and flex his talons with the need to defend his student, defend his territory, just now.

Kevin retrieved the Washington State road map he kept in the Jeep’s glove compartment, went inside, and brought up the state’s slow-loading, frequently-changing active fire emergency website. Whatcom, Skagit, Chelan — the fire sites weren’t *quite* a straight line between Bellingham and Wenatchee, but then the roads weren’t exactly straight, either.

III.

It was hotter than it had any right to be, in the world or beyond it. The moon was a blood-red sickle in the smoke-hazed sky, the dark mirror of the water dancing with wisps of vapor that stank of boiling oil and burning blood. Only the island itself was void of it, swirling aside just offshore in eddies and whorls that didn't quite form into patterns, teasing the shadow's eyes.

Across the Bay, the mountains were on fire — sheets of flame towering hundreds of feet into the sky — their heat a physical pressure against his face and eyes and skin even fifty miles distant. The shadow breathed out brutal midwinter cold and frozen night and, even so, the frost barely glittered before it melted away, his steps turning into tiny lakes as he ran for the Point and the spits of land there that jutted out into the Sound.

Irdlirvirisissong!

No answer. The water did not ripple in response to his cry, enormous gleaming eyes opening in the deep. *Something* heard. The flames shot higher on the mountains, the heat grew fiercer, and in it, he felt something he had most desperately not wanted to feel: *hunger*, an intense and scorching hunger, all-devouring and uncontrolled. Nothing wholly human hungered that way, or seethed with such savage anger at being denied, the hot-iron taste of rage alive in all his senses.

The shadow's own Hunger rose in response, thrashing wildly inside him, and it was all he could do to hold it in check, biting down hard on his own tongue, digging furrows into the rocky beach with his claws, seeking something calm within himself to focus on.

Beneath his hands, an object formed — an instrument of bone, with strings of frost. With a sob of relief, he took it up, stroked the tips of his talons across the strings, and began to play, formlessly at first, disconnected notes as his arm shook and jerked, finally evening as the music came to him, soothing and reflective. The heat retreated somewhat, its Hunger no longer beating at him like an angry fist, the smoke swirling in the air between himself and its source with every motion of his arm. The strings sang beneath the sharpened tips of his fingers, *larghetto affettuoso* and striving for all the serenity the music could give him.

Well played, Maestro. Irdlirvirisissong's voice murmured, far closer than he was expecting or hoping; but then he didn't remember actually walking knee-deep into the dark water, either.

Thank you. The shadow lowered his arms, and the violin melted back into the dark and cold from whence it came, strings still humming gently with the first movement of the Devil's Trill. *You're seeing this too, right? This isn't some sort of starvation-induced hallucination?*

Unfortunately, no. Irdlirvirisissong raised first one head, and then the other, fully out of the water, so that both were eye-level with his own. *This looks rather*

like a fuckton of trouble to me, in all honesty.

I think it was following me today. I smelled it all over the place. The shadow reached out and ran taloned hands through his companion's vulpine mane. And as you see it's—

Yeah. Mad and bad and hungry. Lambent green eyes blinked slowly. I'm going to go find the Old Man. Don't do anything about it until we get back. Lie low.

He vanished beneath the water with barely a ripple.

IV.

Sonny was already gone by the time Kevin crawled out of bed the next morning, without leaving a note and having taken the Jeep. Wandering around the house in his usual morning haze, Kevin had to admit that was probably a wise choice. The Old Man preferred solitude at the best of times and with hundreds of fire service personnel, news crews, and camera-bearing drones stomping all over his territory, he'd likely be even further off the beaten trail than usual and, unlike the pickup, the Jeep had actual off-road capability. The morning news was full of ill tidings. The Whatcom complex fire had almost doubled in size over night and three fire fighters had been killed when it rolled over their position before they could get under shelter. He couldn't quite repress a shudder, remembering the ravenous, wrathful heat that had clawed at him the night before, not wanting to imagine what it would be like, what it would *feel* like, to be consumed by fire.

He was almost pathetically grateful to open the patio doors and step outside and find the Olympics still there, unburnt, snowcaps gleaming bloody in the coppery sunlight. Fortunate, also, that laying low was going to be relatively simple; he had four students scheduled that day and a relatively full week afterwards. He doubted that he'd have to go any further than Norland unless something unusual arose.

Something unusual called late that evening, well after full dark and long after his nerves stretched uncomfortably taut, wanting with an almost physical need to hear from Sonny. "Please tell me you found him."

"Him?" A low rumble of laughter, a voice he didn't recognize. "Who'd that be?"

The caller ID didn't recognize the number and Kevin's breath caught in his throat for a moment. "Who is this?"

"I'm the father of one of your students — I'd like to arrange a parent-teacher conference if I could." The voice had a roughness to it that Kevin associated with lifelong smokers, as though its owner could break into a coughing fit at any moment.

"Certainly." Kevin did a slow turn, scanning the kitchen, the sitting room, what he could see of the patio beyond, nerves twitching. "When would you like to meet, Mr...?"

“Palladino.” A bark of laughter that did, in fact, sound more like a cough. “Nick Palladino. You teach my daughter, Samantha.”

The blood froze in Kevin’s veins, a rime of frost rushed across the kitchen windows and all his senses, teeth, and fingers sharpened. “I know who you are, Mr. Palladino, and I’m afraid I can’t help you.”

“No? Really?” Something crashed outside — it sounded like the garbage bins out back — and Kevin reflexively reached for the window to make sure it was locked, then crossed to do the same for the front door and the patio doors. “She’s keeping my kid from me, you know. The bitch cut and ran as soon as she could, got the court to declare me dangerous to her and the kid.”

Kevin pulled the sturdiest of his canes out of the rack — hardwood cored in titanium — and took the stairs down toward the lower floor to check the back and the music room doors. “Mr. Palladino, I don’t know your wife that well. I don’t know you at all. But I do know Samantha, and I will do nothing at all to endanger her, or to help you violate any orders against you, or force her to see you if that’s not what she wants. She’s a wonderful girl, Mr. Palladino.” The back door was locked with the key and the deadbolt, and Kevin crossed into the music room, reaching for the light switch. “She’s grown up to be a wonderful girl without you in her li—” A hand closed around his wrist and, before he could even begin to react, his bad leg was crumbling under the force of a heavy, well-aimed blow and the hardwood floor was rushing up to meet his face. The phone skittered out of his hand as he hit hard, every pascal of air driven out of his lungs by the force of impact, a hand knotting in his hair and slamming his head into the floor once, twice, a knee pressed into his lower back pinning him down. He tried to struggle, to get his feet back under him, to set some kind of leverage, and was rewarded with a coughing, rumbling laugh, like a piece of industrial machinery rolling over and a stench of boiling oil and searing blood so thick it made his head spin even harder.

“You’re tougher than you look. I’ll give you that.” The weight came off his back and he lifted his head just in time to get a good look at the boot coming at his face.

V.

Kevin woke to the sound of kettle drums made of exquisite, throbbing pain. For a long moment all he could do was helplessly wish for the return of blessed senselessness, only to have his neck, shoulders, back, and bloody already-damaged leg get into the act, sending absolute *sonatas* of pain running through every applicable nerve. While it had the cumulative effect of making him long for easeful death it also chased the last of the cobwebs of out his head and forced him to try to move, at which point he discovered that he absolutely could not do so. He was in a chair, knees spread, legs effectively bound to the front legs by something that resisted any attempt at movement. It didn’t feel like rope, it was too wide for that and there was only the vaguest hint of give. His back was

flat against something tall and thin and straight, squared off, and his arms bound around behind both in a position he was certain violated at least a few parts of the Geneva Conventions governing torture. Best of all was the strip of what had to be duct tape across his mouth, because the inability to scream *and* the revolting taste of industrial adhesive made the whole miserable experience complete.

No blindfold, though, which meant wherever he was, it was still either completely dark outside or someplace natural light was unable to penetrate. He was willing to bet more on the former. Insects were singing nearby and every now and then, he heard the deep-throated call of a great horned owl and the yips and cries of coyotes. The air smelled cleaner and fresher than it did even on the island, less salty as well, rich with the perfumes of loam, moss, and evergreen.

A quick test of his bonds set off another chorus of aches but also yielded a little more information. He was pretty sure that his fingers were bound together in bunches with more duct tape, feeling as they did unnaturally bulky and stiff. His reconstructed left knee joint registered its disapproval of its current position and level of tension with sizzling shocks of agony. And while his head hated him, he didn't feel the dizzy nausea that came with having an actual concussion, which was in itself a minor miracle. Slowly, the relatively soothing noises of the nighttime forest faded, replaced with the much more cheerful sounds of birdsong and the light began to rise. Leaking, point of fact, around the edges of windows sealed in both weathered plywood sheets and heavy wooden storm shutters, enough to let his eyes adjust to the gloom.

Most of the wall in front of him was taken up by a pair of long windows, shuttered against the weather, and a double layer door, wooden-framed screen on the inside, a heavier, thicker wooden door on the out. A cabinet sink equipped with an old-school iron hand pump occupied the space beneath one window. Wooden storage bins were built into the far wall to his right, along with two layers of shelves, and a long table that held a wire rack stuffed with loose papers and pamphlets. To the left, a flight of stairs slanted upward over a wood box filled with fresh-split logs and a cast iron wood stove big enough to cook on. He was tied, he realized, to one of the interior support posts helping to hold up the open-beamed wooden ceiling.

Upstairs, the floor creaked.

Kevin flexed his fingers as best he could in their bindings, felt them begin to part ever so slightly under the change of pressure and sharpness. Definitely duct tape. More creaking from above, footsteps, and a shaft of light falling down the stairs. The legs that came down the stairs first were covered in jeans and a pair of heavy-duty hiking boots, then a camp lantern swung into view, and then the rest of him, sweatshirt, red flannel camp jacket, curly auburn hair that almost brushed the ceiling once he stretched out to his full height. He had to be way north of six-foot tall; wider across the shoulders than Sonny is, but his clothes hung off his frame like loose potato sacks and the flesh clung to his bones, throwing his jaw

and cheekbones into sharp relief. His scent — that horrible mélange of industrial burning — filled the space between them like a pall of smoke, almost thick enough to be visible. Kevin nonetheless saw more than a trace of resemblance there, saw Samantha in the shape of his eyes and the stubborn strength of his jaw.

“Look who’s awake.” His captor drawled. “You’re tougher than you look.” He crouched down next to the cast iron stove, fed it some kindling, and lit it with a match rather than a stream of fire from between his lips, though Kevin rather thought he could do it either way. His captor fetched a folded canvas chair from its place along the wall and sat down across from him.

The first layer of binding over his hands finally gave way under persistent slow pressure.

“Way tougher.” Those pale brown, almost golden, eyes narrowed and in them Kevin could see banked flames leaping back to life in the skeletal depths of his eye sockets. “Most people would just pick a wheelchair over all the work you’ve had done to make that leg usable again.” He leaned over and rapped none-too-gently against Kevin’s left knee; for an instant, he genuinely saw stars from the pain. “Or maybe just stubborn. Lindie would *like* stubborn. She’s plenty headstrong herself. I’d kind of like to talk to you.” Musing. “But I’d also like to not have to move out of here. If I take the tape off, will you promise not to yell? Nod if you agree.”

Kevin nodded slowly as the second layer of bindings gave way.

His captor leaned over and tore the tape off his mouth in a single hard pull. Kevin managed to keep his response to a single, low-intensity, “*Ow. Fuck. Ow. Goddamn it.*”

“Heh. Tough *and* stubborn.” His captor fetched a pair of beaten up camp mugs from one of the storage chests. “Want something to drink?”

“Yes, please.” His mouth tasted so awful even vaguely rusty-tasting well water was like the sweetest ambrosia in comparison. “You’re Nick, right?”

“Nicholas Palladino.”

“Yes.” His hands were almost loose. “Nick...I can help you if you let me. Just listen, okay?”

“*Help* me? Really? You’re the guy Lindie is trying to recruit to protect our kid from me and you want to *help* me?” Nick chuckled, the most unpleasant expression of mirth Kevin had heard in a long damn time. “Pull the other one, dude.”

“This isn’t about Clarinda and Sammy.” Kevin replied, carefully, carefully slicing through the last layer of tape. “It’s about *you*. What you are and what you need. I know about that. I can help you with it.”

Those golden eyes went flat and intensely bright-hot at the same time. “What the fuck are you talking about.” It was not a question and Kevin heard the danger in that as clear as could be.

“I know what it’s like to have a hunger inside you, eating away at you a little more every day, until it’s only what little is left of you and it. It’s terrible and crazy-making and sometimes all you want is for it to stop and at the same time you don’t want to give it up, because it’s part of what makes you who you are now.” His wrists were bound with high diameter nylon climbing rope, it felt like under the tips of his talons. “When it first happened to me, I wasn’t ready — *so* wasn’t ready — and I’m betting it was the same with you. You didn’t know what was happening, and you didn’t have anywhere to turn, nobody to give you answers. Clarinda didn’t understand. She saw what was happening to you and ran from it. I was lucky, I had someone to show me a path.”

“Your little fag boyfriend. What’s his name — Sonny?” *That* was not a good sign.

“He’s not my boyfriend,” Kevin replied, evenly albeit through his teeth, and gave his wrists a slow half-turn. “He’s my *brother*. And, no. Not him. There’s a *much older* kinsman in these mountains. He’s sometimes hard to get hold of, but he’s forgotten more about who and what we are than some of our kind ever know. If anyone can show you the way, it’s him. Please. You’ve been wandering by yourself in the dark for so long. You don’t have to be alone any longer; you don’t have to hurt—”

“Hurt? I’m not hurting.” Nicholas rose, a smile spreading across his face that had nothing to do with any of the emotions usually associated. “And I’m not alone.” He tapped his temple. “I’ve got all I need right here. I know what I need to do and I know how to do it. I can find the people who have to fucking burn any damn time I want. And now I have a pretty good idea where Lindie and the brat are so I can finally give them what’s been coming to them. I’m a little bit sorry they dragged you into it. You seem like a pretty decent guy for a—”

Kevin twisted his wrists and spread his fingers, his bonds snapping with the distinctive sound of nylon rope and duct tape shredding apart. The look on Palladino’s face was briefly priceless as Kevin jerked his arms around, shoulders, biceps, and back all screaming their disapproval, before it disappeared behind the shattered glass and bent metal of the lamp. Palladino staggered backwards, swearing, his face a mask of blood, as Kevin tore the strips of duct tape away from his ankles. Deciding that there was no time better to add insult to injury, he brought the chair around once he was free of it, this time knocking Nicholas into the side of the wood stove itself. Kevin was out the door before his captor finished screaming.

He was brought up short, briefly, by the incongruous sight of an open sided pay phone booth covered in six inches of emerald moss sitting on the concrete slab patio of the building. But only briefly and he took the stairs as close as he could come to a full run, breaking for the heavy underbrush nearest the cabin — no, the *ranger station* — entrance. His captor was squatting in an unmanned ranger station. He clambered into the ground cover, ferns, rhododendron, and a

thick carpet of moss, the trunks and limbs of the trees liberally frosted with it, the boulders and fallen logs crusted in lichen.

Behind him, he heard the door of the ranger station flung open with wood-and-glass-shattering force and incoherent howls of rage and pain. That gave him an uncomfortably enjoyable surge of savage pleasure, his appetite roiling, and then he felt the heat against his back.

Olympia wasn't like the inland mountains. Its western side faced the Pacific head-on, catching storms and funneling them through peaks and valleys, turning them into permanent snowpack on the heights and cold rainforest on the lower slopes. It wasn't impossible for a catastrophic fire to start there, but it wasn't easy, either. When Kevin glanced over his shoulder, though, a wall of flame was leaping up behind him, eating through the wet underbrush and moss-armored old growth with unnatural speed.

Kevin turned and reached for all the power his body could give him, leg screaming protests all the while, and broke out of the underbrush into a length of open trail — a not totally unfamiliar trail. He'd gone hiking more than once here, he thought distantly, as his insides howled and raged furiously over the destruction nipping at his heels, trees older than the country crackling and burning, boiling oil and scorching blood filling his lungs and his skull. Dosewallips. The river gorge would break the fire, and Station Creek, but not before too much would be destroyed. And he was still too close to the fire.

A wooden footbridge crossed Station Creek above the ranger station and by the time Kevin reached it, he was no longer moving as a matter of thought or planning but from instinct. A plume of smoke blackened the sky and ash rained down like a dirty city snowfall and in his mind and body there was nothing but running and wordless, shrieking fury. These mountains and forests were not *his* but they were also not for the Eldjotnar to destroy in a fit of frustrated pique, either; that was not what those flames were *for*. His breath came in tightening gasps, the air thickening in his lungs and emerging in explosive puffs of frost. The wind shifted as he climbed, scouring down the sides of the mountain and pushing back against the flames, a torrent of early winter thick with moisture. Soon, the ash was mingled with snow — true snow, an unseasonable blizzard — and Kevin opened his arms to it, embraced it and allowed it to embrace him, searing cold sinking into his flesh and bones, storm-dark overtaking smoke haze and blowing it away.

The Eldjotnar was pursuing him, he knew that in depths of his being, hunter-senses catching the perverse and polluted essence of the creature reaching out to him even against the wind. He permitted some of his own being to ride those cold and slashing breezes, the scent of night and winter, frozen death in dark places, and continued on, his stride lengthening, no longer constrained by pain or fatigue. The slope grew gradually steeper as he ran, leading his prey on his trail as it raged, futilely, against a world suddenly turned against him, dousing

his flames, and refusing to let them reignite. The forest thinned, as well, becoming high meadow ringed in steep slopes scattered in stands of pine, bending in the winds that shrieked through the wall of the mountains. Here, it was nearly as dark as night, the sky a swirling maelstrom of storm and smoke, and he felt himself one with it, tasted death in the air that was not his own, and waited for it to arrive.

The Eldjotnar crested the rise in a thinly attenuated pillar of flame, face cut and bloody, eyes mad with rage. The shadow could see that from where he waited, crouched amid a fall of scree just above the tarn, whipped to a froth by the force of the wind.

“Come out you little bastard!” The Eldjotnar howled into the wind that laughed and mocked and clawed at his flames. “You should have just—”

The shadow moved, swift and silent, and raked claws like the sharp edges of fresh-broken ice across the back of the Eldjotnar’s knee, severing muscle and tendon in a single blow. The polluted creature wailed and spat fire, but the shadow was already gone, and the snow doused the flame before it could spread. It fell to one knee with a groan of pain and, had circumstances been different, the shadow might have felt some faint twinge of sympathy, or possibly even pity. Instead, it moved in again, shrieking winds preceding it, to lay the giant on its back — for once a giant is brought to the ground it is helpless — and the shadow landed astride the giant’s chest, pinning both arms to the ground and clenching one taloned hand on the giant’s throat.

It took the shadow a long time to remember how to form words in human speech and, when he did, they did not sound right, even to him. “Last chance. Leave them alone. See the Old Man. Learn. Grow. Or you end here.”

The giant drew in a breath to spit and the shadow twisted its wrist — hand coming away bloody and full. The shadow’s Hunger *roared* and, seeing no reason to stop, it bent to the feast.

VI.

Kevin cancelled the rest of his classes for the week, pleading a sudden and wretched cold, which wasn’t entirely a lie. Dragging himself back down from the heights of Hayden Pass in the middle of a raging snowstorm hadn’t done his body any favors. Sonny, of course, had absolutely no sympathy for that, though true to his word, he had at least helped get rid of the body.

Kevin was ensconced on the sitting room couch beneath three layers of blankets and nursing a cup of hot tea when the phone rang, three days later.

“Mr. Ash — Kevin. I’m sorry. Kevin. It’s Clarinda Weston.” The voice on the other end of the line was layered in so many emotions it was actually shaking slightly.

“Hello, Mrs. Weston. I’m sorry about cancelling but, as you can hear, I’ve managed to catch a summer cold.” He did not, unfortunately, have to pretend to sound awful.

“I’m sorry about that. Can we bring anything?” She sounded genuinely concerned, which he found touching, even under the circumstances.

“No, no, I don’t want to risk giving anyone else this crud. It’s hideous.” He wondered if there was any way he could say, *Besides, your ex-husband was quite the delicious gift enough* without sounding completely insane, and decided that had to be the cold medication talking.

“I can understand that. I...just wanted to let you know.” A slight pause. “Sammy told me that she told you about her father, about how we might be having to move.”

“She did.” Kevin kept his tone carefully neutral.

A slightly longer pause. “I’m...sorry you had to find out that way. But...” A ragged breath. “The authorities found Nick’s truck up near Whatcom, behind the fire lines. He was...in it.”

“Ah.” Kevin paused for a moment. “Should I be offering congratulations or condolences?”

“Is it terrible that I don’t know, either?” She asked, sounding very much as though she could laugh or cry, or possibly both. “In any case, I wanted to thank you for being such a good friend and teacher to Sammy. I confess I wasn’t sure what to think of you when we first met but now I know — well, you’re a better person than I was hoping to meet and for that I’m grateful.”

“You’re entirely welcome, Clarinda.” He smiled, glad she couldn’t see it. “And give me a little more time. I’ll have Samantha playing songs you never thought you’d hear.”



DEATH WITH DIGNITY

By Jose R. Garcia

I

The flashing lights of passing cars woke Ed. His head ached and he felt soft leather on his cheek. Hunting. He had been hunting, trailing some skateboarders into an industrial park, ready to send them running home. An easy meal, something to keep his Horror from starving. Then a sharp pain to the back of the head, and now he was here.

Ed looked around. He was in the backseat of a car, on his side so he couldn't get a good look at the driver. He felt the car moving. The sky outside the window above him was pitch black, punctuated by the high beams of drivers on the highway. He must have been out for a while.

He tried to lift an arm and pulled on the ropes binding his wrists and ankles. The bindings ended in a noose tight around his neck, holding everything together. He arched his back to lessen the rope's pressure. The Great Fire Bird was awake now, beating its wings at the same time Ed pulled at his restraints. No luck for either of them. He cursed. The driver didn't respond.

Karma, that's what it had to be. He went out hunting alone, despite every warning not to, and he got caught. He hoped that his broodmates were already tracking him down; they had to know by now. Until then, he'd have to improvise.

The ropes were strong, but nothing he couldn't pull apart. From there, he could reach over to the driver's seat and hijack the car. Grab the driver, make eye contact, drop a nightmare or two in their brain, throw them aside, and grab the wheel. Simple, fast... exhausting.

Using that much power, bringing on that much Hunger would usually make the Horror inside him balk. Not tonight. The Great Fire Bird struggled against its nylon prison, and Ed felt it pound and flutter inside his chest. Its panic leaked into his thoughts.

Get out. Be free. Fly away!

Ed took a few breaths. His belly felt warm, like it always did when the Horror inside him grew agitated. He had to calm it in the only way he knew how.

“Do you know what this is?” he asked the driver. No answer.

“You knocked me out, tied me up, and threw me in your car. You kidnapped me.”

The Great Fire Bird cried out to the heavens, a high-pitched screech punctuated by the crackle of flames. It echoed in Ed’s mind.

Ed lowered his voice to a growl. “You broke the law. You’re guilty.”

The warmth in his belly vanished. It shifted into the ice-cold pang of Hunger. The Great Fire Bird stopped struggling. He felt its disdain for the vehicle that surrounded them. From the sky, traffic looked like scurrying ants, ripe for the picking. This car was only a tiny part of a swarm.

As his Horror prepared for a feast, Ed pulled at his wrists. The Great Fire Bird felt the struggle and gripped at the rope with its talons. The two pulled together. A few strands tore apart, but the effort was too much for his back. He straightened out and the noose squeezed his neck.

He tried to curl himself again but his muscles were too exhausted to comply. The highway’s asphalt became rough, and the car bounced. The bumpy ride changed the constriction around Ed’s neck, giving him enough air to speak in bursts.

“Help,” he choked out. “Help. Please.”

The Great Fire Bird tore at the noose with its beak and talons. The rope still didn’t come apart. The car hit a pothole, and Ed tumbled off the backseat, into the ditch between the front and back seats. The impact stretched his back and his vision filled with sparks.

What kind of rope was this? He was never as strong as some of his other broodmates, but even he could tear metal chains like cloth. The light of a sports car sped by, illuminating the leaves embedded in the fibers. It all came to him at once: these were leaves from Rock Creek Park, from the forest that burned down in the Green Fire. Anything wrapped in those leaves could hold him. That wasn’t true last year, yesterday, or even a few hours ago, but he felt it in his bones. Only one kind of person could do this, to impose a fatal flaw on him and make it real. His Horror keened. It figured it out before he did.

Who else could strike hard enough blows to knock him out this long? Who else could trap him in just the right way? This was a Hero’s car. Whether he could break through the ropes or not, he would not escape alive.

And yet. “You can’t let me die like this!”

The figure at the wheel made a hard turn. Ed’s vision dimmed. He heard the wheels crawl through tall grass. The car stopped. The Great Fire Bird frayed a few more strands, but the fibers touching the leaves would not come apart. A painful, tingly numbness cascaded down his limbs. His whole body convulsed and his eyes felt tight.

This was it. He'd die here, pleading and choking on the side of the road. He thought of ghosts, the kind that Ruth would meet on her trips to the land beneath the earth. Ghosts lived in a vast labyrinth, she said, a world lit by colorless fire. They wandered the maze forever, lamenting their wasted lives. That's what waited for him, a wasted life, and a duty unfinished.

The driver's door opened and slammed shut. The passenger door by his head opened up, but Ed had no strength to face his killer. His vision was gone, replaced by a pulsating yellow tone. Through his own thunderous heartbeat, he heard the metallic hum of a knife leaving its sheath. Tied like a hog. Slaughtered like a hog.

"I'm sorry, Charlie," he whispered.

The knife whistled as it cut the air. Ed shut his eyes and braced for the first stab.

Ed felt the pressure around his neck loosen. The rope that connected his limbs to the noose sliced apart. He gasped for air. The Great Fire Bird roared a challenge at the person in front of him, but that didn't stop her from pulling Ed to meet her face to face.

"Big talk, Eddie," the woman said. "So much for punishing me."

His vision returned. She lit a cigarette. The soft red glow illuminated her face.

He knew that voice. Even through sight blurred by aching eyes and hot tears, he could recognize her.

"Mary?"

She was as tall as ever, a full head above him. She looked stronger, tougher. There was an aura of glory around her, a heaviness on Ed's soul that he felt as he looked at her. It was a feeling he had experienced before, and one he had helped snuff out.

Ed had become used to looks of scorn, fear, and hatred. Sometimes he even welcomed them. That wasn't how Mary saw him. She looked at him with pity, and he wasn't sure how to feel.

II

Every night over the past few months, Ed dreamed of a burning forest. He would run for safety, but he could not hide from the inferno. Exhausted from running, he collapsed on a bed of grass. Flames consumed him. He saw a great bird of fire circling him in the dark sky. It dove for him, and then he was awake.

Not all his dreams of fire could prepare him for the real thing. Now, the actual flames that consumed the trees around him had a deeper shade of green. Their arrival brought an unfamiliar sensation of sticky heat. No one had been with him in his dream, but now Charlie was right beside him. All these differences, but with one familiar terror, Rock Creek Park was burning, and all that surrounded them was forest.

Charlie grabbed Ed's arm and pulled him. "C'mon, man, we gotta go!"

Ed wasn't sure how far they went off the trail, how far they were from the rest of the class. It was Charlie's idea. He wanted to see the mouth of the river and that wasn't a part of the field trip. They gave their class the slip and wandered the forest. Ed was proud of their escape; Charlie's sister had kept a close eye on them until then. He should have known something was wrong when the patterns of branches felt too familiar, when the color of the leaves were just so, but he had kept quiet.

There had been no smoke in his dream, but the cloud surrounding them now burned his eyes and nostrils. It snuffed out the sun and bathed the world in a yellowish tinge. Charlie charged into wherever he thought the road might be. He called out for their teacher, then for his sister, then for anyone.

Ed looked at the sky and saw nothing but smoke and flashes of tumbling treetops. A flaming trunk crashed behind them. Red-hot pinpricks of pain scattered down the back of Ed's neck. He yelped and yanked himself from Charlie's arm. He slapped his neck. Nothing felt burned.

Charlie ran for a moment more and then stopped. "You OK?"

"Think so, yeah," Ed said.

"I think we're good, Eddie," Charlie said, "We're in a—"

Charlie fell into a coughing fit. Ed lifted his shirt collar above his nose and mouth and sprinted forward. He knocked him to the ground, where the smoke was thinner. Charlie took a shallow breath.

"We're in a clearing," he said. It was a hoarse whisper, barely audible above the snapping of burning branches. "Just gotta stay here and we'll be fine."

Ed nodded. "Mary's going to be so pissed at us."

He wasn't sure if Charlie laughed or coughed. It wasn't entirely a joke, more like a hope for the future. A dressing down from Mary for doing another stupid thing with Charlie was a sign of normality. It meant that surviving this would be another silly misadventure, like diving into a cold lake on the first morning of winter or pretending to fight on the church greens after Mass. Maybe she'd never forgive them after this, maybe no one would, but that was okay. Having to deal with his best friend's sister holding a grudge would be better than her having to speak at their funeral.

Ed kept his face pressed to the ground. He buried his fingers into the earth so deep that he pulled up grass from the roots. In his dream, the fiery bird would have taken him by now. He wished that it had, that it would grasp him in one talon and Charlie in the other to take them to wherever.

He heard crackling fire close behind them, "Charlie."

"It's gonna be fine!" Charlie said. "Someone will find us."

On his right, Ed heard the collapse of another tree. "We need to move."

“Where? Where do we go, Ed?”

“Somewhere else. Anywhere!”

“I can’t see where, Ed!”

Ed sprang from the ground and ran ahead. Charlie grasped for his ankle but he pulled free. He kept his hands in front of him, waving around to feel for trees in the thick yellow smoke. Charlie was right, this was a clearing, but that meant there had to be some road to civilization connected to it. If they just stayed down, the fire would have burned them along with the grass.

His left hand swept across flames. Ed yelped and fell to the ground. He gagged on his dry throat. His head spun. He looked up at the sky. He saw light through the smoke and a dark shadow above him. He couldn’t make out its shape or size, but he knew who it was. The bird had arrived to snatch him up. The nightmare was ending.

He lifted his burnt hand to the sky. “Come on. Come and get me.”

Charlie called out for him. He sounded closer now.

“Just let ‘em take us, Charlie.”

Ed felt a sharp kick to his shoulder. The pain was a dull ache compared to his burned hand but the surprise was enough to make him sit up.

“We’re going back,” Charlie said. “Best chance we’ve got.”

Ed tried to say that they were close to the road, that they were going to burn no matter where they were, that it was all just a dream anyway and the bird was going to get them, but it came out slurred and quiet. Charlie said something in response, but he couldn’t hear him over the sound of a tree tipping over beside them. The tree careened forward and its branches caught in the burning canopies of smaller trees. The flames spat embers on the brush around them.

Charlie ran faster. Ed tried to keep up, stumbling over patches of dead leaves and branches. Charlie’s grip slipped every time he fell over, until all he was holding onto was his wrist. Ed steadied his footing but an upturned root caught his ankle. He fell on the ground face first. A new pain bloomed from his nose. He looked up to see an emerald blaze fall towards him.

“Ed!” Charlie dove over him. The burning wood rolled down Charlie’s back and Ed saw his face contort into a silent scream.

A trunk hit the back of Charlie’s head. Ed felt the entire weight of Charlie’s body on top of him. He didn’t feel him breathing. The fire tore through the back of Charlie’s shirt and spread over his corpse. Ed pushed him off and the world went black.

Then he was awake again, rising into the air. He was on a stretcher attached by cable to a helicopter. Two paramedics were with him. They pumped clean air into his body. Everything hurt.

They reached the helicopter and one of the paramedics motioned to the pilot. They flew away from the smoldering forest. Ed hoped that Charlie was on board

somewhere, but after they wheeled him out into the hospital, all that he saw come out of the helicopter were body bags.

III

Mary led Ed into the diner at knifepoint. She kept her arm around him and leaned in close, brushing the small of his back with the tip of her switchblade. Her acting was impeccable: she walked with an unsteady gait to the table and kept her face buried in his shoulder. She burst into giggles, and the server gave Ed a knowing smile.

On their way to their table, Ed wrapped his arm around her. He pulled her in closer, pressing the blade closer to his spine. She wouldn't stab him here, and he wanted her to know that. She looked up at him from his shoulder. There was no fear in her eyes. He made sure that she couldn't see his.

At the table, they sat across from each other. Mary took a moment to feign pulling herself together and order their meals. She ordered a patty melt and a hamburger with extra lettuce. She kept her eyes on him as she ordered.

The server left. Ed said, "You remembered that."

Mary nodded. "You're the only person I know who actually wants more lettuce on your burger. There's easier ways to order a salad, Eddie."

His stomach tightened. What the hell was this? After she cut him loose, he wondered if Mary had just fallen under some other Hero's influence and became their lackey, but now that he had a good look at her, he knew that wasn't what was going on. Even with the smile she wore, nothing could hide the cold gleam of longing in her eyes, the lust for violence. His brood described that look to him when they first told him about their common enemy. On bad days, he saw that look on the faces of fellow Beasts. On worse days, he saw it in the mirror.

But here they were, about to eat old road trip favorites, as if nothing had changed. Everything about this made no sense, and yet it gave him a twinge of nostalgia. Running with the brood was fun and comfortable but being with Mary, even now, felt good. There had to be some kind of angle, some kind of trick to all this.

Their meals arrived. Mary reached over for a bottle of ketchup. Ed grabbed her wrist. She looked at him with a blank expression. He saw her other hand clenching one of the knives on the table. He let her go. He looked around. No one saw what had just happened.

"I would have died tied up like that." Ed kept his voice low.

Mary poured the ketchup on her plate.

"I would have strangled myself and died. End of story."

"Yep," she said.

"But you cut me loose. You let me sit next to you all the way here."

She bit into her patty melt. Ed took a deep breath.

“You know what I am, what I’ve become. It works both ways, you know. You’ve become something too. I know you won’t believe me, but it’s true.”

The Great Fire Bird, bored with their conversation, circled the diner. It tasted the hidden nightmares of each patron, nudging at their minds with its glowing ember beak and lifting its head to let the scraps drop into its gullet. It gained no nourishment, but the wave of tension that spread across the establishment was its own reward.

“I believe you,” Mary said. Ed saw the bloodlust in her eyes vanish. The Great Fire Bird felt his surprise. It flew back to him and perched on his shoulders.

“Something is wrong with us,” she said, “and I’ve been trying to stop it.”

The Great Fire Bird screeched into Ed’s ear.

She deceives! The great and awful light spreads within her! She seeks to snuff out our fire!

Mary reached out for Ed’s hand. “But now I know how.”

Attack! Kill! Hide! Flee! Run!

“You don’t have to do this,” Ed said. “You...we can walk away from this.”

Their hands clasped. “I don’t think I can,” she said. “And you just won’t.”

Mary’s grip tightened as he tried to pull away and the Hero’s look crept into her gaze. “I can’t walk away but I can end this. It’s all so simple, Eddie.”

Ed felt the gaze of the entire diner on him. He wanted to throw nightmares into their tired minds, send them scattering into the night so he could make his escape. The Great Fire Bird disagreed. Even now, it didn’t want to go hungry.

“I do know what you are,” Mary said, “That’s right. I’ve seen what lives under your skin. You’re a firebird. You’ve *been* a firebird, all this time.”

Ed felt her nails cut into his skin. The glee he felt in her voice made him sweat. Ruth had that same sort of joy in her voice when her brood took him in. *You were always one of us*, she said on their first meeting. *Being human was just a long dream you woke up from.*

Mary leaned over the table. “I should have known that you were going to run off into the forest with Charlie. I should have *known* what you were going to do.”

Ed growled and met her gaze. “What the hell are you getting at?”

She grinned. “You burned my brother alive, Eddie.”

“You know that isn’t true!”

“I’ve been tracking you for a month now. I know exactly what you’re capable of.”

“Mary, for Christ’s sake!”

“You made a man fall into a ditch and break his leg because he walked on the wrong side of the road,” she said. “You threatened to throw a woman off of a building because she snuck onto the roof!”

Ed sneered. “They were guilty. That man robbed hitchhikers. That woman—”

“She wanted to start a garden!” Mary’s nails slashed at his skin. “It was her apartment building!”

Ed said, “It wasn’t her decision to do that. And besides, going out that late, there’s things that...”

“Why’d you really do it?”

“I...” Ed took a breath. “I was hungry, Mary. I was just so hungry.”

Mary raised her knife. “Was that why Charlie had to die? He was guilty. Or were you just hungry?”

“Stop!” Ed slammed his free hand on the table. The quiet hum of other conversations ceased. He glared at the rest of the diners: the scared, the confused, and the tired. His Horror spread its wings and reared its head. It kept its gaze on Mary, ready for her to strike. Her grin faded.

“I loved Charlie,” Ed said. “And I loved you too. I’d never hurt either of you.”

The Great Fire Bird tilted its head and scowled at him. Ed ignored it and kept his focus on Mary. It hissed and lowered its wings.

She let go of him. The tops of his hands had thin, deep cuts. The Great Fire Bird pecked at them. The wounds cooled the tip of its burning beak, and it screeched at Mary. Ed wiped away his tears, and the blood from his hands left small trails on his cheeks.

Mary threw the knife at the table. “It doesn’t matter now. Something must be done.”

“So why didn’t you just get it over with in the car?” Ed asked.

“It wouldn’t kill you. The leaves can bind you, but there’s only one place where you can die.”

“Rock Creek,” Ed said.

Mary nodded. “It’s where you first struck. It’s where everything began and where it’ll end.”

Ed’s eyes widened. “You made that happen.”

Mary narrowed her eyes. “What?”

“Come on, doesn’t that sound too obvious? Why would I still live around the place that would kill me?”

Mary furrowed her brow. She scanned the table, as if the answer lay nearby.

“You can still stop this, you just need to think. Was that really where I struck first, or is that where you would have *wanted* me to?”

Mary ran her fingers through her hair and gritted her teeth. Then, she was calm.

“The fire,” she said, “You’re made of it. It’s part of your body and it got into the soil. The trees that grew, they’re tuned to it. That’s why it’ll kill you. That’s why I have to. The forest’ll burn down again if I don’t.”

Ed felt his stomach sink. He shook his head. “Mary.”

Mary pulled apart her patty melt. “I wanted to give you a last meal.”

“We’re never alone, Mary. They’ll know I’m gone.”

“Just a last meal between two good friends.”

“You can’t kill them all, Mary. They’re going to tear you apart.”

“A wake for the boy I thought I knew.”

“I could do that myself if I wanted. I shouldn’t even be humoring you like this,” Ed said.

“Eddie,” Mary said. “Just eat.”

They ate in silence. The server returned to leave the check. A canyon of empty booths formed between the two and the rest of the diner. Ed felt the guests breathe a sigh of relief once they stepped outside.

Ed led the way back to Mary’s car. Mary followed. They drove back on the highway, to Rock Creek Park.

IV

It was the dead of night. The Serpent of All Colors slithered through the tall grass. The Daitya walked beside it with a hundred mile stride. The Monk Fish imposed lakes and rivers upon the world and swam through them with terrifying speed. Above them all, the Great Fire Bird soared in the sky, boasting to the land below.

It was the dead of night. Anatoly sped his car down the country road. Morgan sat next to him, hashing out next week’s schedule with her personal assistant over text. Ruth watched the world pass by from one of the backseat windows. Ed bragged about his new job.

“They let me set my own hours,” he said. “I could just take a whole month off if I felt like it. Maybe two!”

Morgan kept her eyes on her phone. “They can’t afford all their employees, so they call limiting your hours ‘setting your own pace’. Clever.”

“Come on, Morgan,” Anatoly said. “Let the kid have his moment.”

“That kind of work ethic turned Silicon Valley into a ghost town. Any kind of mine deserves better.” Morgan slipped her phone into her purse.

Anatoly looked at Ed through the rearview mirror and smirked. “If only he worked for you, yeah?”

Morgan frowned. “I don’t see what that has to do with anything.”

“It was really nice that you offered,” Ed said, “I just don’t think I’d be happy working with family is all.”

Ruth turned from the window. “And this isn’t work?”

Ed smiled. “It’s dinner.”

Ever since he woke up sobbing and shaking on the night of his Devouring, Ed slaked his Hunger with gusto. As long as people trespassed into places they didn’t belong, there was a feast at the ready. Fences made good neighbors, and in a world like theirs, someone was always willing to pay to keep the neighborhood nice and friendly.

They were making sure of that now. Anatoly got the tip from one of his myriad connections: someone was squatting on private property. Someone else wanted them gone. Perfect family outing material.

They parked in front of a boarded up warehouse outside of town. Graffiti tags tattooed its walls and ancient debris littered the parking lot. It was a husk, a discarded remnant of a better economy. No one belonged in there. The thought had the Great Fire Bird drooling.

Morgan tore off the boards blocking the door. She hurled it away and they sailed through the air. After a moment, the brood heard a distant crash.

“Smooth,” Ed said. Anatoly snickered.

Ruth slipped inside and gestured for Ed to follow. “Keep watch,” she said to the others.

The warehouse was dark and smelled like moldy wood. Mangled shelves and ancient cardboard boxes littered the floor. Ruth examined the shelves and prodded the boxes apart with her foot. Ed walked onward, whistling. He was halfway across the building when a shadowy figure ran out of one of the doors upstairs. The metal stairs rattled as the figure took a few steps down. Ruth was already waiting on one side of the stairway exit. Ed made his way to the other side. The figure stopped halfway down his side of the stairs.

The moonlight shone on him from one of the upper windows, a dramatic flair that Ed appreciated. He took a few steps up.

“You’re in big trouble,” he said, “You know that?”

No answer. The figure in front of him stepped back up to a landing, just as he hoped.

“You don’t belong here, and you know it.” The Great Fire Bird grasped for the mind of the prey before it and latched on. Ed walked up the steps with an easy pace. The figure didn’t move.

“You’re surrounded. We’re everywhere, and we don’t like you one bit.”

Ed heard a whimper. He grinned. “Don’t tell me you feel sorry *now*. No one’s coming to help. You’re all alone, in here, with us.”

The person before him clenched the handrail so hard it wobbled. The Great Fire Bird prodded their mind with its burning beak, looking for an opening, nudging at small imperfections and old fears. Ed stepped onto the landing. The small stuff was over; it was time for the grand finale.

When it was time to feed, Ed made a show of it. This wasn't just a way to eat. It was a duty, an image to maintain. Everything had to be just right. There would be no point to cracking open someone's mind and feasting upon the fear within if there was nothing to remember him by.

"You can feel it, can't you? That there's something off about me?" A good set-up was important.

The figure in the darkness spoke with a young feminine voice. "Leave me alone."

Ed's words had opened a small crack in her mind and the Great Fire Bird supped on the fear that leaked from it. He felt nourishing warmth in his belly. The warmth was so powerful that it spread into the depths of his bones, but it was not enough. He saw Ruth on the other side of the landing. She was mouthing something to him, but he was too in the moment to make out what she was trying to say.

He stepped out of the moonlight. His eyes adjusted to the darkness and he saw their target. She kept her eyes on him, even though he was over a foot taller than she was. She was in rumpled, soiled clothes covered by a winter jacket made for an adult man. Her curled black hair was flat and matted with grease. She couldn't have been older than thirteen.

Oh well.

He grasped her shoulders and pulled her close. "Look at me!"

She saw him. Not the twenty-something grasping her, but the Beast within, the Great Fire Bird that spread fire among the fields and brought blessing and doom in equal measure. She felt its blazing glory and Ed saw the girl's flesh singe. The warmth was overflowing. It was time to pull back now. He'd tell her to run. Ruth didn't need to do anything direct to feed, so she'd just block the girl's path. Morgan would probably scream one last threat at her and Anatoly would make sure she kept far away.

"Run," he said, "Run away and never come back."

The girl threw herself off the landing. Her neck twisted the wrong way when she hit the floor, and then she was still. Ed felt three things in succession: the instant feeling of being comfortably full, the Great Fire Bird falling asleep, and then numbing fear.

"I told you to stop!" Ruth said.

"I..." Ed began.

"Cop cars on the move!" Anatoly yelled. "Let's book it!"

Ruth grabbed Ed and pulled him out of the warehouse. The girl's corpse never left his sight until they were well beyond the warehouse door. The rest of the brood didn't say a word to him on the ride back to town. For now, he was the only human among monsters.

V

All they had to talk about was each other. Mary told Ed about the failed semester at college and the nightmares that came after. She told him about seeing monsters, and all the horrible things they did. She told him about changing that, about repairing lives, finding lost objects, and comforting the abused, all while she lost her apartment and her father died of cancer. She told him about the nightmare that pushed her over the edge. A girl fell to her death, pushed by a bird made of fire.

Ed told her about his last nightmare, about the bird of fire that ate his soul and made a nest in the empty space. He told her of the creatures he had known and the worlds he had seen. He told her about feasts and famines. He told her about the duty that the Dark Mother tasked his people with and everything else Ruth had tried to teach him. He told Mary about what she had told him when they were out of their broodmates' earshot; about the cycle of Beast and Hero and how it wasn't always that way. Ruth said that with enough time and understanding they could shift the tide back to a better time, when no one had to die.

No minds changed and no reconciliation occurred.

Rock Creek Park prospered in the time after the fire. The grass grew bright and full, the trees were thick and hardy, and even the waters of the lake tasted sweeter. The nighttime drive hid the true beauty of the forest, the intricate pattern of sunlight flowing through the thick tree branches. When he first set out to feed his Hunger, Ed only hunted here. He watched the forest's renewal and kept trespassers out of the places that had yet to recover from the fire. Anatoly and the brood met him on one of his vigils there.

Mary stopped the car in front of the park entrance. The booth next to them was empty. She unlocked the doors and pulled a shotgun from the side of the car. "Let's go," she said.

Ed could take the blast. The Great Fire Bird could melt the buckshot as soon as it hit his flesh. He could even use that to his advantage and take off running in Mary's moment of confusion. He braced himself for the shot. Mary nudged his side with the barrel.

"Not here," she said, "We've got to go deeper. Open the door."

She stared at him, shotgun on shoulder. The Great Fire Bird hollered.

Grab the gun! Tear her throat!

"No," Ed said to both Mary and his Horror.

"What?" *I will not die here!*

"No. Charlie wouldn't want this."

Mary put her finger on the trigger. A hazy white light intensified behind them. Ed looked through the back window and saw the headlights to a familiar car. The light vanished and they heard two car doors open and shut. Mary cursed and reached for the car door.

Ed burst out of the car before Mary turned the handle. She fired at him and pellets whizzed by his skin. He ran into the woods before she could take another shot. He could feel the Great Fire Bird's flames dampen. Its protection of his body was gone, and he had to tread carefully.

In the distance, he heard the harsh crash of twisted metal. Morgan's doing. He heard another shot, much closer than he expected. He saw Mary sprinting after him, glowing with a faint golden light. She fired again and bits of bark flew into his face.

Anatoly called out to them. "Where you going, lady? I thought we were having fun!"

"Anatoly! I've got this!" Ed yelled. A tree tore from its roots and flew into the trunks of other trees. The sound covered his words.

"Morgan, stop!" The crashing cascade of trees muffled this too.

An evergreen crashed down towards him. Ed leaped into the air, hoping that Mary's weakness hadn't stolen his most important ability. The Great Fire Bird spread its wings, and Ed flew up to the forest ceiling. He hopped over the thin branches with careful steps. He looked below. Anatoly slithered through the falling debris and Morgan tore a path through the forest. Mary dodged the trees. She hadn't seen one of the upward roots and tripped. Her gun flew from her and fired into the night sky. They had her now.

Ed leaped down to her. "Mary. Mary!"

Mary hunched over her left knee. She had a firm grip on it, like she was trying to hold it together. Her eyes shut tight. "Well?" she asked. "What are you going to do?"

Anatoly yelled, "You see what happens when you screw with my family?" He wasn't anywhere near them, and that gave Ed great relief.

"I'm going to save you," Ed said. "We're going to go home, and we are never going to see each other again."

More trees fell. Ed helped Mary up.

"But you're going to promise me, Mary, that you're not going to kill anyone. That you're going to keep helping people, no matter what. Because it *works*, it really works, no matter what you're telling yourself."

She looked at him as both man and prey. "Can you promise me that, Eddie?"

He saw her, standing alone and afraid in a forest that had no place for her. A trespasser. The Great Fire Bird hungered. Ed shut his eyes to block out the sharp pains of starvation. He heard Mary pick up her shotgun. The sound of falling trees was around them now.

"I can't," he said.

A pause. "Then I can't either."

She fired. His shoulder burst apart. Ed shrieked and it echoed through the trees like a birdcall. He knelt on the forest bed, panting and sweating. He

hadn't bled since he was Devoured, and the hot blood darkening his shirt seemed to make up for lost time. He heard Mary reload.

Then he heard another tree crash, followed by a sharp hiss. Mary screamed. The sound of tearing flesh and gurgling blood cut it off. A hand reached out for his uninjured shoulder and he recoiled.

"It's just me," Morgan said, "You're going to be fine."

Ed looked up to see Anatoly feasting on Mary's corpse. He looked up from the open wound in her torso and grinned at him.

"Wipe that smile off," Ed growled.

"Hey, whoa!" Anatoly said. Mary's blood dribbled down his front. "Don't be like that!"

"She was one of my best friends," Ed said.

Anatoly looked at his meal and grimaced. "I'm... sorry? We were just looking out for you, dude."

"We were worried," Morgan said, "We thought the Hero killed you."

"She *was* a Hero, right?" Anatoly asked. Ed nodded. "Tough break. Really, I get it. It's kind of inevitable."

"We'll talk about this later, Anatoly. Ed needs help."

"Right, right. Come on, buddy. Can you stand?"

Ed could stand, he just didn't want to. He wanted to sink into the ground, far into the earth, where no one could find him. The two Beasts hoisted him up. Morgan carried him back to her car.

Anatoly said, "I'm going to call Ruth, see if she can't find us a way to get Ed's shoulder fixed without going to the ER."

"She won't be happy about this. Let her know what happened, but skimp on the details."

"Good thinking."

As they drove away, Ed watched the forest sink into the distance. The Great Fire Bird cried a cheer into the sky, celebrating its victory.

VI

The day was beautiful. No clouds in the sky, a cool breeze with a pleasant heat. The clearing's grass was lush and Ruth couldn't stop running her hands through it. Ed liked that. She loved the lake. He had to stop her from just diving in, clothes and all. He worried that nothing would live up to that, but this was a good sign.

Ruth lay on the ground and smoothed out her dress. "This would make a great Chamber."

Ed said, "I guess it would."

“I mean it! There’s nothing more terrifying than a calm day. It’s not bad but it’s not good either. It’s a day full of possibilities and that’s the scariest thing, I think.”

She tore some grass from the ground and scattered it to the air. “It can all go to pot, just like that.”

“Yeah.” The wind carried the scent of a barbecue grill. On the other side of the clearing, a family sat down at a picnic table. The kids started chasing each other while the parents spread a tablecloth. One of the kids, a girl in a pink dress and short-cropped hair, saw Ed watching them and she waved at him. Ed smiled and waved back.

Ruth said, “I didn’t think you’d ever want to come back here, Ed.”

He looked at her. She sat up, a hard expression on her face.

“I know Anatoly and Morgan think they can fool me, but I’m always listening. That’s how I feed. *Of course* I’d find out what happened between you and your friend.”

Ed sat down with Ruth on the grass. “You must think I’m pretty stupid, don’t you.”

“I think you’re hurt,” she said.

Ed rubbed his shoulder. “How do you know? About all that stuff you were telling me. How they don’t always kill.”

“I get around. I hear stories. Some of us say that if you look hard in your Lair, you can find a piece of the Dark Mother’s body, and she’ll whisper to you about how the world once was, and how it could be again. It might be some of that, too.”

The kids at the picnic started to play Cops and Robbers. The parents kept close watch. A man and woman joined them, and they were cooking on the grill. Ed and Ruth watched them.

“That’s not how they are all the time,” Ruth said to Ed, “That harmony you see. Whenever we’re looking at someone, we’re always seeing only one aspect. Even if you could read their mind, one moment in their being is all you get. That’s all you have to act on.”

She put a hand on his shoulder. “I am not going to say you did the right thing. I *am* going to say you did what you could.”

Ed scoffed. “A lot of good that did for Mary.”

“This is not a kind world we live in.”

Ed put his face in his hands. Ruth patted him. She looked to the sky and saw a dark storm cloud waft into the horizon. The family saw it too. They talked amongst themselves about what to do.

Ruth said, “I know you realize this. Why else would you gorge the Great Fire Bird so quickly after that night?”

Ed didn't answer. He had wondered if his Horror felt any kind of worry or concern over how fast he was eating, over how fierce and cruel his punishments became and how petty the transgressions that sparked them. Instead, it looked upon Ed with love as it fell asleep in his Lair. That was the only time he had ever seen it look upon him with anything more than a generic approval. It gave him an equal mix of pride and revulsion.

"I just wanted to be alone for a while," Ed said. "To just be me."

"To be half of you," Ruth corrected.

"Whatever."

Another storm cloud followed close behind the first.

"I thought that maybe it wouldn't feel as good. Feeding," Ed said.

"And it wasn't?"

"No, it was. That's what I hated the most. It was like when I was first Devoured all over again. It felt right and sometimes it took the guilt away."

Soft thunder peeled across the sky. The family had made their decisions; they were going to pack up and leave. They put away the containers and covered the half-cooked food in foil. The children complained as they were ushered along the path back to their car. The girl in the pink dress looked back to Ed, but he didn't see her. He was looking at himself and the grass below him.

"Ruth," he asked, "Do you think they're there? Where the ghosts go?"

Ruth watched the family leave. "Maybe. Not everyone becomes a ghost, and not every ghost stays in the Underworld forever."

"So I'd be looking for a long time."

"Yes."

"I think I'm fine with that."

"You're asking me to take you there?"

"Sort of."

He looked at her with a flat expression. Ruth's eyes widened. "Ed."

"I couldn't promise Mary anything. I didn't kill anyone else this time, but I came close."

"Ed, you don't know what you're talking about."

"I cut a man. I cut him for sneaking into his job at night, because I knew it'd get me a step closer to putting it to bed. I cut his ankles and made him crawl for help."

She reached for his hand.

"I didn't feel guilty, Ruth. Not about that. Not about that night. Not about anything."

She held his hand tight. He squeezed her hand and smiled sadly.

“When you were first showing me around, showing me who I was, we’d meet these Beasts who’d kill people without even stopping to blink,” he said. “That’s what it was like, Ruth. For a moment, I understood what it was like to be them. And that’s why I need to go.”

He leaned his head on her shoulder. “I couldn’t trust anyone else to do this. Anatoly, Morgan, I love them, but they’d be OK with what I’d become. They might get that way too one day.”

Ruth said, “You can’t come back from this. You won’t even be you.”

“That’s fine.”

“You don’t know if the Great Fire Bird will even do what you want it to do.”

“No, I don’t.”

“The Underworld is filled with ghosts. You want to look for two.”

“Three. At least three.”

He felt Ruth shake. He had never seen her in any state besides pensiveness and mild contentment, even in their darkest encounters. It felt wrong to watch her cry. He embraced her.

“You’ll see me again, Ruth,” he whispered.

“Only half.” She lost control of her voice. “The half that I can’t call by your name.”

“Maybe not.”

They parted. “I’ll do it,” she said. “But I’ll be guiding you. I know someone who’ll help. We’ll lead whatever’s left of you to where you want to go.”

“Thank you.”

The storm clouds crossed the sky as quickly as they arrived. They brought no rain and even their thunder was ephemeral. The sky became blue again. A strong breeze blew some of the loose grass into the air. Ed and Ruth walked down the trail together into the deepest part of the forest, into the heart of his Lair.



TERRITORY

By Peter Woodworth

Jesse almost kept walking when he heard the knock. It's funny, the sort of little things that can save your life. Or would have, in his case.

Instead, he took out his earbuds, the sounds of Bad Religion growing tinny and faint as they fell to his chest. "Hello?" Jesse asked, looking around uncertainly. The art building was locked up at this time of night, with only students working on special projects being given access. His own painting, a surprisingly inspired take on a still life he'd based on the photo of a merch table of a show his band had played two weekends earlier, sat upstairs nearly finished.

There it was again. Coming up from the basement stairwell, there was a loud banging sound, like someone hammering on one of the steel classroom doors. *Boom, boom, boom.* Or was that where the photography darkrooms were? He'd taken the tour freshman year but had since kept to the painting studios on the upper floors. "Are you locked in?" Jesse called down the stairwell. He wasn't sure that you could get locked in, but maybe a door had gotten jammed somehow. That had happened to two of the people on his floor last year, and a couple of burly maintenance guys had to force it with a huge pry bar.

Boom, boom.

"Hang on, I'll get someone." Jesse walked down to the security office, where the officers and the night janitors tended to hang out bullshitting after hours, but despite finding the door unlocked and a television tuned to some late show there was nobody around. "Great." He could probably wait for the guard to wander back, but there it was again, faster this time: *boom-boom.* Jesse took a last look around and headed for the stairs.

Perhaps to make up for the lack of exterior light, the lights in the basement hallway were set to be a bit over-bright, and in the stark fluorescence, it seemed like every detail jumped out at him. The doors were closed but as he looked down the hall the second to last one on the left shook slightly as it banged again: *boom, boom, boom.* "Just a second," Jesse said, dropping his bag. It would still be leaning up against the wall when the guard came by fifteen minutes later, upright and tidy

as if waiting for its owner to return. The door was rattling at a steady rhythm now, *boom-boom-boom-boom-boom* — Jesse put his hand on the latch.

The pounding stopped.

“Is it jammed?” Jesse asked. From the other side he thought he could hear voices, maybe a man and a woman, it was hard to tell through the thick darkroom door. He repeated the question, louder this time, but if there was any particular response he didn’t hear one, just more indistinct talking. Jesse shivered, and with a sense of growing confusion realized the handle was cold in his hand. Had it been that way when he grabbed it? He felt like he would have noticed that. It was cold outside, but the heat was on in the building.

He let go, turned to walk away—

Boom.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake, fine.” Jesse turned back, grabbed the handle and put his shoulder to the door. There was a moment’s resistance, but then the door flung open and Jesse stumbled after it into the darkened room. At first he figured the dim red light was simply par for the course in a darkroom, until he saw what was emitting it, and had just enough time to wonder who had put up torches in a classroom before the many things that were one was upon him.

The door slammed shut as Jesse began screaming.

• • •

“There’s that creepy chick again,” Steve said, mock whispering. He nudged Sam with his elbow in case she somehow failed to miss his cue, nearly knocking over her orange juice in the process. Around them the grudging early morning activity of the cafeteria went on like any other day, students rubbing bleary eyes and lining up for breakfast while professors and teaching assistants flitted to the coffee station like tweedy hummingbirds.

“It’s not funny,” Sam said, elbowing Steve back, but he just laughed. Two tables away and directly across from her, Sam’s stalker sat down with a plate of eggs, half an orange – neatly sectioned — and a small glass of milk. Sam could have taken her order for her she knew it so well. The girl opened a book on the table in front of her and began to eat, so carefully avoiding even looking in Sam’s direction that she might as well have announced herself with fireworks.

There was nothing unusual about her stalker, at least not to look at. She wasn’t decked out head to toe in Goth black or paramilitary gear, didn’t carry any obvious weapons or look as though she slept in the bushes outside Sam’s window. No, she was just another coed in blue jeans and a university sweatshirt slightly too big on her, plain brown hair pulled back into a neat ponytail with a simple black scrunchie, glasses from the middle of the fashion curve perched on an equally pleasant but unmemorable face.

She looked, in short, like nobody special. Just the sort of girl who could be seen in a campus brochure from most any college in the country, walking with a

group of laughing girls down some path strewn with autumn leaves in front of a tastefully brick-fronted building. At the edge of the group, maybe, or following in the background, but there all the same. Sam could easily have missed her.

Except for the scent attached to her.

In her time, Sam had encountered a fair number of distinctive scents that signaled the presence of different types of supernatural beings. The dried blood scent of vampires, for one, or the earthy musk of a shapeshifter, even the curiously mixture of chalk and ammonia that seemed to follow the occasional psychic talent who graced the campus. This scent, though, this scent was totally new. Turned earth, old rot, and about a century's worth of dust, as if someone dumped an exhumed body into the library stacks.

It was so strong that the first time Sam caught it, she'd glanced around to see if campus construction had hit an old graveyard as they were digging the foundation of the new administrative building. Then she'd realized it was no ordinary scent, but one that meant a supernatural creature of a type she'd never encountered before must be nearby, and that's when she'd first noticed it surfaced whenever that girl was around. As Sam thought about it, she noticed that the girl was around a lot.

At first Sam had chalked up her stalker's presence to selective perception — it was a quiet campus as far as other supernatural beings went, the way she preferred it, and so naturally, a break in that routine would stick out. A new type of being was potentially a concern, but she'd wait to see how that played out first. When it was clear that the girl was deliberately following her, however, to the point where even Sam's friends noticed, that was a different story. Sam had her own version of invisibility to maintain, and while she liked hers to be a bit further along on the fashion curve, whatever else this girl was she was a threat to that for sure.

“Sam? Hey! Come back to us!” Steve snapped his fingers, apparently not for the first time. Sam shook her head, gave an exaggerated blink as if leaving a trance state. Steve grinned. Sometime while she had tranced out, Kelly had joined them too.

“You have to be careful. You don't get rid of stalkers by creepy-staring back at them,” Kelly said patiently.

Steve grinned. “True. It's why I'm stuck with her.”

“Dick,” Kelly said, without malice.

“I wasn't staring,” Sam said, a little more defensively than she intended. She sipped her juice but neither of her friends spoke up in agreement. “Was I?”

“Little bit,” Kelly said, shrugging apologetically.

“You should just go and ask what her deal is,” Steve suggested. He spread his hands in an encompassing gesture. “I mean what the hell, right? What's the other option, waiting around to see if she wants to use your skin for pajamas?”

“Because confronting stalkers always goes so well,” Kelly replied acidly.

“I’m pretty sure you could take her,” Steve said to Sam, only half-joking. “You’re fierce.” He added a ridiculous little growl for effect and Sam couldn’t help but laugh along with Kelly. Not for the first time, she was glad she had spared Steve that night freshman year. He’d turned out a lot more interesting than he’d seemed back then. Plus, without him around Kelly would probably still be pining for that douchebag she left back in high school, and Sam figured she was a lot better off now.

“He has a point,” Sam conceded.

“You’re going to fight her?” Kelly said, eyes wide.

“Yes! Cat fight!” Steve pumped his fist in victory. Both girls reflexively hit him.

“No! Don’t be gross.” Sam pushed her food around on her plate with her fork, thinking. Her Horror actually would have liked nothing more than to grab the strange girl by the neck and shake her until all her secrets spilled out, but Sam knew the sphinx had grown bored simply gnawing on the mystery and so she stamped the instinct down. It had been too long since she’d indulged her Hunger, though, and her Horror was restless. She’d hit a bar later, maybe, find a nice clueless frat guy just to quiet it down a little. “But I do need to talk to her.”

“Now?” Steve asked.

“No,” Sam said, taking a piece of bacon and tearing a long strip from it with her fingers. “But soon.” Her eyes fixed on the girl, who glanced up in time to catch her eye. There was nothing special there that Sam could see — no great hate or desire, just a sort of mild curiosity. There was that scent again, though, like she was standing in a cemetery. “Yeah,” Sam added, not wavering. “Real soon.”

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“She’s noticed you, you know.” Tom’s eyes didn’t leave the bright colors of the Simpson clan on the television across the room, but his tone belied his casual posture. “I told you it wasn’t a smart move to shadow her.”

“I know!” Becca chewed her lip, an old nervous habit that she stopped as soon as she noticed she was doing it, and which resumed moments after she stopped thinking about it. She pulled a new yearbook from one of the stacks on her desk and started flipping through it, pen and note tabs at the ready. There were three stacks altogether — the first, tall but rapidly diminishing, of yearbooks she hadn’t examined yet. The second was next to her desk, a small pile of books with no notations. The third, however, sat to one side of her small study area, with slips of different colored note tabs sticking out anywhere she’d made a discovery.

All the places she’d found the girl she was watching.

As far as Becca could see, the girl was very good at staying under the radar — she hadn't found her in anything as obvious as club photo or a posed publicity shot. But Becca was observant by nature, and meticulous, and so she looked more closely. When she did, the story started to tell itself. A face in a campus concert might be hers (pink tab), while this other one of a protest was definitely the same girl (yellow tab). So far, there were more pink tabs than yellow ones, but the ratio was a lot lower than Becca would've liked.

This was especially true considering that Becca had pulled yearbooks going back four years, then another five years, then another ten years after that, and with the occasional exception of a year here or there the girl was still showing up.

Living your own life was complicated enough; taking care of the restless dead she came across made things damn near impossible sometimes. When she first came to campus, and saw how free of spirits it was — a welcome change from some of her other college tour stops, to say the least — Becca figured she'd get a nice break. But, as always, her curious nature kicked in, and she'd started digging. Why was such an old campus so devoid of ghosts, exactly? After all, colleges are already a bubbling cauldron of emotions, so when you add in the occasional tragic death or freak accident there should be plenty of spirits who weren't quite ready to move on.

Only a couple of days after her curiosity piqued, she saw it. A girl walking across campus — short, stylish, pretty — who sent three ghosts scattering with her mere presence, like the bow wake of a ship. Two of the ghosts were too far gone to get much useful information out of, unfortunately, but the third one — a handsome boy with sad eyes and an eternally broken neck — told her what he knew.

“That’s the Monster,” he said, shivering despite never feeling cold again. “She was here when I ... you know. She’s bad news. Watch out for her.” Becca had pressed for more but he hadn't much else to tell her, just that he'd been warned to stay away from her when her first died. That had been eight years earlier, and supposedly she hadn't changed much since then. The girl didn't look much different from anyone else, but then again, neither did Becca. At least she came out in daylight, though, so she figured that ruled out vampires.

Hopefully.

A small envelope slid under her door, breaking her reverie. Part of her wanted to tear it into small pieces, pack her things, and call her parents, but only a small part. The part of her that had seen a good friend die only inches away from her, and then helped his spirit adjust to its new existence, that part bent down and picked up the envelope. *Stalker* was written on the outside in small, neat writing. Not a promising start. “Well, at least we know she’s trying to talk,” Becca said.

“Wait! What if she booby-trapped it?” Tom asked, hovering next to her.

“How? It’s an envelope.”

“I don't know!” Tom threw his hands in the air. “Could be anthrax inside, could have a mummy’s curse on it for all we know. She’s clearly not normal! I mean, even for, you know, us.”

"I know." Becca wished she could hug him, but manifesting would take up too much of his strength. "Promise to stick around if this kills me?"

Tom's smile was genuine, if a little sad. "Promise."

Becca opened the envelope. Inside was a partial sheet of paper, torn from a notebook. A couple of lines were written in the same small, neat handwriting: *Think it's time we talked. Lunch tomorrow, 1 PM @Ike Hall? You know where I sit.* If there was any kind of magic curse unleashed by opening the envelope, Becca didn't notice it.

Tom peered over her shoulder. "Well, that's to the point."

"Could be worse," Becca said. "Public place, no death threats."

"Could be better," Tom pointed out. "No promise not to kill you either."

"Can't have everything," Becca said, turning the little piece of paper over in her hands.

"Are we going?" Tom asked.

"I'm going," Becca said. She held up a hand to stop his protests. "If she doesn't know about you, bringing you just exposes you for no real gain. And if she's got some bad stuff in mind for me, having you elsewhere means you can, I don't know, get help, or something." She knew how lame that sounded coming out, but she knew he heard the words unspoken underneath them: *I've lost you once; I don't want to lose you again.*

Tom's expression darkened and his form flickered like a candle that suddenly caught a draft, but didn't say anything. Acceptance, then. "Fine," he said at last, practically spitting out the word.

"I'll be OK," she said, unsure of whether she was saying it to Tom or herself. Probably both. "After all, She's watching over me too. And I doubt she's going to let some creepy girl break our deal." She saw the fear cross Tom's face when she mentioned Her; he had adjusted surprisingly well to their situation, but even so it he preferred to not talk directly about the Black Angel unless he had no choice.

"Do you think she's the one that set up the trap in the art building?" Tom asked.

"I don't know," Becca admitted. "Maybe? The guy I talked to said the ghosts avoided her, and what I saw seemed to confirm that for sure. But that doesn't mean she isn't some sort of, I don't know, necromancer or something."

"Aren't you a necromancer?" Tom said. He gestured down at his hazy form. "I mean, here we are, right?"

"She's not like me," Becca said firmly. She'd never met anyone else like her, but somehow she just knew that was true. "But that doesn't mean there aren't other people out there who can do the same sort of the things I do."

"I guess." Tom didn't look any more comforted by the idea than she felt. He pointed to the other stack of books, the older ones the yearbooks had displaced. "Are you going to tell her about the research?"

“Maybe,” Becca said. “Not right off though. What if she’s the one who put the gateway there, somehow? And she’s, I don’t know, pissed about me finding out?”

“She’s dangerous. I can feel it.” Tom shook his head. “I wish you’d let me follow her. We could learn a lot.”

“I. Am not. Risking you.” Becca said firmly.

“But what if she attacks you?” Tom said softly.

Becca exhaled, puffing out her cheeks. “Then this might be a short conversation. But it’s still one I’ve got to have. Because something in that building is feeding, and I don’t think anyone wants to see what that means up close.”

• • •

“Have a seat,” Sam said, gesturing across from her. When Becca hesitated, clutching her books a little tighter to her chest, Sam rolled her eyes. “It’s not a trap, I promise.” She smiled, a charming expression that nevertheless showed just a few too many teeth for it to be really friendly. As Becca sat, Sam picked up her apple and began peeling it with a sharpened fingernail. “Hi Becca, I’m Sam. So, what the fuck are you?”

“Excuse me?” Becca said, jerking back as if Sam had just slapped her.

“You’re not human,” Sam said, in the same tone that someone else might have noted unremarkable weather. She gave Becca an appraising look, head cocked slightly to one side. “Well, not entirely human, anyway. So what are you?”

“Um.” Becca swallowed. She thought about lying, but what was the point? For all she knew this girl was an expert already and just testing her. “I don’t know, exactly.”

Sam blinked. “Well, that’s refreshing.” Seeing Becca’s confused look, she continued. “Most of the other weird critters I meet have a whole spiel about what they are and where they come from. Lots of history, weird vocabulary, the works. So, this ‘I don’t know’, it’s kind of nice, actually.” She finished peeling a wide strip off her apple and let the piece coil on her plate, starting another with her too-sharp nails. “Simple is good. I like simple.”

Becca couldn’t help but smile. This wasn’t exactly how she pictured this scene going down either, but in the face of that casual frankness, she found herself spilling things she hadn’t told anyone since the night of the crash. “I died,” she said. Sam cocked an eyebrow. “C-Car accident. Not my fault, but ... well, my boyfriend died too. Then this ... angel came to me. I made a deal.”

Sam’s eyes narrowed. “Angel, huh?”

Becca nodded. “I got to come back, but it came with me. I — it — we do things together. Keep ghosts and people from messing with each other.” She blushed. “I guess that sounds pretty weird, but it’s all I know. It hasn’t been too long since — since it happened.”

“OK.” Sam gave a noncommittal grunt. “Not the weirdest thing I’ve heard, I guess, but the angel’s kind of a new one.” She raised a finger and traced a circle to indicate everything around her. “You’re in luck here, then. Not too many ghosts around here.”

Becca cleared her throat. “Well, see, that’s the thing. There are, but they’re hiding. Specifically, they avoid *you*.” For the first time since she sat down, Becca thought she saw surprise cross Sam’s features. Surprise, and something a touch darker. She didn’t know what, and didn’t like it either. “They call you the Monster,” Becca finished softly, head down as if bracing for impact.

“The what?” Sam barked a disbelieving laugh. “Oh, that’s *rich*. All the problems they caused when they were alive and *I’m* the monster? Please.” She took a bite of the apple and wished it was a throat. That had been a while, for sure.

“Well, what are you?” Becca asked. “I mean, I can’t believe I’m actually sitting here asking this, but it’s only fair, right? I mean, you know about me, and I’ve never told anybody.” She considered a moment. “Anybody alive.”

“The short answer is bad news,” Sam replied. When Becca’s expectant look didn’t waver, she put the apple down and licked her fingers clean. “Fine. I’m a sphinx, OK?”

“You’re a — what? Are you serious?”

“Yeah, what’s wrong with that?”

“Nothing, I just—” Becca cast about for an explanation, came up short, “you don’t look Egyptian.”

“Ew! Racist.” Sam wrinkled her nose. “My dad was, like, half Egyptian, for the record, not that it’s your business. And besides, it’s not like it’s genetic or anything. I think it’s just a coincidence.”

“Wow. A sphinx.” Becca thought about that for a minute. “Do you—”

Sam rolled her eyes. “No, I fucking hate riddles.”

“Sorry.” Becca reached into her backpack and pulled out a few of the yearbooks, colored tabs sticking out like tiny evidence flags. She spread them on the table as Sam watched curiously, but when Sam saw the dates, she just swore under her breath. “You’ve been here a long time,” Becca said, pushing one of the best ones across. “This is 1989, and it’s not the oldest one.” She lowered her voice. “Are you immortal?”

“I’m pretty sure I can die,” Sam said, a parade of close calls and broken bones crossing her mind. “Not sure I want to test that any more than I have. I just ... don’t age. Much. Haven’t since I came here.”

“That’s so weird,” Becca said, with more admiration and curiosity than anything else.

“Say la vee,” Sam said, amused. She was reminded of a friend she’d had back in the nineties, a guy who’d been one of the few who knew what she was and didn’t freak out. What had his name been? Keith? Carl? Something like that. It was a happy association, anyway. This girl might not be so bad, whatever she was. For someone who’d died and come back, she looked like a loud sound

might knock her over, but that was all right. The other supernatural beings she'd met had mostly been immune to fear, or they pretended to be. Someone with a bit of it might not be a bad thing.

"C'est la vie," Becca agreed, correcting the pronunciation out of habit. It was going well so far, this talk, but she had to address the elephant in the room. "So, you're not going to kill me for knowing all this about you, are you?"

"I don't know, should I?" When Becca paled, Sam sighed. "Kidding. Kidding! I don't go around randomly killing people. Do you?" Becca shook her head. "I just ... this is my place, you know? I like it here. This school, this town. I don't let anyone mess with it."

"Don't people notice?" Becca tapped one of the books. "I mean, you're bound to have the same professors — hey!" Sam let go of Becca's wrist, leaving a neat bead of blood behind. From somewhere inside, the Black Angel stirred angrily. "What'd you do that for?"

"You just lost the last five minutes," Sam said casually, offering Becca a napkin for her bloody wrist. She tapped her phone, which from Becca's perspective had suddenly appeared on the table, and a conversation Becca didn't recall began playing back. "Venom," Sam added, tapping her nails on the table for emphasis. "I'm surgical with this shit, too. I can take a whole year or just every Tuesday of it if I want."

"Christ! Is that true?" Becca asked, wide-eyed.

"Maybe." Sam gave a small smile and reached out for Becca's wrist.

"Gah! No! Don't do that!" Becca pulled her hand back and dabbed her wrist, trying to keep her fear and temper in check. The Black Angel grated at her, metal on metal, demanding a show of her own power, but she had the feeling that would go poorly for everyone. "That's really not OK."

"Sorry," Sam said, not sorry. "I figured it would save time."

"Seriously," Becca insisted, anger rising in her voice. "How could messing with someone's memory ever be OK?"

"Fine! Sorry!" Sam said, close to meaning it this time. "I didn't mean anything by it. Just easier than explaining it and having you not believe me. I hate when people do that."

"Yeah, well, don't do it again, all right?" Becca said. "It's messed up."

"Fine," Sam agreed. For a nervous girl, it was plain this Becca had some stones when she needed them. "I promise."

A long silence stretched out between the sphinx and the dead-yet-living girl, while around them the rest of the undergraduates joked and flirted and worried and wondered their way through another college day.

"So, you've been here for what, twenty years?" Becca asked. Sam nodded. "So you know about the locks under the art building, then? About the gateway?"

Sam cocked her head curiously. "Wait, what do you mean, gateway?"

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me.”

The two women were standing in the basement hallway where Jesse had died only a few weeks earlier, staring at the last door he’d opened. The college had reopened the room in the week after the “tragic accident,” but now that the two women were close enough to it, no supernatural senses were required to feel the otherworldly chill emanating from the room. Sam stood across the hall from the door, hands on her hips and a disgusted, almost offended expression on her face. “You didn’t sense this before?” Becca asked.

“No! I mean, I haven’t been here in,” Sam paused to do some math. “Well, let’s call it a while. I got bored of art, figured I’d give it a break for a few years. Fuck!” She slammed her hand into the wall hard enough that Becca winced. “I’m getting sloppy.”

“Not to twist the knife,” Becca began cautiously, “but this is way, way older than a few years.” She pointed at the door, and then gestured around them. “*This* has been here since before all of this was built. Now something’s breaking and it’s coming apart.”

“How do you know all that?” Sam asked. An unspoken question trailed under the words: *And how did I miss it?*

“I have a bookbinding class right there,” Becca said, pointing at a door across the hall. “The first day I came down here, the Angel ... reacted. That was right after that kid died, though, so I figured he might still be around. But when I went inside, well, I sensed a gate instead of a ghost.” Becca pushed her glasses up. “It’s not the first one I’ve seen. Back in my hometown there was one by this old tree at the edge of town. It wasn’t this strong, though.”

“So you found this gate and just, I don’t know, left it here?” Sam asked. Her palms hurt and with a start, she realized she’d dug her nails in hard enough to draw blood. That something like this could be here, in her territory, without her knowing — for so *long* — was just too much. Utterly infuriating, in fact.

“Well, I started looking into it, but then I noticed how the ghosts moved away from you one day as you were crossing campus, so I figured you might have something to do with it, and so I started following you, and...” Becca trailed off with a shrug. “Here we are.”

“Yeah, well, this? This is news to me.” Sam felt an absurd urge to attack the door itself and reined it in. She was already hungry. She hadn’t had a proper feeding since she noticed Becca following her around, and the bad mood that accompanied a lean time was only getting worse. “Seriously. I haven’t got a fucking clue what’s going on here, but I’m going to find out, believe me.” She felt the blood running down her palms and a feral smile crossed her face. “Nobody hunts here but me.”

“I don’t think anyone is hunting,” Becca said. Seeing Sam’s sideways look, she explained. “I mean, yes, whatever’s down here killed that guy. But I don’t think it’s a person, or even a thing. I think this *place* is hunting.”

“What, like ... an Amityville thing?”

“Well, Amityville was a hoax,” Becca corrected reflexively, “but yeah, if it was real, I’d say something like that.” She put a hand out toward the door, feeling the chill intensify as she got closer. Even the gate under the old hanging tree back home hadn’t been this powerful, and that had set her heart racing just passing by. This gate, whatever it was, felt like standing too close to the bass speaker at a concert — a constant, low-level thrumming in her bones.

“I did get some research done before I ran across you,” Becca said, pulling her hand back. Her fingertips looked bleached, as if she’d plunged them into a snow bank. “You know this was the site of the college founder’s original residence? I mean, it was the president’s house until the ‘50s, then it burned down and they had another building in mind for the president’s residence, so they put the new art building on top of it.”

“So, what, are you saying people died in the fire or something?”

“No, not like that. That might cause a haunting, but not this.”

“Was he like some sort of weird occultist or something?”

Becca frowned, considering. “Maybe? I don’t know how you’d create something like this on purpose. This is a real Avernian Gate — a gate to the Underworld — but it’s been modified, somehow.” Becca gestured vaguely at the doorway, trying to find the right words. “Most gates are locked, one way or the other. Otherwise, people would just wander in and out of the Underworld, living or dead. That’s true here too. As strong as this gate is, believe it or not it’s still locked. Well, mostly.”

“Mostly being the fact that this place feels like a freezer?”

“Yeah. I guess you could say it’s leaking.” Becca paused. “Or coming off the hinges.”

“Then what killed the kid?” As they were talking, Sam’s Horror probed the doorway, finding the edges of the portal, looking for ways inside like a hungry cat stalking the perimeter of a butcher’s shop. It had been a long time since she’d had to open a passage to anything but the Primordial Dream, but she was confident with a few more minutes she could manage it. “I mean, fine, say the building did it somehow, we still need to know *how*.”

“Give me a few minutes.” Becca put her backpack on the floor and knelt down to unpack it, removing a few tea lights, some chalk, and a small jar of cow’s blood she’d snagged from the butcher’s section of the supermarket. “I figured out this little ceremony when I was dealing with the hanging tree. It should show us more about the gate.”

“OK, but try to make it quick or I’ll have to dose the security guard again.” Sam had wanted to wipe the guard’s memory of needing to patrol the basement at all, but Becca had insisted on not altering any more of his memory than was absolutely necessary.

Becca set up the candles in a semi-circle in front of the door and lit them one by one, muttering something to herself as she did so. When they were all burning, she stepped inside the space she'd created and traced a series of flowing symbols on the door. Something about the symbols looked familiar to Sam, but then she'd seen a lot of occult fads come and go.

Symbols hadn't ever caught fire on a steel door before, though.

Becca yelped and leapt back out of the circle of candles even as Sam stepped forward, her Horror surging to the surface so that her hands and the claws of the sphinx overlapped, ready to fight. It hadn't been necessary to actually fight a supernatural being since that strange shapeshifter had tried to take up residence in the woods at the edge of campus back in '93, and she was surprised at just how excited the thought of just tearing into something made her.

The little wisps of smoke from the candles darkened and swirled above the flames, forming something between a human and a shadow. Candlelight eyes flared to life where the vague suggestion of a head appeared to be as long arms of smoke extended from the "body" — though not past the ring of candles, Becca noted.

You are not the keeper. It was hard to say if it spoke aloud or in their minds; the voice was soft but diffuse, seemingly coming from everywhere at once.

"That didn't happen before," Becca said, her voice flat and echoing. As soon as the candles flared, the Black Angel had flowed into her skin, changing it to tarnished metal, her shoulders aching for wings to burst forth. The chill followed with it, compounding the cold already in the air, reminding her as it always did of lying on that winter road, glass sparkling like a bed of ice around her, life and breath drifting away on tiny clouds.

"Holy shit, that's creepy," Sam said, taking in the change.

"Told you I had an angel watching over me," Becca replied in that oddly flat voice. "Never said it wasn't spooky as hell."

"Yeah. So ... what do we do now?" Sam asked. Her hands were still hooked into claws, tensed and ready, but the longer she waited it the more ridiculous it started to feel. Ripping open a mountain lion girl was one thing, but some sort of smoke ghost? Would it even matter if she had claws or not? "Do we fight it?"

The keeper must be summoned.

"Why?" Becca asked, waving off Sam's question for the moment. Her limbs groaned as the metal ground against itself. "What does the keeper need to know?"

"Who is the keeper?" Sam added.

There are too many. The eyes flickered like flames by an open window. *It cannot hold.*

"I get the feeling it's not really hearing us," Sam said. If the smoke ghost understood what she said, it gave no sign. On the other side of it, the symbols on the door blazed away, but the flames were turning green at the edges, whatever that meant.

“Spirits can be pretty single-minded,” Becca replied, not taking her eyes off it. “Especially if they’ve been stuck in one place for a long time. It’s a question of figuring out how to fit into their worldview, what they’ll respond to. Think of them like really simple machines that only have a few working buttons.”

“OK, Sam said. She thought a moment. “Where is the keeper?” The spirit’s eyes shifted to her, but then away without response. “Shit. Well, this is awful.”

“How many are there?” Becca asked.

Thirteen.

“Thirteen what?” Sam said.

Sacrifices.

“Of course. It had to be thirteen?” Sam said. The two women exchanged a look that failed to comfort either of them.

“Who’s collecting these sacrifices?” Becca waited but the spirit didn’t answer. As was often the case, when the Black Angel merged with her, her tension and anxiety had vanished, leaving her mind to coolly consider her options. “How are they being taken? Isn’t the gate still locked?”

The keeper alone may pass the gate. What waits answers only to him.

“So there’s an awful thing on the other side of the gate,” Sam said, adding it up. “Probably some nasty ghost, who grabbed people from the building, or whatever. Like the kid from a few weeks ago.” Becca nodded. “So who’s the keeper?”

“I don’t know if there is one.” Becca looked over her ceremonial tools. “It doesn’t look like it’s been properly opened in a long time.”

“So how is this happening?”

“I think it got hungry,” Becca said. “Without a keeper, it’s been starving. Whatever’s in there is forcing it from the other side.”

“OK. It’s just been snatching people here and there for years, like some kind of fucked up Venus flytrap, but now it’s, what, finished?”

“Close to it, I think.”

“Who does something like that?” Sam turned her head to the side and spit on the floor.

The Devourer, whom the keeper feeds. It was a rhetorical question as far as Sam was concerned, but evidently, the spirit disagreed.

“Awesome,” Sam said. She looked at Becca, whose skin was now fully metallic and yet oddly graceful. “So whoever this ‘keeper’ is, they locked this ghost away and set this gate up to open now and again to feed it.” She shook her head. “That’s fucked up.”

“Trust me, you have no idea how fucked up the dead can get.” Becca flexed her metal hands. “I’m not sure how we’re going to get in, though. It doesn’t seem like it’s too inclined to accommodate anyone else.”

“Don’t worry,” Sam said, her grin returning. “I got this one.” She took a deep breath, held it a moment, and called her Horror as she exhaled. There was a rippling in the air, perhaps even the sound of giant padded feet, and suddenly the door squealed, metal against metal. “C’mon, help me out here,” Sam said through gritted teeth.

“What ... what are you doing?” Becca asked.

This is not — you cannot — this is not —

“Huffing and puffing,” Sam said, and before the spirit or Becca could respond the door groaned and long gouges appeared around the edges, as if some great animal had grabbed the door in its claws and was slowly shredding it. Just when it seemed like the door was about to fly off its hinges entirely, a blast of freezing air snuffed the candles and dispersed the guardian spirit with a mournful wail. The door vanished, leaving behind a red glowing outline of a doorway instead. The shape of the portal crackled and shuddered but held.

“I really need to read more about sphinxes.” Becca said, stepping up to the gateway and putting a hand up to it cautiously, the red light giving her metallic skin the color of dried blood. “You’re a little different than I remember from mythology class.”

“Probably not,” Sam said, savoring the Horror’s primal triumph at wrenching open the gateway. “Everyone goes on about the fucking riddles, but most people forget that the sphinx really just wanted an excuse to tear people apart.” She walked up, putting her hand on Becca’s shoulder. The metal was cool to the touch, little bits of ice already forming from the cold blasting from the doorway. “So, I got nothing else to do tonight. You in?”

Becca smiled, the charm of it only slightly ruined by the statue effect. “I’m in.” Together they stepped through the doorway, Sam pulling it carefully shut behind them in case security came along, her very human hands leaving large and terrible scratches in the fabric of the gateway as she sealed it.

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“Damn.” To Sam, the large, vaulted chamber looked like a man-cave designed by Aleister Crowley — tall shelves stacked with books, black candles burning in elaborate brass candelabras, rich carpets the color of pooled blood spread across the floor, even some overstuffed chairs with suspiciously textured leather. A fire blazed in the hearth, though no heat emanated from it, just waves of bitter cold.

The Devourer might once have matched the room better or so said the tatters of its suit, but it had bloated past human proportions, swollen skin bursting out through straining seams. Its face was a puffy mess of flesh devoid of any recognizable features aside from its wide, slobbering maw, which had distended to stretch almost the entire way around its head. What sheltered form of immortality it had grasped at had come at a steep cost. At the sound of their intrusion, it raised itself up on ponderous legs and gurgled at them, waving its fleshy hands in an unmistakable gesture of outrage and surprise.

“Oh, you can just fucking die,” Sam said, launching herself forward, all doubts about the effectiveness of her claws lost in the need to purge the abomination from her campus. She hopped up on a footstool as she came and used it to vault herself even higher, equal to the creature’s bloated head, scything down with her talons.

The Devourer squealed like a butchered hog and got one meaty arm in the way, Sam’s claws ripping strips of spoiled meat free from the arm in its sausage casing suit. Something between blood and congealed sewage spurted from the wounds, catching Sam in the face and making her gag, while venom sizzled through the creature’s flesh with an audible hiss and curl of smoke. The Devourer bellowed in pain and fury and backhanded Sam with the remains of its arm, sending her flying face-first into a bookcase. She struck with a sickening crack and her mouth filled with blood and broken teeth, the grinding agony in her chest telling her of at least one broken rib.

She tried to curse but all she could was spit shards and cough on the fluid; she’d mend fast enough, always had, but first she had to survive and that thing hit a *lot* harder than she expected. At least she’d dosed it with her killing venom, but that could take minutes to work — assuming it functioned on ghosts the same as the living — and another hit might make it a moot point as far as she was concerned.

“I’ve never destroyed a spirit before,” Becca said, walking slowly toward the Devourer. Her feet thumped heavily on the carpet, leaving deep tracks. “Not deliberately. I don’t think anyone really deserves it, even the cruel ones.” She raised a hand in front of her, the metal gleaming in the firelight, as if extending a blessing. “But I’m new to this, and I think ... I think you really deserve it. I’m sorry.”

Sam tried to yell a warning as the Devourer rushed forward, but managed only a loud cough as she aspirated blood, her ribs still clicking together in her chest. Becca stood her ground as the abomination charged, a sad cast to her features, and when the Devourer swung its good arm, she didn’t even flinch.

The impact made a sound so loud that Sam winced, but all it did was shatter the creature’s arm around her head, coating Becca’s metallic form in blood and strips of flesh but not budging her an inch. The Devourer howled and tried to recoil, but Becca grabbed hold of it with one hand, holding it with the grim patience of Death itself.

“I’m sorry,” Becca repeated, placing her free hand against the creature’s chest and pushing even as she pulled it closer with the other, her hand ripping through fabric and sinking through flesh, the Devourer wailing in panic and agony, until with a final crack Becca’s hand emerged from the creature’s back, holding something twisted and pulsing with eerie green light.

Its twisted, unholy heart.

Becca let go of the Devourer and with a final bubbling wail, its great bulk turned to foul-smelling liquid that splashed down around her and soaked into the carpet. Sam took a feral joy in seeing that the liquid, whatever it was, bubbled

and smoked with the distinctive scent of her killing venom. She hoped it could still feel pain, somehow.

“Are you OK?” Becca asked, walking over to Sam and seemingly oblivious to the gore that soaked her head to toe or the foul heart she still held in her hand. Sam took the offered grip and got slowly to her feet, clutching her burning ribs. She reached in and pulled up a broken tooth with a grunt, feeling the new one already coming in.

“I’ll be OK,” Sam managed at last. “I heal fast. You?” Becca just shrugged, the gesture disturbingly casual for a gore-spattered statue. Sam nodded at the heart, still pulsing green. “What do we do with that fucking thing?”

“I don’t know. I think it means some part of that thing is still around.” Becca looked thoughtful. “Should ... should I crush it?”

“Sure, but first let’s make extra sure,” Sam said, raising her hand and plunging an envenomed talon deep into the pulsing heart. Almost at once the pulsing elevated, then slowed, as the green grew cloudy with blackness before finally extinguishing entirely. When Becca crushed it in her metallic grip, it didn’t turn to liquid as the rest of the creature had, but turned to fine ash and dust instead. They both felt that seemed a lot more final, somehow.

“Are you good to get out of here?” Becca asked, offering a supporting arm anyway. Sam hesitated, then accepted it, her ribs still crackling in her chest. “I honestly don’t know what happens when you kill the creator of a place like this, so...”

“Let’s get the fuck gone.” This time Sam’s Horror barely had to brush against the gate before it swung wide, spilling them back blinking into the too-bright fluorescent hallway. Weary, Sam reached out and pushed the gateway shut, the battered door deeply scored with claw marks. That would be a strange thing to explain, but one good thing about keeping a Lair on a college campus meant a certain amount of vandalism and general weirdness got dismissed as pranks or student art pieces gone awry.

“I’ll come back and check on it later,” Becca said. Her skin was losing its metallic sheen, and fortunately, whatever sort of ectoplasm passed for the thing’s blood and tissue had evaporated on crossing through the gateway. In a moment, she looked herself again, just an unremarkable college girl. She paused. “Do... do you want to check it with me?”

“What, are we a team now?” Sam asked. She meant it to be sarcastic, but to her surprise, it came out straight, and to her greater surprise, she found she didn’t mind. She’d just learned there was a whole side to her campus she didn’t know, for one, and for another she’d started to admire the fearless girl who thought herself shy. Becca was blushing; about to apologize it away, but Sam squeezed her hand to stop her. “I’d like that.”

“Really?” Becca smiled. “I thought you had this territorial thing going on.”

“Well,” Sam said, “territory’s not just the place. It’s the people.” They made their way slowly up the stairs, arms around each other’s shoulders.



THE SHEPHERD'S LESSON

By Gregory Eburn

Zhuangzi, the great Taoist philosopher, once dreamed he was a butterfly, lazily fluttering about his garden on a spring evening. Upon waking, he couldn't tell if he was a man who dreamed he was a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming he was a man. That story never used to bother me before I learned that dreams are real. I don't have the luxury of doubt. I struggle with my own version of his dilemma with one big exception. Zhuangzi dreamed of something beautiful, and I dreamed of a monster.

I felt the Hunger rear up in my bones, my head, and my heart. Under all the noise, I heard the monster start to hiss and growl. I thought with all these people around, that I'd be okay. Yet again, I'm wrong. Breaking into a cold sweat, I closed my eyes and tried to ignore the growing sense of fear that swelled within me. All these people, all so close. I hadn't been to a show in so long. Not since I realized the truth about what I am. Not since the monster. Too many people all crowded in. Too close, too real. How stupid of me to come here.

Colin leaned over to me and said, "This place is packed. Didn't know they were so popular."

"Me, neither," I lied, too consumed with Hunger to get into much of a discussion. Rappaccini's Daughter was a local band, but they toured like mad, building a relatively large fan base in the process. All I could think about were possible excuses that would get me out of there before I did something I would regret. Hunger and fear pulling me in opposite directions, I could feel those forces tearing me in two.

The concert hadn't begun yet. The lights went down as the impatient crowd engulfed me. All the voices crashed into each other, dissolving into a single dissonant wave. I could gorge myself with all those people. It would be so easy. Turning around, I pushed my way out of the throng. I had to leave before I did something stupid.

Before I could make it to the door, the audience let out a collective scream. The band had arrived on stage. I tried to move faster, but as the first notes sound-

ed, I could feel the monster's attention fixed on something behind me. Something strong enough to get its mind off the Hunger. I turned to get a glimpse of the stage. The band had started their first song, but all I saw was the lead singer, not as she looked, but as she really was. Kelp in her hair, sea foam green, and all shadowed as if she was swimming beneath a frigid winter sea.

She was like me. I knew there had to be others. My anxiety lifted like a fog thinning out in the morning sun. It was still there, but muted, weakened. She was a light on the shore giving

Rapt, I watched the show from the back of the crowd. Not really hearing the music, just watching her. A natural star, she commanded everyone's attention. With every movement and note the crowd reacted with adulation. It took me a while to understand what was actually happening. What a clever trick.

"Wow, they're really good," said Colin.

"I thought you said they were derivative?"

"Yeah, but they rock live. The album doesn't do them justice."

"No," I said. "Not at all."

Colin had overheard me listening to Rappaccini's Daughter on my phone and had dismissed them, as he always did with heavier music. I made him listen to the album in an attempt to change his mind. His whole attitude changed as he watched them perform. Almost too much. I could see him shift from uninterested, to amused, to fascinated all in the course of one performance.

"I need to learn that one," I muttered. "Colin, do you see what she is?" I asked him loudly enough for him to hear me.

"What do you mean?"

"She's like me."

Colin almost jumped, losing all sync with the music. "What? I don't see anything. You sure?"

"Positive." Surrounded by prey, the monster's Hunger gnawing away. The monster wanted to see unabashed panic in their eyes. To absorb the nectar that sprang from terrified minds. Just the slightest effort and these people's fear would flood the tiny club. I considered how easy it would be to reveal myself and claim the resulting bounty. Only the shock and curiosity of discovering the singer's true nature granted me a reprieve. "After all this time of looking, I finally run into one by accident."

"Maybe it's not an accident. You think you could have sensed it somehow? Listening to the album?"

"No. Not consciously at least." I hadn't even considered it until his suggestion. Maybe that's how it works. All this was still new to me.

Just then did I catch that she was staring right at me. Our eyes locked and I saw that she knew. She recognized me as I had recognized her. She saw my

wings furled behind my back, my talons firmly clasped beneath me, eyes piercing the dull shadows that cloaked the crowd. I smiled, waving my hand. Her eyes narrowed, and half her mouth raised into a wicked grin. The song ended.

“I see you out there,” she said into the microphone. The club hollered and whooped in an incoherent response.

“I know,” I said, more to myself than anyone.

Colin and I watched the remainder of the concert. Rappaccini’s Daughter owned the room. If only they had been born a few decades earlier they would be headlining stadiums. They didn’t seem to mind, however, and by the time the encore ended, it certainly felt like they ruled the world. That’s exactly how she wanted it. I could tell.

The house light flickered on and the audience began to disperse and resume their carousing and drinking.

“I need to talk to her,” I said. “This could finally be my chance to learn more about who I am, where we come from.”

Colin nodded. “Let’s do it.”

“Follow me.” We made our way over to the stage door. The bouncer launched himself in front of the backstage door.

“You can’t go back there,” he said.

Colin folded his arms and looked away.

“Hold on,” I said to him before turning my attention to the bouncer. “Just tell Bec that I’m here. She wants to see me. I guarantee you.”

The bouncer scoffed. “Sure she does.”

“Open the door,” I said. I also screamed it, the sound reverberating around the man from all angles. Reaching into his mind, I unfurled my wings and bared my teeth. I was everywhere. His face contorted and his whole body shook for a moment. Sweat began to pour down his forehead.

I reached past him and grabbed the doorknob. At the first hint of movement, he slunk away into the corner, his palms flat against the walls, his mouth still hanging open. The other patrons went about their business unaware of my actions. It seemed like a simple conversation to them.

Dinner is served. I hadn’t intended on feeding. I just needed to get past him. The Hunger abating as ferociously as it had arrived, I breathed a slow, contented sigh. The monster’s desperate craving sublimated into a newly strengthened sense of focus.

“Thank you,” I said. The bouncer, gasping for air like a waterlogged swimmer, held his head in his hands and dropped to his knees. Colin following behind me, I walked through the door. We moved down a hallway decorated with faded old playbills on the walls. A single, uncovered light bulb hung from the ceiling and quietly buzzed.

Colin shook his head. “I’m never going to get used to that, Sally.”

“I’m sure the crew you run with does much worse.”

“Not that crazy mind shit, no.”

“Oh, yeah? I’ve seen people go nuts just by laying eyes on you when you change.”

He laughed. “They’re just scared because they see something dangerous. You reached in that dude’s mind and twisted it all up.”

“He saw what I really am. Works the same as with you. Only difference is how they see it.”

I could hear the voices leaking out of a slightly open door to our right. The band was conversing about the crowd, the acoustics, equipment that I didn’t understand. I knocked at the door, pushing it further open in the process.

“Excuse me, Bec? I need to talk to you,” I said.

“I was wondering if I’d get to see you,” she said. “Come in.”

Bec dismissed her bandmates, who left through the rear entrance to smoke and stow gear in the van. She motioned to a ratty couch. “Please, sit down.”

“My name is Sally. This is Colin.”

“Nice to meet you. Did you enjoy the show?”

“Fantastic,” I said, trying not to gush too much, “but I think you know the real reason I’m here.”

“I do,” said Bec, beaming for a moment. “You’re family.”

She seemed proud. Almost like she had wanted me to come backstage and find her. Other than acknowledging me, she had made no overture to invite me, however. I think she had wanted to see if I had the guts to do it myself or if I’d simply let the chance encounter pass and go about my life.

“This calls for a celebration. Would either of you like a drink?” She grabbed a fifth of whiskey from the end table and foraged the green room for more glasses.

Colin studied the various posters that covered the walls of the dressing room. Most displayed obscure bands. Each offered concert dates from years ago, sometimes decades. Musicians frozen in time, never aging or changing. He stopped when he got to the Rappaccini’s Daughter poster. Bec and her bandmates hand-drawn before a tangle of vines and leaves stretching around the borders of the page.

“There are so many things I want to ask you. I don’t know where to start,” I said. “I’ve never met another monster before.” I could see her true form clear as day. The monster watched her intently, studying the creature as if it recognized an old friend, but couldn’t place where they had met before. She felt so familiar yet so alien.

“Why don’t we start with you then? Tell me about yourself, Sally.” She poured three glasses of the obscure brand of whiskey and passed them to us.

Only fair. I told her everything about what happened to me. The dreams of the great raptor plummeting down from a stormy sky, its bloody talons outstretched, growing larger and larger until they blocked out all light. How I would cower at the

sound of its screeching calls and fumble blindly for a way out of the dark. In time, I sank completely into the shadow and noise. It wasn't I who disappeared, however. Not really. It was my victim, my prey. I was the predator and I always had been.

"You've been alone this whole time?" She asked.

"I met Colin pretty soon after it all happened, but I've never met someone like us."

Bec nodded. "I'm sorry. Some of it is instinctual, but it must have been overwhelming to cope with all that by yourself."

Colin said, "I tried to help Sally the best I could, but I don't understand how any of it works."

"I'm sure you played a greater role than you realize," said Bec. "The Uratha and the Begotten are both descended from the Dark Mother. We're cousins, you might say."

"How did you know what I am?" he asked.

"I've met your kind before."

He opened his mouth as if to speak, but stopped himself, shooting me a sidelong glance.

"Feeding must have been a problem," she said. She studied me intently. Like a bug on a pin? No, like a fine painting hanging on a museum's wall. That was it.

I finally caught what she said, and a wave of vertigo hit me. All the memories of the things I did to feed the monster. "I've done things I'm not proud of."

"You shouldn't feel guilty. People need to feel that kind of fear from time to time, or they get too complacent. You said you use the word 'monster' to describe what we are. Do you know where that term comes from?"

"No," I said.

"It's derived from a Latin word meaning 'warning'. That's what we do. We warn them of all the dangers in the world. We teach them what to fear because that knowledge saves lives. It shaped civilization."

"But we hurt people."

She cleared her throat. "Back when I first realized the truth, I was lucky enough to find Victor. He helped me figure this stuff out. Let me ask you what he always asked me when I would doubt. What does a shepherd do?"

"Guides the flock?" I'd never really been around sheep, so I was guessing.

"That's what I said, too. Yes, but how does he do it?" I could see in her eyes that she had a specific answer in mind, but I didn't know what.

"I don't know. I guess he shows the sheep the right path to take?"

"Wrong. A shepherd shows the flock where it *shouldn't* go. If a sheep tries to stray of the path the shepherd shoos the wayward animal back to where it needs to be."

“For its own good,” added Colin. “That lamb would be doomed out in the wilderness.” He seemed like this made sense to him. It was a little unnerving.

“Exactly,” said Bec, smiling at him. “We are what they need. You can’t simply tell them because they don’t understand the words. Not really. Oh, they’ll *know*, but what they need is to feel. Deep in their hearts. Deep enough that they’ll never forget or rationalize it away.”

“How do you do that?” I asked.

“You terrify them. You put so much fear in them that it creates a watershed moment. The kind that divides their lives into ‘before’ and ‘after.’” Her eyes narrowed.

“You mean traumatize them,” said Colin, crossing his arms. “That’s pretty cold.”

“It’s necessary,” she replied. “People need this. They long for it. Why do paying customers watch horror movies or ride rollercoasters?”

“I get it,” he said, “but this is way beyond a scary movie. And it backfires. Not everyone stays scared.” It dawned on me that I had been keeping Colin in the dark about the monster’s appetites. I figured he didn’t need to know all the unsavory details. Perhaps that was a mistake.

“Most of them do,” said Bec.

“What if you go too far?” I asked, my voice shrinking into a whisper.

“What do mean?”

“You can’t teach the dead.”

“You have killed,” she said. Not a question but a statement.

“What?” said Colin, his brow furrowing.

I wished I’d told him. I remembered how the blood stained my clothes. How the guy tried to scream, but mustered only a faint gasp, his hands grasping at the ragged gash across his throat like he could somehow stem the torrent. I wanted to speak, but I knew all too well that if started I couldn’t stop. I didn’t want to lose control like that.

“I’ve been there,” said Bec. “You’re absolutely right. You can’t teach the dead. We can only learn our lessons, as grim as they might be. Death can be a warning to the prey. Death should be a warning to you, too.”

“That shows us where we shouldn’t go?”

“That’s right. It won’t make it all go away; the world is not an easy place. It will help you accept your own failings.”

“There’s evil in the world, Sally, but it sure isn’t you,” said Colin. I tried to believe it.

“Thanks,” I said, hoping I sounded sincere. “Both of you.”

She sighed, looking away from us. She seemed to focus on something that wasn't there.

"What is it?" I asked.

"I wish we had met sooner, Sally. I would have wanted more time to help you."

"We just met. There'll be plenty of time."

"Are you in some kind of trouble?" asked Colin. Assessing the room, his eyes darted to the exits.

"I don't just tour to meet family. Something's following me, Sally. I'm being chased."

"Chased? By what?"

The warmth drained from Bec's face. "Victor lived in Philadelphia. A few weeks back we played a gig there, so I went to visit him afterwards. I arrived at empty house with an unlocked door and the car in the garage. I could feel something through the Dream. Something was there. Opening the door, I saw Victor's body sprawled across the hallway, his hands outstretched for help." She paused.

"I'm so sorry," I said. The monster let out a shriek and battered the floor with its wings. I couldn't remember the last time it got so upset. I knew I could die, but I hadn't considered something might want to kill me.

"He looked like he died of a heart attack or something, but I knew better. I saw his true remains, what little was left. The Reaper had—" Bec's face wrinkled in disgust. "It feeds on its own kind."

"It's one of us?"

"I'd heard rumors about things like this. Never believed them until now. The Reaper went mad and consumed its own body. Now it is on a rampage like some kind of rabid animal. It killed Victor and now it's coming after me. Following me from town to town on the tour."

"Good. That means you can outrun it," said Colin.

"No, I can't. It lives in the Dream. It knows my Lair. When I found Victor's corpse, it saw me. Imagine a shark that smelled blood. You can't just swim away from it. Not for very long at least." She sat down on the couch, burying her head in her hands. "I fell asleep that night and almost immediately I could feel it preparing to strike. As I dreamed that night, I saw it hovering at the edge of my Lair. It was Begotten, maybe, once, but now there's nothing anchoring it down. No thoughts or reason at all. Just Hunger. I've heard stories, but I hadn't really believed them until I saw it."

Colin put a hand on my shoulder. I didn't have to look at his face. *Not our fight*. I shrugged his hand off and sat down next to Bec.

"I ran back to the hotel and forced everybody to pack up and leave in the middle of the night," she continued. They weren't very happy, but I was so relieved. I thought I had escaped. Now I get how utterly naïve I was. The next night we played a show and the Reaper found me. I keep seeing it. Every few days it finds me."

I sat down next to her. “Can you fight it?”

She looked at me and forced a momentary smile. “I’m going to try. I owe it to Victor’s memory. I have a plan, but it’s just theoretical. It might not even work.”

Bec sighed. Her eyes locked on something distant again, she held her arms across her body like she was trying to get warm on frigid day. I thought about how easy I had really had it. Being orphaned and isolated couldn’t compare to running for your life from city to city. Perhaps I was better off alone if this sort of chaos was how other monsters lived. All I had to do was walk out of the club and I’d never need to give this something a second thought.

Instead, I took her hand. “We’re going to destroy it,” I said. “Together. This thing is far too dangerous to live.”

“What?” said Colin.

“No,” she said. “The Reaper hasn’t caught your scent yet. It doesn’t know you exist, so it won’t hunt you. I want it to stay that way.”

“You said you had a plan. We can help you carry it out.” The monster let out a triumphant shriek.

Colin tapped me on the back. “Can I talk to you for a second?” he said in a low tone. “Over here.” He motioned to the hallway leading back to the club.

“Just give us a moment,” I told Bec and then followed Colin out the door. “What is it?”

“Look, I know you want to help this woman, but we just met her. She’s talking about some kind of dangerous dream creature that could kill any one of us. Your heart’s in the right place, Sally. I know. You really need to think about this, though.”

“You’re saying we should just leave her to it? No. I won’t do that.”

“Bec seems nice and all, but, I mean, we just met her.”

“I’m not going to abandon her. She needs help and we can provide it. Yes, it will be dangerous for three people. It would be deadly for one.”

He sighed. “You don’t know what you’re getting yourself into, Sally. You’re not seeing this clearly. *Nu imru.*”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“It means she’s not one of us, Sally. She’s not *pack.*”

I looked him square in the eye. The monster stopped thrashing and stared through my eyes. Colin’s hackles rose, and I realized what an incredibly stupid thing I was doing, but I couldn’t not. “The *hell* she isn’t.”

Colin stared at me, and then nodded. “Fine. This is a definite case of curiosity killed the cat.”

“I’m no cat,” I said, “and neither are you.” I put a hand on his shoulder. “Anyway, I thought the wolf must hunt?”

A crooked trace of a smile appeared on his face. "Right."

We returned to the green room to find Bec nervously pacing the far side of the room, her arms crossed.

"Sorry about that. We discussed it and we want to help you. Is there anything we can do?"

"Thank you," she said, her eyes flickered with a dim glimpse of hope.

"What's the plan?" Colin asked.

"We need to go to my Lair, but we can't do it here. If you're ready we should leave now," said Bec. "We're not going to wait around for the Reaper to find us. We're going to get its attention." She told us the parts we were to play in laying the trap. It sounded risky, but I knew Bec believed it could work.

Ten minutes later, Colin and I drove his old Taurus west on I-90, following Bec's pickup. She had sent her bandmates home, telling them she wanted to catch up with her cousin. As I waited for the looming confrontation, the all too familiar panic crawled back into my mind. I watched the white dotted lines on the asphalt speed and blend together. Focusing on the optical illusion helped me stay centered. I'd be damned if I was going to let fear stop me this time.

"Thank you," I said, staring out the passenger side window.

A short grunt was Colin's only acknowledgement. He wasn't angry. I knew that response. He was frightened. Strange how, despite all assertions to the contrary, my life revolves around fear. Not just to feed, but fear that kept me from seeking other Begotten, fear of what we were about to face. My mind drifted back to what Bec had said about fear's power. That it directs us and plays a most vital role to our lives. *Shepherds show us where not to go.*

"You could have told me about what happened. With the feeding and everything," said Colin.

"I just try my best to forget it."

"Okay. Just... I'll listen."

"Thank you." I turned my face away from the windowpane. "You have to be prepared for anything," I told him. "The Dream is like another planet. Physics, reason, even causality, none of them apply."

"It can't be stranger than the Shadow."

"Oh, really? Think of every crazy, absurd dream you've ever had. Just know it can get exactly that wild. Not always, but I've seen it."

"Great."

I huffed out a terse laugh. "This is why I'm never going to the Shadow. Two worlds are more than enough for me. I can barely deal with *them*, let alone a third."

"You'd like it. I'm telling you."

We followed Bec off the highway and through a series of anonymous small towns. Suburban homes quickly gave way to a vast stretch of huddled, leafless

trees. Autumn in New England drained the normalcy out of the countryside, rendering it into a sylvan underworld. All this talk of the Dream and I had started to ignore the waking world. The butterfly never paid Zhuangzi much mind either.

“Almost there,” I said. We soon pulled into the gravel parking lot of a small park. We got out of the car and followed Bec to edge of the forest, the only light provided by her flashlight.

“Right down here,” she said. “Watch your step.” As we entered the woods, the ground pitched down sharply into an embankment. I clutched at passing branches and trunks to keep my balance. I could hear an owl hoot in the distance and the soft tone of babbling water. “This is it.”

A narrow stream cut a path through the foliage before us. Oval stones smoothed by years of erosion poked through the surface. Bec got down on one knee and propped the flashlight against a nearby log. She reached her hands down into the creek, watching the water effortlessly flow around her wrists. The sound of the water grew louder. It rushed toward us like a runaway train. The vegetation around us dissolving, the stony earth grew taller and taller. Time lapse fast motion of mountains thrusting up from grappling tectonic plates below. The darkness suddenly abated as a countless host of stars popped into existence above us. They slowly rotated around a moon in full eclipse. A raging torrent of water flooded the banks of the once tiny stream. Colin and I stood on the shore of a knee-deep river.

“Welcome home, Bec,” I whispered.

In her Lair, she no longer hid behind a human body. She swam out into the current, crossing the turbulent waters with ease. Even standing on the opposite shore, she looked as if she stared back from deep beneath the sea, eyes like black voids, hair like dark tangles of kelp. She lifted her hand, palm up, toward the sky and as she did a rocky outcropping rose out of the river in tandem. A single massive slab of bedrock, a bridge, provided us with a path across. We hurriedly crossed and joined Bec on the far side.

In the Dream, I took my true form, too. I would need it for what was to come. I felt the cold breeze on my wings, the strength of my talons, and the sharpness of my teeth. It seemed strange, however, to do so in another’s Lair. I felt like I was seeing myself through someone else’s eyes. It reminded me of strolling through a hall of mirrors, or seeing myself on video. Maybe Bec’s interpretation of me colored my senses. All the thoughts and ideas anyone ever had orbited the world like the planets around the sun, and this planet belonged to her. Everything it in, to some degree or another, resonated to its frequency,

“I might as well join in,” said Colin. His body contorted and elongated. A coarse pelt of hair sprang from his skin, his muscles shifting beneath it. Within a matter of seconds, the metamorphosis ended, and where a man once stood there walked a fearsome red wolf in his place. Even his transformation bore the marks of the Dream around us. He looked larger, more feral than I remembered in the physical world. The three of us, unmasked, moved in unison around the mountain’s base.

This way, Bec said, her voice like waves receding from the shore. Around the bend, we entered a tunnel hewn into the solid granite of the newly risen mountain. While it was utterly lacking in light, we could all see clearly. I didn't try to understand. The Dream is beyond rules or logic. It's ultimately unknowable. With that kind of freedom, that kind of power, it would be hard to deny the reality of the world around us even for Zhuangzi.

The burrow snaked a path deep into the mountainside. Even though we were descending farther into the ground, I could feel the path raise into a steep incline. Even notions of up and down were suspect in the Dream. A strong chill permeated the air. My breath condensed into wispy clouds and floated away. The tunnel gave way to an intricately carved stone stairway that led up into the open air.

We stood on a bleached crag of coral, its top sheared flat and polished smooth. A frozen sea surrounded the small island in all directions, its thin film of grey, cloudy ice obscured the water beneath. The sky remained the same, however, with its phantom stars and backlit disk of a moon.

Bec jumped to the edge of the ice, ready for war. *It's here.*

I heard nothing at first. Then a distant thundering that only grew audible slowly. As it neared I could tell the din consisted of many overlapping cracks and pops. They seemed amplified and filtered, almost like Bec's guitar tone from the concert, but even louder. Then I saw the line of jagged breaks in the ice shooting towards our island. Ice shattering, launched upward by a massive form swimming underneath.

Like a breaching whale, the Reaper erupted from beneath the glacier. Shards of ice fell on us like hail. The creature's bulbous body floated above us, poised to strike with dozens of barbed limbs. It reared its insectoid head and screamed, sound emanating from its dozen mouths, each lined with rings of serrated teeth. If this horror had ever shared itself with a human mind, no trace of it remained, not even the natural instincts I recognized in my own monster. Only a diseased drive to kill and consume remained.

I took to the air and soared passed the Reaper. It turned to follow me, roaring so loudly I could feel the vibration. It must have been close, but I couldn't bring myself to look over my shoulder to see for sure. I focused instead on leading the Reaper away from the burrow.

Colin bounded on to the ice and gave chase. I looped back around in a tight circle so he could get close enough to strike. He tore at the Reaper with his fangs and claws. The creature slammed him to the ice with one of its long, spindly arms. Turning its back to me, it unhinged his massive front jaw and dove towards Colin. I swooped in and dug my talons into the fleshy backside of the thing's neck. Colin ran in the other direction while I led the Reaper astray again. Working together we could keep it distracted and running in circles. We couldn't kill it. Did it know that? Was it afraid?

I glanced at Bec. She still stood on the island, eyes closed, hands stretched skyward. The temperature plummeted. Tiny ice crystals began forming in the air around her like an aura. The whole Chamber was freezing solid just like we hoped. She grimaced, falling to one knee. The world seemed to be moving too quickly, like a film projected in fast motion. Everything juddered and strobed. The Chamber started to fossilize around us.

“We need to trap it,” Bec had told us back in the club. “Have you even seen those photographs of flies trapped in amber? Millions of years ago, a bug would land in some sap and get stuck. The sap would, over time, transform into amber and keep the bug frozen forever. That’s what we’re going to do.”

The ground shook and the sky quaked. Gaining speed, I looped above the Beast and dove back down to the ice behind it. Only inches above the surface, I dashed to Colin’s side. He ran swiftly, but not fast enough. The Reaper thrashed and clawed mere feet behind us. I veered toward Colin and, grabbing him with my talons, lifted him off the ground. My muscles burning from the additional weight, I beat my wings with every ounce of strength I could muster. It seemed to take forever to reach that shore.

Carrying Colin, I rocketed past Bec and down the stairwell into the tunnel we came from. I released him from my grasp and collapsed on the ground, tumbling from the momentum. She ran behind me and lunged passed the Burrow’s threshold with seconds to spare. Dust and gravel falling on us, the rock walls of the tunnel trembled and cracked, bucking like a wild horse determined to throw an unwanted rider. The roof dissolved into a torrent of soil and boulders crashing into the threshold and filling it in. Through the rockslide, I saw the Reaper scream in anguish as we barely escaped its grasp. Then I lost sight of the Beast as tons of material blocked off the icy Chamber. It didn’t stop there. The cave-in continued, launching a tidal wave of earthen detritus down the tunnel.

The three of us ran from the avalanche, but it caught us. The flow swept us up like we were nothing. The wall of soil hit me with what felt like the force of a train barreling down the track. Knocked over, I fell upside down as the dirt covered me. If I died here in the Dream, what would happen to me? Would it spit my corpse back out into the waking world? Or would it chew my remains like food and digest me? I struggled to remain conscious. The monster struggled. It was afraid, because it could die. It — we — clung to awareness as long as we could.

How I survived, I don’t know. The force of the cave-in pushed me out onto the riverbank. Minutes passing, I teetered on the edge of consciousness before waking up completely. Partially buried, coughing and wheezing, I struggled by way out of the debris and stood on shaky legs.

“Colin!” I cried. “Bec!” No response. I dug frantically at the mounds of earth littering the gravel embankment. Tears welled up in my eyes. I couldn’t bear the thought of losing my friends like this. Not after facing that horrible monster just to see them crushed to death by something so prosaic. My hands

grasped thick clumps of soil and rock and threw them aside, but it didn't seem to make any difference.

The Dream evaporated piece by piece. Mountain peaks beside me faded from view, shrinking back to the rolling hills of the grove. Water drained from the river, which again took the form of nothing more than a minor stream. My wings and talons vanished. The sky reset. The waking world remained, and Bec's Lair receded into memory. Scanning the area, I desperately looked for my companions. I called their names again.

"Sally." Following the sound, I found Colin lying against the trunk of a tree.

"Are you all right?" I asked. Blood had soaked through his shirt. I could hear his ribs knitting themselves back together.

"I'll live." He said. His broken nose healed as we spoke. I helped him to his feet.

"Of course you will."

He looked around. "What happened? Where's Bec?"

"I'm not sure. Her Lair kicked us out." I said.

"Could she have survived? Maybe the whole thing disintegrated."

"Her Dream is still there. Most of it, anyway. I can feel it." I kept scanning the woods for some sign of Bec. "I can't find her anywhere. Help me look." I weaved and bobbed through the foliage looking for her. Colin went the other way, and, between us, we covered the both the park and the adjoining woods. We found not a trace of Bec.

"What does this mean?" Colin asked.

"She's still there. The question is whether she survived. She said when Victor died his body reappeared in his house. Maybe that means she's okay." I held on to that theory like I could somehow make it true by sheer will.

"Can we go back somehow?"

"Not without her."

We silently made our way back to the Taurus. Driving off, we left Bec's pick-up parked at the side of the street. I looked out the window to see a different world than the night before. This time the sky glowed orange in east, and the rising sun banished the gloom of the nighttime forest. I tried to be optimistic about her. I visualized her wounds healing, her eyes opening. That she would appear out of the Dream whole and alive.

I imagined the thing sealed in a lone Chamber floating through the astral reaches. Maybe, over time, it would starve to death and decompose into raw dreams to be recycled into the collective unconscious. Or might it be locked into a sort of suspended animation, destined to eternally slumber in its frozen prison.

Sometimes I wake in the middle of the night filled with that same dread. The utter terror of being hunted. Exactly the same feeling I knew I had visited upon

my victims when I fed. Perhaps it had fed on me as it chased me. If so, I told myself it would be the last time it would ever feed on anyone. It was dead, and I had learned what the fear had meant to teach me. Either way, the Reaper played its role. A shepherd chasing me back into bounds. A siren singing in reverse.

Colin dropped me off at my apartment. “I’ll see you tomorrow. Anything you need just ask, okay?”

“I will. Thanks.” We discussed returning to the car later in the day. Emailing her bandmates to see if she had returned. The uncertainty was the worst part of the situation. If she had died, as tragic and heartbreaking as that would be, at least we would know. Based on my experience with the Dream, I expected we’d have an answer soon, but that didn’t make the waiting any easier.

“Colin, I think someday I will take you up on that trip to the Shadow.”

“Sure thing, Sally. Take care. I’ll call you later.”

I walked to my door, fumbled with my keys, staggered to my room. The monster was hungry, but Hunger would have to take a backseat to fatigue tonight. Time seemed to slow down and speed up all at once. The waking world, in a way, started to resemble the weirdness of the Dream.

Maybe that was the key to solving Zhuangzi’s dilemma. He is the man and the butterfly simultaneously. They are both real, and to discount one diminishes the whole. He doesn’t have to choose. As I collapsed into bed, I thought Bec would like that.





BIGGER BITES

By Sean K.I.W. Steele

Fifteen Years Ago

Hunger makes you focus on all the wrong things.

I should have been memorizing lines, eyes fixed on the page and mouth muttering Shakespeare's prose. Instead, I kept looking and listening to other things. At the other end of the building, there was the scrawny boy from first period who kept looking at me, sitting by himself, eating breadsticks and continuing to gawk at me when he thought I wasn't looking. Flat voices dropped heavy consonants awkwardly from the basketball court instead of the steady rhythms of rubber thumps and chain swishes. The neighborhood complexes imprisoned the school, eating the light left over from the clouds' hunt for the sun. My entire body ached every time my gut growled. My dad's bank should have a grace period for bounced checks.

"Come, let me see what — let me see what — what task I have—"

"What are you doing here?"

I glared up at the chick. She backed up a step, but she didn't apologize. She had a navy lunch bag slung over her shoulder, new clothes, and styled hair, cataracts in her right eye, and a slightly tense pose. I felt a little squeamish, surprisingly. I guess startling disabled kids at a new school was my kryptonite.

I leaned back and tried to speak lightly. "I'm memorizing a speech from Titus Andronicus, actually."

She scrunched her face, and said, "That's a whole 'nother discussion. What I mean is, shouldn't you be over at the high school? Are you a student aid or something?"

I did not let my jaw hang open, but it was a near miss. "What? No, I'm in the eighth grade. I go here."

She laughed, and she loosened up. "Really? Get out of here, there's no way. You look so mature, seventeen at least. And there is no way you're reading Shakespeare for fun if you're my age."

“Well, I’m not, on both counts,” I said stuffily. Having umpteen mothers tell me I look so old ruined the compliment for me. “I was going to try out for the school performance back in my old town, and I figured I could use it for class here.”

“Ah, okay, that makes sense.” The girl nodded, smiling. “What city you from?”

“Nevada. Reno, actually.”

She snapped her fingers. “I actually know that place. Had to deal with a lot of gamblers?”

I rolled my eyes. “Nah, I lived closer to Lake Tahoe. Had to deal with the other kind of tourists.”

She nodded. “I moved up in the summer from Denver, actually. My dad had the bright idea that there were better jobs up in this area, and my mom always wanted to live in the glamorous northeast, like New York. This was my dad’s idea of a compromise.”

I nodded in acknowledgement, re-evaluating her as a low grumble from my gut filled the pause. It occurred to me that if her right eye wasn’t all milky, she might have been too cool to be caught dead with me. She was totally relaxed now, even with the faux pas, and I know a lot of people love that sort of cool. She kept up a cute look with her hair and clothes, too. I wondered if one blind eye was the reason she was hanging out with me with my well-worn rocker look rather than dealing with the middle school drama queens.

“So, which role were you going for?” She said, breaking the silence as she sat down next to me.

I raised an eyebrow and scooted over a bit. “Do you even know what Titus is about?”

“Not a bit. Tell me about it anyways.”

The eyebrow dropped as skepticism rose. Still, her eyes were wide and focused, and she kept that light smile on her face.

I cleared my throat and shifted on the bench a little. “Well, I was going for the role of Titus, who—”

“But you’re a girl,” she said.

I shrugged. “My dad taught me to always go for the best roles. Even if you don’t fit the role, directors like actors who show off with the heavy parts. Besides,” I said, grinning, “I feed on the shock of the audience.”

She was grinning too. “Yeah, I could see that being really cool. Walk out on stage, everyone’s wondering who you’re supposed to be, then you shock them all as you do... whatever it is Titus does. That’d be cool to see.”

“Yeah, well,” I said, distracted by a slight growl in my stomach. “I guess; I should get back to memorizing it then.”

She frowned. "Aren't actors supposed to practice their lines out loud?"

"Well, yeah, but I don't know where I can do that, and I don't want to look crazy, reading to myself" I said, shifting back to read.

The girl stood up. "Well, c'mon then, I know a place that should work."

I felt a little warm. "Nah, you don't need to."

"A trade then," she said. "You give me a performance; I give you half of my lunch."

My stomach roared at that. Traitor.

"Is that a yes?"

There was something disarming about this chick. It usually takes me a month or two to make friends. But even with her poking and prodding, I felt at ease with her. Hell, I was kind of intrigued at her sticking around despite my being a jerk. Not a lot of people just go up and start talking to strangers.

"I guess I can be blackmailed into it," I groaned. I stood up and began to follow her into the school.

"Can you read me it while we go?" she said as she maneuvered between some of the groups at the doors. "I want to at least know the lines before seeing you go at it."

"Um, sure." I said, stepping to her right side and opening the book. "See, that part there. Marcus says 'Why dost thou laugh? It fits not with this hour', and Titus goes into it with 'Why, I have not another tear to shed: besides, this sorrow—'"

She stopped and I bumped into her. She turned, looking a little embarrassed. "Holy crap, I totally forgot to ask your name."

I thought back and felt stupid. "Yeah, no, we both screwed that up. My name's Robin."

She sighed with relief. "Wendy. Now, start over, I totally missed Titus's first bit."

I grumbled, but I went over it again.

You know. Anything for food.



Twelve Years Ago

"You are not enough," the wolf said, the cavern turning it into a chorus of spiteful growls.

I didn't have breath to waste on an argument. Instead, I pulled myself inches ahead through the water, shivering in cold pain as I tugged on the ribbon at my fingertips. The tunnel continued to curve ahead of me, and I wanted to say I wasn't anywhere near the end. But I wouldn't. I always made my way to the wolf's jaws inevitably, but tonight, it was going to be my choice.

"Your promise is already betraying you," the wolf snarled. "If an immortal hand could not free the world for two, what hope can your failing form give us?"

I fumbled the ribbon in between my fingertips for a long time, slowly wrapping it around and around until I was decently tangled up in it. I dragged my head up, and took a breath just in time for the water to surge up. I gagged and sputtered, and I swore frost was spreading over my lungs as I gulped quick, small breaths. I went for another deep inhale, and pulled myself forward, cringing as I tore up my belly along the sharp rocks. I reminded myself of the wolf chewing one me night after night after night, my throat crunched, my femurs stabbing out, my rib cage collapsing. That thought filled me, and I screamed as I threw my other arm onto the ribbon.

I knew why it was happening. The wolf was trying to escape the ribbons and the cavern, but it wasn't strong enough. All it had to eat were scraps, the unwilling, the unaccepting-people who were nothing but empty calories. It kept drawing me in, but like an audience, it kept eating faces I wore, and never the real me. If it kept going like that, it would stay trapped forever. The wolf didn't get the idea, though, and so it would keep gnawing on me every night. I wasn't going to let that happen. I wasn't going to let the wolf keep drawing me back in night after night until it finally realized it wasn't filling itself. I would not let it control me like that.

“Bright as your defiance is, you are bound as deeply as I. Your flesh binds you to the world that bars your dream. Your fate is sealed.”

I started fidgeting the ribbon around my other fingers. I could barely get them to twitch.

I wasn't going to stop until the wolf was free. I wasn't going to stop until I was free.

The wolf laughed, long and loud, genuinely pleased. It sounded cracked, like faint faith grated a throat used to cynicism.

“Fulfill the oaths, then. Become all that I am and free yourself from this cycle.”

I tore the ribbon apart, anticipating the inevitable. The great wolf who had been stalking me for the whole year finally lunged and snapped me up. I could feel my bones lance sharp and hot out of me with each bite, before I plummeted down its throat. We opened the eyes of my body and looked frantically around my bedroom, and I felt the truth as the Hunger raced through my bones — my nightmare was always who I was. It was my soul. I was its body. We were one.

Oh god, what was I going to tell Wendy? What was I going to tell Dad? My friends? Could I even tell people about this?

I paused on that thought. Why did I have such lame priorities? I had just embraced hopelessness and paradoxically became a Beast of hope, and I was worried about what people would think? Fuck that noise. I mean, okay, I should figure it out, but that would come in time. In the meantime, I should be coming up with ideas for what to do with my newfound self.

I went through the usual routine of the morning, and the wolf made itself known in every movement. I felt like the Daft Punk song — better physically in every way. I ate cereal as I talked to Dad about how the school production of *Assassins* was going, and as my stomach calmed, I became aware of other gnawing feelings. An itch in my muscles, a need to smash the bowl, flip the table, and burst through the wall. In my bones, I felt a small, empty ache, like when you've lost a tooth, but more...spiritual, I guess.

I finished and said bye to Dad, giving him a quick hug (nearly too tight) before prowling outside. We had moved to where the inner city gave way to the suburbs, still in the same school district but with more room and genuine attempts at plant life. It wasn't the Sierra Nevadas, but even this space made the wolf within bound up and down. I sprinted, and the wind and the earth that disappeared with each step felt like little kids trying to keep up. I felt like a storm in search of a farm.

And then, reaching the regular 7-11, I saw Wendy, watching me with two sets of eyes.

There were her eyes, one fixed, one off-key, framed by the wavy chestnut hair, calm posture, and comfortably chic clothes that made up the girl I knew. Then there were her other eyes, poised sharply on a serene face with wild mahogany hair, resting atop a large, elegant black birds' body, a tail of autumn colors hanging long and low behind a set of sickle sharp talons. It was collected, unwavering, and sure; the final thing you would see if you were not worthy.

I gulped and started to stammer. She was like me, but I wasn't quite sure if she had the same rules as me, if we were actually all that similar beyond the basics, and I tried to think of how to start before Wendy cut me off.

“Oh thank god, I hoped you were being Devoured!”

Weirder words will never bring such relief.

• • •

Nine Years Ago

I stuck my leg out against the brick wall, stopping Wendy from pacing. “Christ, girl, stop that before you wear out the sidewalk. We've got this.”

“But what if we screw up the time window?” she chattered, fixing her sable eye with my eyes, and even her pearl-clouded eye seemingly settled on me. “This won't work if the security guard thinks he's either gone or could believe we slipped in at a different time, and our Lair isn't exactly stable on time. We could actually get busted for this.”

I leaned gingerly off the rail and pulled her in for a hug, ignoring the ache in my bones. I spoke with a low rumble I knew calmed her. “Mike'll cover us, and so long as I keep the gloves on, the only thing anyone could get is that you were there, with no proof you could wreck the office or that you even touched anything. You and Mike figured out every angle. We'll do okay.”

The door nearby opened, and we broke apart to see Mike the Manticore come out, jovial in his navy Adidas windbreaker and grey slacks. He rolled on up to us, saying “So, you two ready to bring justice to the campus?” I suppose at his age, I’d be an unflappable monster too.

I handed him a thin folder, and he slipped the evidence for the Dean into his briefcase as easily as a student’s late work. He just smiled and went to open the door for us. Wendy slipped in first, and I followed her, whispering a small thanks to him as I did. He gave us a small wave and then moved on to his car.

Mike’s ease had clearly reached Wendy. She moved quickly, but I saw her slip into her role, and my eyes slid to her hips swaying easily as we went up the stairs. Mr. Prescott wouldn’t see anything else once she got in.

I let her go ahead on the third floor and knock on the professor’s door, and waited for her to go inside before I approached. I checked my camera as I listened closely to the wood.

“So, what exactly did you have in mind for letting me make up my test grades, professor?” Wendy said with a perfect tremble. A little nervous, a little depressed, flat enough for resignation, but strong enough for false hope. What I’d do to convince her to take to the stage.

“Well, business is a serious major, Wendy,” Mr. Prescott said, his dark voice flowing with a layer of velvet I’d never heard before. “Quite frankly, to give you a chance to continue on at this point in the semester would involve me breaking some rules.” That was creepily effective on a lot of emotionally manipulative levels.

“So, I can’t just work hard over the weekend on re-taking the tests?” Wendy whined slightly, some lost fight with fake panic.

“Well, I know one way you can work hard to make up for this,” he nearly whispered. A second later, there was a bump and scrunch, and some uncomfortably silenced sounds. That was as much of a cue as I needed.

The wolf within reared back, and I broke through the door with my elbow. I spun in and took a shot before the teacher could even turn around. The Polaroid slid out neat and easy, and I shook it as I bounced around the edge of the office to the stammers of Mr. Prescott. Yep, that was his red-sleeved hand at Wendy’s crotch, and his chiseled face smashed against hers all right. A wave of nausea rolled through me, making my muscles itch all over and the ache in my bones pulse.

“So, not only hacking, cyber-stalking, and academic discrimination against female students, but sexual assault too,” I growled, waving the picture up in the air as he stammered and shambled away from Wendy. “I think such atrocities should be shown to the world, don’t you?”

“Absolutely,” Wendy said with devastating sensuality as she rolled of the desk and strutted over to the front door. “Let’s start an exhibition here. Pin that

on up on the shelves, I think that'll look nice." She smiled brightly at Prescott, and I swore he was staring into Heaven's judgmental light as he fixed his eyes on her.

I stole his attention back by sweeping my arm across a bookshelf with such force that the pages flew apart from their covers. He jumped and yelled, like that would make a difference this late at night I placed one Polaroid there, and then reached into my bag and started sticking up the photos we stole from him of each lesbian he had raped.

Mr. Prescott charged me, but I turned and kicked him in the chest, sending him flying. Wendy was kinder than physics. I felt her bring in our Lair quickly to keep him from breaking on his desk. Instead, her tower of arches bled into the room just in time for Prescott to crashing through a fragile wall. Still, he writhed and screamed on the sand as I went around and put a few more pictures around the room, before I pulled out an entire stack of them and tossed them into the air. His sin quickly covered the middle space between the Dream and his office.

"I'll be blunt," Wendy said as she soared over onto his chest, all elegance and judgment as her gamayun self. "You're going to make up for this, or next time I'll just let her break your back. Understood?"

He tried to grab her, but here, I was the giant wolf. I leapt over and bit his arm, breaking it. Then, for good measure, I flung his body back toward where his bookshelves were still half-present, shattering each one, with only the kindness of the Dream keeping him alive. I watched him writhe and cry as the office faded out, the bridge between our Lair and there disappearing with time.

I looked over at Wendy. "You okay?"

She gave me a stern, pained look. "Did you have to break my tower? That hurts, you know."

I chuffed. "Really? We just kicked serious ass, and you're going to complain about a little redecoration?"

She snorted at that, and...I started laughing. I couldn't help it. Her snorting with that face, normally so serene and now looking grumpy, I just rolled over and laughed. After some seconds of confusion, she started laughing, and soon we were racing through the Lair, giggling and telling the story over and over again, making it more awesome each time.

We ran out of another chamber back into the lake I had bonded to our Lair last summer, tripping into the water. I gave a startled scream, and so did Wendy, and that just brought on a whole new burst of laughter as we stumbled up and helped each other to the shore. This was better than drunken weekends with friends, than opening night highs. I was so elated, even my bones didn't ache. I felt like we could do anything.

Wendy clearly felt that way too, because she pulled me in and kissed me.

I wasn't surprised. I kissed her back. That was an excellent place to start.

Five Years Ago

Wendy's eyes tracked from me to the entry staircase, and I turned to look with her across the ballroom, the wolf within perking its ears up. The hotel owner had come in with a couple of staff members, sweat shining as they tramped around the balconies and down onto the main floor. Some of the servers caught the new group, and quick whispers led to barely muted curses and scrambling to fit into a plan that didn't exist.

"Robin," Wendy whispered flatly, straightening her suit coat as she stiffened. "This doesn't have anything to do with you, does it?"

I rubbed my palms reflexively on my dress, handling the blue satin like a worry stone. My muscles only felt a little sharp, but my bones hurt so much, they felt cracked. "I...may have gone to get a snack earlier," I lied.

She groaned, lost for words. A small part of me wanted to do something to make up for this. A chance to get support for our women's awareness group doesn't come along often, and I had just eclipsed the work we had put in all evening with my little arrangement.

I watched the scene unfold instead, intent on seeing the result. Wendy simply walked away towards one of the side doors, and as the guilt crashed in, I still couldn't turn away.

A chance to get answers like this doesn't come along often either.

Some projectors turned on as the owner tapped the microphone and got people's attention, even mine. I hadn't planned on them showing it. The wolf began tearing into the crowd's dread as the bald man began his explanation. The great beast sagged as it chewed on the tragic news of how the valets discovered that an entire slew of cars had been wrecked. The lake and the caverns of who I was became blobs of color and fuzzy feelings as I swallowed the terror of the cameras being destroyed, the evidence of who or what did this simply not existing. The world became heavier, flatter, and claustrophobic as my Horror licked up the owner's utterances of recompense and aid for those who would gather at the office in an orderly fashion.

Finally, the projectors flicked on, showing two whole rows broken plastic, twisted steel, bleeding tanks, and devastated vehicles. No one was expecting to have weakness exposed like that. Throughout the entire room, everyone had frozen expressions, shuffling positions, muffled cries. The wounds of a few taught the lesson to all: none were safe from such cruelty.

I forced myself to take a big bite of that shared nightmare. The wolf within chewed, swallowed, and then closed its eyes, and everything that I was disappeared with it. I ceased to be me.

No one could have picked me out of that crowd in that moment. I was right with them. I sat down to keep from falling at the onset of the shaking, put my

head in my hands to catch the tears, and breathed to keep from whimpering.

Half an hour later, Wendy started rubbing my back stiffly. She hadn't forgiven me yet, and she wasn't quite sure why I was so shaken. She wanted answers for why I did it, why it hurt me now, and why I didn't think about how she would feel. She wanted to know why I was selfish.

But her hands still went up and down my back, and she didn't say anything. That was her punishment—to let me choke on self-loathing as she saw to our relationship first where I had not, and to burn as she showed me the flaw behind that feeling still playing second to the despair binding me.

“My bones still ache,” I said, sniffing. “No matter what I do, no matter how I fill myself, I still can't stop it. I just hurt all the time, down to the soul, and even when it falls asleep, I still hurt. I'm broken, and I don't even know why or how.”

Her hands stopped, for a second. Then she pulled me onto her lap and held me, resting her cheek on my head, stroking my hair with her fingers. I felt her bitterness at that answer. I felt her hatred for how I hadn't trusted her when she told me that we would find out how to fix that together. I felt her disappointment that I placed my problem over her plans for our larger work tonight. I could feel her every dark emotion about this.

But I tasted her sympathy for my confusion. I smelled her compassion for my pain. I could hear her acceptance of my self-loathing. I knew her caring for every loss I had coursing in my veins. Wendy had hope for my growth the way prophets had hope in their gods, and she was dedicated to making us work.

“We'll find a way,” she said simply, saving everything else for when I was more composed. “If it takes another decade or ten, we'll make you whole.”

In that moment, I believed in her love more than anything, and I hated that my bones ached with emptiness.

• • •

Two Years Ago

“I know why your bones ache, and I know how to sate that hunger,” the vampire said.

I snarled at him and turned around in the flooded tunnel, trying to figure out where he was. I had only ever talked to Wendy about the deep pain, and yet he jumped straight to the heart of it. I didn't think monsters like me could have nightmares, but I had to wonder about this. I had no clue who this asshole was and how he got into my dreams, but he couldn't have picked better words to confuse and scare me if he had borrowed from the Bard himself.

“Oh, you've never known who I was, why bother now?” the vampire snapped from... seemingly everywhere. How the hell was he doing that? “I've come to accept that, and despite your injustice, I still have decided to save you from your misery. Perhaps, just once, you could try for some gratitude.”

I bristled and barked, prowling around to find the stalker “You break into my Lair and start dangling my secrets around like a prize, then tell me I should be grateful? When I find you, I’m gonna—”

“Why are your priorities so lame? Yes, you’ll do all sorts of terrible things to me and spend the rest of your life wondering if I actually knew something, yes, I know,” the vampire said from behind me, losing some dread with how nasal it came out. I whipped around to bite him down on him and...nothing. Not even ripples in the water. “Really, if anyone should appreciate defying the expectations of others, it should be you.”

I questioned him with a growl. I had to wonder if my initial read of him was wrong and he was just a ghostly voice who wandered in somehow, because his voice just kept moving around, with no other signs of passage. I debated going down to the Heart of the Lair, where the ribbons would seek him out.

“Oh, please,” the vampire said from above me. He sounded juvenile, but that didn’t help me remember him. “If you somehow didn’t remain oblivious to everyone who judged you for doing men’s roles all these years, you actively defied them. You’ve refused to keep to the script society expects you to play at every point and in every way.... Well, except for that one night you wore a dress, but you were having a moment of weakness. Point is, you refuse to be restrained. It’s your best trait, and that is the gift I need to help you realize.”

I reeled at the thought of how long he had been stalking me. Three years since that night? That was insane. I tried to place something, anything from that evening, but the wolf-I-was reminded me of when I was Devoured. Become all that I am and free yourself from this cycle, it had said. There was something resonant in the asshole’s words.

“Something’s binding me?”

The vampire snickered around the bend ahead of me. “Think back. Think of a time when your bones didn’t hurt. What happened around the night you attacked Alex Prescott?”

So, no, make that seven years ago. Holy shit, how had I — no — how had Wendy not noticed this guy for so long? “I ate the fear of a rapist, so what? I’ve done that a couple of times.”

“So what was different about it? If breaking a mortal has never filled the emptiness, what did?”

I continued padding around the tunnels, thinking hard about that. I had destroyed his books, destroyed his reputation, and only avoided breaking his back because Wendy called down the Lair, so instead of breaking his back on the desk, he crashed through—

“Yeah, there’s your sweet spot,” said the vampire.

That night, I had felt a rush. Truth be told, I had felt more alive and free than I had ever done before. Any anxiety I had had just hadn’t been there, the rest of

the night. And without a doubt, tracing that feeling back, it started with ruining Wendy's tower.

The vampire's voice went from obnoxious and stuffy to glowingly indulgent. "Robin, creatures like you and me are higher on the food chain than others. It's taken me over a decade of watching you and eating different things to understand. We can't be sated by the souls of mortals; we need something with more substance. We made the mistake of thinking others could fill the void; you tried to devour Wendy's love from the start, and I tried to sate myself by fighting for your love, but that was never the answer for us. The simple truth is, we've always needed to break taboos, and go on to bigger and bigger meals. We could never go backwards."

I wanted to hurl up dinner. The madman's words made sense. I've been stalked for who knows how long by an obsessed freak, and his words fit the shape of the aching emptiness in my bones. I couldn't be listening to this. I could not take this seriously, but the idea stretched beyond the tunnels that still bound me and resonated with the wider world.

I fought not to whimper. "Why would you tell me this?"

The water trickled down from the lake above the tunnels with a grim melody.

"I've wanted to find a way to make you whole for ten years, and to win your love for thirteen," the vampire said with all the tragic heroism of a seven-year old. "When I found the truth, I realized I had to let you go, but I couldn't break up with you without letting you know you were truly loved. So, this is my parting gift. You were so lovely because of how much you broke the mold, and I hope you'll free yourself now that you know that."

My stomach growled angrily, and I woke up just in time to grab the waste basket before I vomited. I climbed out of bed and stumbled over to the apartment bathroom, fell to the toilet, and vomited again.

Wendy stepped in quickly from the living room and pulled my hair back while I failed to eject the words. She rubbed my back as she asked. "Hey, what happened? Was it something you ate?"

• • •

One Year Ago

I could feel the Dream.

It was like what I'd heard about phantom limb sensation, but with instead of arms or legs, it was with my tunnels, arteries reaching into other bodies, other worlds. I could feel them, but I couldn't quite touch them yet. There was room, in that place beyond the cage under the lake, for me to be more: more than myself, more than my cage, more than my story. I could only feel the faint beat of a heart unfathomably expansive, but its cadence fit the shape of the aching emptiness. I tasted the cosmic drumbeat as the wolf within continued chewing on the ruins, and its taste was True.

More simply, my bones didn't ache as much. I could argue and spin my thoughts around repeatedly, and I kept returning to that and the path it suggested. I wasn't sure I had a decision anymore.

"What are you doing here?"

I looked up at Wendy from the bench. The middle school was dark and quiet, with only moonlight and the autumn breeze daring to dwell here. It had been nearby and out of the way and a good place to think about what had just happened. I chewed on words to explain those thoughts, to try to get them off the tongue.

Wendy slapped me.

No one else would have a face right after that. Wendy wasn't as strong as I was, but the bird of paradise had sharp talons. As tough as my hide was, I still had four angry cuts on my cheek now.

I pulled myself up and covered my cheek, stunned. I was caught between deserving it and never forgiving it. I looked at her face — seething, taut, and desperate — and I felt her pull away from judgment time and time again.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" she said, her voice barely in check. "After everything I've done for you, every plea I've given you, every hope I've fed you, everything you agreed to... you just decided a myth was better than all of that?"

She knelt down and dug her talons into my wrists. "How could you beat the crap out of Mike and wreck his chambers? I thought you gave up on that vampire's bullshit, that we were going to find an actual answer, that—"

"I found an Incarnation," I said quietly.

She stopped, blood draining from her face.

"During the show in Vegas, I met a dragon named Shen-Lung. Not like us, not a nightmare in flesh. He was a nightmare made flesh. Incarnate. I heard he was there from some travelers a few months ago; the show was to check it out. He hunted me down, and I could just feel it. Even as I ran, he was...whole. Complete. When I escaped him, he caught up and I asked him about it. He told me it felt like an aching emptiness, bone deep, before he achieved it, how he finally felt when he Incarnated, and I knew — I *knew* — I had to try it. And Wendy, it's true. The myths of Incarnation are true, and they're what I've been missing. I feel it, I know it."

She was silent, the weight of everything we've been telling ourselves for a year crashing down. She stammered as she tried to see something more beyond the disbelief. "So, what, you decided to go and knock down the one guy who's always looked out for us? Just leave Mike a shaking husk so you can become... Christ, so you could become a living terror?"

I didn't have a defense. I let that sink in for her, watched as her deep sable eye got wider and shakier. I wished I had a choice.

“He’d have stopped me if I didn’t catch him unawares,” I said flatly. “He’d have stopped me and then I’d never stop the pain. I can’t match him head on.”

She froze. She followed where that all went, and her hands slipped from my wrists as she reached the conclusion. She stumbled back, barely managing to stand, and she walked away, then back again. I saw fourteen years shatter in her graceless motions, and I felt myself drowning behind the dull certainty I had found earlier.

Finally, she came back. She stood as a wreck, but she had made up her mind. “Give me your key.”

I numbly obliged, fumbling for the key in my pocket. “What will you do now?”

“I’m not sure I should say. I can’t say. I don’t know anymore. I just — Robin, I can’t, now with this. Unless—”

I waited. Part of me was hoping for a miracle. Mostly, though, I just knew where we were going.

She sighed, hiccupping a little. “You sure? You could take what the family has to offer, work to make up for it. It’s not too late.”

I really wanted to. My bones didn’t hurt, but looking at her face, contorted and lost, it didn’t matter. She was right, Mike would forgive me, and from there so would everyone he knew. It would take Wendy time, but I could go with her and continue acting for her events, fighting bigotry and having fun, and slowly make up for everything.

I almost could have swallowed that.

I handed her the key. I had tasted a larger world, and I couldn’t go back.

There weren’t any other words between us. I’m not clear when she left. One second she was there, and then only the aching emptiness. I got up, trying to think of who wouldn’t have heard the news, who I could devour before the walls started coming up.

Titus had lied to me. When you didn’t have any tears left to shed, there was no laughter. Only the Hunger remained.

• • •

Now

The wolf within stalked the tunnels intently, sniffing out its direction while fixing its eyes on the ceiling. I had a similar feeling in my own bones, like the gravity was starting to break them apart and feed them to the sky. Like a skydiver about to jump, I felt heavier than I ever had before in my life. Maybe it was something I had never noticed on the tower.

The Heart of Wendy’s Lair was the altar at the top of her tower. Even here, where the spiraling arches came together to scratch at the heavens, the sand from the desert still swirled everywhere. The gamayun rested on the altar, its tranquility gravely carved into its face.

I still had no idea what a Russian myth was doing in a Babylonian setting.

I still had no idea why Wendy had invited me in after all this time.

I had no idea why Wendy was standing beneath her soul, in front of the altar.

“The family and I came up with a theory,” she said over the wind. “One that will let you Incarnate without crippling everyone.”

She was standing straight, but she was loose in her posture. She had bags under her eyes brown and white eyes, her hair drooped. She was standing, but she looked ready to go to sleep.

I wandered over to her as I looked her over, and I leaned against the altar. “I think I’d rather just take big bites out of everyone,” I said quietly. “I don’t much like where this theory goes.”

She smiled with her lips and frowned with her eyes. “You’re going to have to destroy this place anyways to get what you want, and even after that you still have a long way to go. You got the new kids in the city, but the old guard’s prepared for you.” She stretched, and stood in front of me. “And quite frankly, I don’t want to be just another person on your list.”

I grunted. “So, what, I just kill you? You come to me as vulnerable as you can be, and I,” I gulped, skipping the ugly bits, “I’m supposed to become everything I am with just that?”

“You might not have realized how much we matter to the family, Robin.” She took my hand. “What’s going on with us, it’s one big ruin for everyone else. No one feels safe with how far this has split us. If you do this, it’ll be the only meal you need.”

I glared at her. “No.”

“This isn’t a discussion, Robin. It’s a jury council.”

She put a gun in my other hand. I was stunned, and she guided the barrel to her forehead in that moment.

“What are you doing?”

She was maddeningly calm. “It’s judgment day. I can’t abide you hurting family for your pain, and this is my punishment for you. You can stop everything you’re doing, or you can get everything you want. But you’re going to stop hurting family like you did Mike and the others.”

I couldn’t stop shaking. I was frozen to the spot. If I overpowered her and ran, she would punish me the only way she thought would work. I saw that in her eyes. But I didn’t want to choose between the two.

My bones ripped at me, splinters of pain and confusion racing through my thoughts, my blood, my being. I felt like ribbons were binding my heart, my throat, my hands, my feet so tightly I would be crushed by them if I didn’t get out. I couldn’t choose. It wasn’t right, I should just be able to take and win and be, I shouldn’t have to be bound to this!

My stomach roared, and my bones joined in a chorus. Their song pierced me, hot and angry, want so intense it threatened to devour itself and I could only scream in fury, only hide in myself by curling up and closing anything that might get in.

The gun went off.

I watched as she fell, her head splitting like lightning, and I fell to the floor as my world broke apart. I fell and I drowned and I died. I screamed, and cried, and rolled through oblivion, trying to kill this moment, trying to wake up, trying to find comfort, trying to escape these endless tunnels. I only found darker ones.

“I think she got the idea,” said a young boy with a nasal voice. “Can I go now?”

I rolled over and blinked my eyes clear.

There was a scrawny, awkward kid sitting where Wendy had lain dead, sticking bits of skull back over his brain as blood raced back inside. And near the stairs, there was Wendy, tired as hell, but alive.

Wendy glared at the boy. “Yes, vampire, now get out of my city. If I see you again, there won’t be a scrap of you left to find, understand me?”

“Yes, mom,” the kid whined, and he disappeared.

I blinked a few more times, sputtered for a bit, and then decided on a simple question.

“What?”

She didn’t answer me immediately. She came over and helped me up onto the altar while she thought it out.

“I didn’t think you’d shoot me,” she whispered.

My mind was numb. My bones hurt. I didn’t have words to say.

She noticed and took a breath. “Other people weren’t so sure. That little show was what I was originally going to do, but they advised caution. So, I hunted down the vampire and...persuaded him to stand in for me. He can hide himself pretty well, and he still cares in his way, despite being a douche.”

I was still turning facts over in my head. “Why would you let your soul sleep around that guy?”

She shrugged. “I needed you to take it seriously. I couldn’t keep it too light.”

I struggled for words, then settled on another simple question. “Why?”

She looked me in the eyes reluctantly. “I figured you needed food for thought. A chance to feel the consequences.”

I chewed on that. “So, what now?”

She sighed, shrugged, and looked up to the sky. “I don’t know. I guess the original choice is still on you. I’m not moving on this.” She looked back down. “Take some time, think on it. I’ll be here for you, no matter what you choose.” With that, she left for the stairs, to wander around her Lair.

Her words clicked in my head, and I felt frail. I hurt all over. I curled up on the altar, and I rutted through how helpless I felt.

You are not enough.

I was so close. The chase for Incarnation had been hard, but each soul I wrecked made the world that much vaster, and at the same time brought me closer to satisfaction.

What hope can your failing form offer? Your promise is already failing.

I was so close. I could almost reach out and grab it if I wanted to. However, I couldn't reach past her. She was too wide a chasm for that.

Your flesh binds you to the world that bars your dream.

I didn't want to give up. I was so close. I felt like I could stop hurting. I felt like I could be something in this world, if I could just overcome this one obstacle. If I just wasn't bound up like this.

"Hey, Wendy?"

She stopped near the stairs. "Yeah?"

Fulfill your oaths. Become all that you are and free yourself from this cycle.

I hesitated, gripping the gun.

"Thanks for feeding me."





FAMILY REUNION

by Meghan Fitzgerald

“Hey Felicia, what's up? Venti iced coffee, extra shot of espresso.”

The barista laughed as she rang me up. “Venti, huh? Girl, you *must* be tired. Rough night?”

“Yeah, you could say that.” I rubbed my face, paid, and took my coffee back to a table by the window. A siren blared a few blocks over, barely registering to these jaded people with their lattes and laptops. Outside, people passed with purpose and buses roared by proclaiming the merits of the newest TV series on their flanks. A street performer banged out a rhythm on what looked like overturned industrial buckets. I considered calling in sick, but didn't want to miss my coworker's birthday party. I wasn't sick, anyway, just sleepy. Okay, and kinda rattled.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw that woman again, the one who never bought anything. She always just sat near the door pretending to read the same book, one of those self-help books about positive thinking and “the new you.” She'd have to be on her third reading by now, though, if she were doing anything but using the book as an excuse to sit there and watch people. Maybe she was an undercover cop, or a reporter, or something. She freaked me out a little.

I glanced at my watch. It was 8:52. I watched the second hand tick around and shuddered. Something about that ticking was familiar in a way that made me want to throw up. I took off my watch and stuffed it into my bag, picked up my coffee and went over to the counter. “Do you know anything about that lady over there?” I asked Felicia, trying not to point.

She glanced over and their eyes met. She looked back at me and said, “No, she's only ever here in the morning and she don't ever drink nothing. Just sits around and reads her little book, then leaves.”

“Heh. Just curious.” I gave Felicia a wave on my way out. I wasn't looking forward to the long day this was gonna be.

• • •

“I think Sparks — I mean, Stephanie — is starting to notice me,” said Nadia, straddling a chair backwards in the dining nook. The glass of the closed window muffled the cacophony from the garage below the apartment, and it faded to white noise from long familiarity for the three throngmates.

Corazón shoveled a huge mouthful of canned beef stew into her mouth and then talked around it. “It’s okay, you can call her whatever you want. Not like she’s here to argue.”

“No, the point is to call her whatever *she* wants.” Nadia looked down at the table, hunched over the chair’s back. “She gets to choose her own name now.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Anyway,” Nadia continued, “she ordered a really big coffee with extra espresso.”

“Mm-hmm.” Cora gestured at the two Prometheans with her spoon. “That means—”

“No, don’t tell me,” Prin interrupted, adopting a thinking pose with one hand on hir chin. “I know what it means. It means...” They waited. “She’s in a bad mood. She didn’t sleep well.” Hir raised eyebrows turned it into a question.

“More or less,” said Cora, digging in for another spoonful. “Probably she has a long, exhausting day ahead of her and she’ll have ice cream for dinner or something.”

Nadia sighed, pushing a drop of spilled stew around on the table with her finger. “I wish I could be there for her.”

“We talked about this,” said Prin sternly. “No direct contact. No relationships. She’s human now and we can’t ruin that for her.”

“You mean you can’t ruin your observations with corrupted *data*,” Nadia spat back.

“Yes, I mean that too.” Prin shook hir head, taking a seat. “It’s important that we continue to study her progress.”

“Is that all she ever was to you? An *experiment*?”

“No!”

“She has a point, Prin,” said Cora, frowning and pushing her bowl away. “If we’re going to be in her life, maybe we should actually *be* in her life. Humans need friends too, you know.”

“Corazón, not you too.” Prin folded hir arms and fixed the other two with a glare. “I can’t believe what I’m hearing. You know what will happen if we talk to her. Do you want her to show up at our door with the police like they did in Secaucus? Or with Molotov cocktails like they did in Camden?”

Nadia hugged the chair. “I just miss her,” she whispered.

Prin relaxed a little, nodding. “So do I. But let’s not destroy what she’s earned so soon after she’s earned it. All right?”

"I know, I know. You're right." Nadia smiled faintly and rose from the table. "I'd better go. Those customers won't help themselves." She peered into Cora's bowl. "You've got a transmission to fix and three piles of scrap to deliver, are you finished?"

"Yeah, I'm done." Cora licked the spoon clean and tossed it with the bowl into the sink with a loud clatter. "Lost my appetite anyway, talking about this."

• • •

"Thank you all for being here tonight," said the woman at the microphone. "As you know, we've gathered to celebrate the accomplishments of one of our finest officers, Detective Kelly Anderson. Let's give her a round of applause!"

Kelly stood in front of the room, smiling, as they all clapped.

"We've put together a slide show to showcase all of Detective Anderson's wonderful achievements," said the emcee, gesturing to a projector screen. A flickering picture appeared there, like a still photo from an old home movie, of a bruised and beaten college student's corpse. "Take this aggravated assault and murder case, for example, which she never solved!"

Another round of applause. Kelly wasn't smiling anymore.

The picture changed. Now, a woman and her son lay side by side in matching coffins. "And this double homicide, the perpetrator of which was never caught despite the hate group that claimed credit!"

Everyone cheered. Kelly opened her mouth to protest, but the sudden glint from the emcee's badge seemed to warn her off, saying *you have no voice here. You don't matter.*

"And this next one — oh, who am I kidding," said the woman, grinning now in the fitful light of the projector. "Why don't we be honest with ourselves? Detective Anderson isn't worth the paper her resignation will be printed on!"

The applause became laughter, filling the room. The glint wasn't coming from the emcee's badge anymore, but from her teeth, which seemed to elongate more and more the longer Kelly looked. "Why don't you just *die*?" the emcee roared, taking a step forward as a huge, hairy brute burst from beneath her skin, foaming at the mouth. "Then *your* murder can go unsolved, you pathetic has-been!"

Kelly screamed.

She woke up in the dark, sweating and panting, her blankets long since kicked onto the floor in a lumpy pile. "Another one," she muttered to herself, breathless. She pressed a hand against her chest and tried to will her heart to stop its hammering. She slid off the bed, pulled on a thin robe, and went to the window. Pushing apart the slats of the blinds with two fingers revealed nothing stalking the streets below, and she sensed nothing on the wind, no electric pull, no ominous howl.

"I know you're out there," she said to the nothing she sensed, crushing the blinds in her fist. "You can't hide forever."

“The key to self-actualization,” said the book Nadia wasn't really reading, “is to know where your true self lives, and make it a point to move in.” She had no idea what that meant, but had faith that the author understood human emotional needs better than she did. Maybe Sparks would get it, she thought, and then silently chided herself for thinking the wrong name.

She looked up when the jangling bell above the door chimed, and immediately looked down again so Stephanie wouldn't meet her gaze. She watched as the other woman ordered the same venti coffee as before, saw how her head drooped and the dark circles under her eyes. Nadia shut her book and frowned. Maybe Stephanie was ill? What if it was serious? Humans were so fragile...

Before she really thought about it, her feet took her across the crowded cafe toward Stephanie's table. There she is, Nadia thought, resisting the urge to reach out and touch the exhausted woman's shoulder as she approached from behind. She was the same, but different. She still sat with her legs tucked up underneath her, still let her hair fall down over her face when she was deep in thought, the way she always had. But now she moved with an easy grace that was new, and took her time with things she would hardly have given a second glance, before.

Nadia hovered, hoping to be noticed without speaking, but no such luck. “Hi,” she said eventually.

Stephanie looked up, pushing her bangs away from her face. “Um. Hi.” She smiled belatedly. “Can I help you with something?”

“No, not at all,” said Nadia, and then paused. “I mean, yes.”

“Oh,” Stephanie said, her smile bemused now. “Well, what is it?”

“It's...” Nadia cast around desperately. Her hand came up, still holding the book. “It's this book,” she said hastily. “I don't understand it. I thought you might.”

Stephanie's expression changed several times, but Nadia couldn't identify anything in it. Then Stephanie said, “Sorry, I'm pretty out of it, I haven't been sleeping much. I don't think I can help you.”

“Is something wrong?” said Nadia.

“Nah, not really.” Stephanie shrugged, then chuckled. “Just some bad dreams, that's all.”

Nadia didn't see what was so funny about that. “Bad dreams? Like what?”

“Like, bad dreams, I dunno. Something about a clock? Or was it...” Stephanie looked down at herself, her chest, her arms, turning her hands over as though they were unfamiliar. She took a long sip of coffee, rested her forehead in her hand for a moment, and then glanced sidelong at the Promethean. “Look, I have to go.”

“Oh. You do?”

Stephanie stood up and clutched the cup to herself like a security blanket, or a weapon. “Yeah, I do,” she snapped. She brushed past Nadia and went out the door.

Nadia watched her go, feeling stupid standing in the middle of the cafe by herself. She thought, what if Sparks stops coming here? What if you can't find her anymore? You should never have talked to her in the first place, she scolded herself, all the eyes in the room on her like spotlights as she kept standing there. “What are *you* looking at?” she barked at them, and stalked out.

• • •

“So?” said Cora, tearing off a piece of beef jerky with her teeth, lounging on the hood of the truck and tossing a wrench up and down in one hand. “So she had some bad dreams, so what?”

“Don't play games with me, Cora, I *know* you went after her!” Nadia slammed her palm into the chrome.

“Hey, quit it, I just fixed this thing.”

“Oh, you'll have a lot more to fix when I'm through with you —”

“All right, that's enough,” said Prin, moving to stand between the two of them. “Corazón, you have to admit, this wouldn't be the first time we caught you hunting alone.”

“I wasn't hunting!” Cora protested, pointing her wrench at the Osiran. “I swore I'd follow your rules after last time, I don't break my promises.”

“It doesn't matter if you've been hunting or not,” Nadia said sharply, “you've been eating meat nonstop for days. You're *hungry*. I know you, Cora, you don't eat like this unless you need your fix.”

“And you think I'm getting it from *her*?”

“She dreamed about a clock.” Nadia turned her back on the truck and sat down on the asphalt. “A clock, you think that's a coincidence?”

Cora sprawled on her back across the hood, her long hair splayed out over the shiny painted surface like corkscrew graffiti, and dropped the wrench with a clunk. “Maybe she's just remembering stuff.”

“No! She can't!” Prin glanced between them in alarm. “It'll ruin everything!”

“Who says?” Cora challenged him. “Who says she shouldn't remember?”

“I say,” Prin's jaw clenched. “If it is you, you'd better stop.”

“Oh, *you* say. What the hell do you know? When was the last time you were human?” She cupped a hand next to her ear. “What's that I hear? *Never*?”

The Promethean stepped close to tower over her. “I may not be human,” she hissed, “but I know more about *you* than you think. I know that thing that lives inside you won't rest until you've ripped the wool from her eyes and destroyed her life. I'm not going to let that happen. Do you hear me?”

“What life?” Cora bared her teeth in a sneer. “Bills by day, Netflix by night, no family, no friends — if you ask me, it's worth destroying.”

“Good thing I never asked you.”

Cora's hand shot up to grab Prin by the collar and pull hir down until she could smell hir breath, like tea and ashes. “She'd be better off here where she belongs and you know it,” she growled. “People are weak and miserable. She's not. She's one of *us*.”

“No,” said Nadia, stalking over to wrestle the two of them apart. “She's not like us anymore, Cora. I tried to talk to her, she practically ran away from me.”

“You *talked* to her?” Prin turned on her, aghast.

“Yes, and it was a mistake. Are you happy?” Nadia shoved hir back, sending hir stumbling. “You were right, we were wrong. Just the way you like it.”

“I don't —”

“We should leave.”

“What do you mean, leave?” said Cora.

Nadia gazed out at the setting sun. “Leave New York. Go far away. I think we need to... I think *I* need to let her go.”

“Like hell.” Cora slid off the hood and snatched up her wrench. “None of us is going anywhere.”

The Prometheans watched her storm out of the garage. They watched the sun go down. They wondered whether she was right, and whether they could afford her being wrong.

• • •

It was clear now, like being led along a path of crackling static into a den of snakes. She breathed living air that smelled of certainty and justice. Her father's pistol at her hip lent weight to her mission.

She double-parked alongside the crowded row of brownstones and passed by three before pushing open a creaky gate and climbing the stairs to ring the doorbell.

A young woman opened the door, bleary-eyed and carrying a steaming mug of hot chocolate. “Hi?”

Kelly flashed her badge, tasting ozone. This wasn't the monster, but the monster had been here, one way or another. “Sorry to disturb you, miss...?”

“Um. Kim. Stephanie Kim.”

“I'm Detective Anderson, I'm investigating a potential homicide. May I come in?”

The woman's eyes grew round and she moved aside. “Yeah, of course.”

Kelly stepped inside and wondered how often Stephanie used the place. No discarded takeout boxes or dirty dishes cluttered the living room, no dust gath-

ered on the sills. Oddly, though, in a room where everything was so dutifully taken care of, the clock hanging by the television wasn't running.

Stephanie hovered. "Can I get you anything, Detective? Do you wanna sit down?"

"Let's sit," Kelly said, gesturing for the woman to join her on the couch. "Tell me, Miss Kim, has anything strange happened to you lately? Weird visitors, crank calls, nightmares?"

Stephanie opened her mouth to say 'no' and then paused, the N half-formed on her tongue. The word transformed into "Nightmares?" Kelly nodded, as though the question were perfectly routine. "Actually, yeah, I've been having pretty wild dreams. How did you know?"

"How long have you had them?"

"I dunno, maybe a few days? Sure is making it hard to get enough sleep, let me tell you. I was thinking about seeing a doctor or a shrink or something." Stephanie sipped her hot chocolate. "What's this have to do with a murder?"

"Sorry, I'm afraid that's confidential." Kelly shook her head. "I advise you not to change your normal routine for at least a few more days. Do everything you would normally do, come home whenever you would normally come home. All right?"

"Um, sure."

Kelly asked a few more questions, ones that had no bearing on her quest, but made her investigation sound more legitimate. Then she said good night to Stephanie and went out to drive around the block a few times, before pulling into a space a few doors down to settle in. It had been here. It would be back. And when it came, she would be ready, with an army at her back.

• • •

A piercing car horn jarred Cora out of sleep, and the dim shouting of indistinct voices outside seemed for a moment to be weak cries for help, for mercy. Once she adjusted and realized they were just people arguing in the street, she sighed and rolled over. But her eyes fixed on a spot where a streetlight played over something reflective across the room, and she didn't close them.

She felt like a leashed bloodhound, and the Prometheans were holding the other end. Something else, too, a straining anticipation, as though the leash were about to break. Maybe Prin was right. Maybe her other self *was* creeping into Stephanie's dreams. After all, she wasn't exactly being conscientious about satiating her appetite.

The throng hadn't hunted since Sparks had left them, it just didn't feel right. Not without that awe on her face, watching someone reach a moment of understanding and collapse into tears or scream and smash mirrors. The long hours they spent, just Sparks and Cora, huddling over pancakes at the 24-hour diner

and talking about what made a person afraid. The way the Promethean gasped, her eyes animating with excitement as she came to some revelation about human terror. Without her it felt empty.

La Corazón. That was what Cora called the other side of herself, when she thought about what she might someday become. Getting to the heart of the matter was her gift. Where was *la Corazón* now?

Slowly she let the light of the lamppost blur in her vision, moving her sight from without to within. Through the eyes of her Horror, things were not as they should have been. She wasn't in her Lair, but instead stalking a grand concert hall with high vaulted ceilings that vanished into darkness above. Up on stage, a frail little shape sat at the piano, playing to a metronome's beat. The music sounded feeble and tinny by comparison to the monstrous ticking of the metronome, pounding like the rhythmic fall of a judge's gavel. She passed empty row after empty row. She silently climbed the stairs to mount the stage. She raised one razor-sharp claw, ready to tear the false flesh from the pianist's bones to reveal what was really underneath.

Stephanie turned.

Cora wrenched control of the dream from her Horror and vanished into the shadows, quick as a breath. She didn't dare let go of the reins until she was safely back in her Lair. Coming back to herself, lying on the bed staring at nothing, felt like giving up halfway to orgasm. She curled up and sobbed into her pillow, mauling it with her fingernails, still aching to shred apart the lie, still regretting the loss of a squandered time.

Eventually she sat up and wiped her nose on her nightshirt. She had to stop this before it was out of control, before she sated herself at her sister's expense. And yet, the thought tasted bitter. Nadia and Prin wanted to leave Sparks behind and pretend she'd never been theirs, to abandon another home, to forget. Cora wasn't about to forget. And maybe, she thought, Sparks didn't have to forget either. This time, though, she'd remember without *la Corazón* in the way.

• • •

Something alive prowled the shadow of a spindly city tree, but only for a moment. That shadow was the door that led Cora into the pitch black of a bedroom, two stories above the street where the tree's sad dead leaves scraped the pavement in their windborne quests. She was the presence of the darkness. She was everywhere, she filled the room. The darkness said, "Sparks! Sparks, wake up."

The woman in the bed stirred and opened her eyes, then clutched her blanket close to her chest. "Who's there?"

"It's me, Cora." The voice sounded affable, but the darkness was total. "We were friends, once. We can be friends again."

Stephanie's eyes darted back and forth across the room, seeking a figure, a target, something to run from. Nothing. "W-where are you?"

"Just calm down and think back. You remember last year, don't you? When we went to Coney Island, and you made me take you on the Ferris wheel, and we got stuck at the top and Nadia tried to climb it? And we got thrown out?" The voice laughed. "You remember, right?"

"What?" Stephanie didn't dare get out of bed, but she reached toward the bedside table with one hand, fumbling around. "I dunno what you're talking about, leave me alone!"

"We never should've left you alone in the first place," said the darkness. "Your name's not Stephanie, it's Sparks. You're not even human! You're a machine, a living machine who can think and feel and loves pancakes, don't you *remember* me?"

"No! Get outta here before I call the cops!" Stephanie's hand found the lamp. She groped for the switch.

"Don't do that," the voice warned. "Please, Sparks, listen! We used to stay up all night together watching old horror movies! You'd ask me what was supposed to be so scary and we'd eat hot dogs right out of the fridge and —"

Light flooded the room and chased the shadows out. The darkness vomited up a woman who stumbled back, squinting. Stephanie stared at her. "I don't know you," she whispered.

"Yes, you *do!*"

Stephanie threw herself off the bed and bolted for the door. Cora's hand lashed out like a whip and seized her by the hair, yanking her back and dragging her toward the full-length mirror. "You don't believe me?" Cora sneered. "I'll show you what you really are! *Look!*"

In the mirror, Stephanie saw her reflection flicker and change. The lamplight shone dully on the gears and bolts that made up her body. The metallic casing of her skull, frozen in a vacant grin, held two LEDs where her eyes should have been. In the center of her chest, a chrome mechanism ticked out an artificial heartbeat, sickeningly regular. When she screamed, it sounded like an electronic squeal, like radio feedback.

"*Now* do you remember?"

"No!" Stephanie struggled and kicked, but Cora's grip on her hair held fast. "No! Let go of me! Please, please...please stop...it's not me, it's not!"

"Fine." Cora's face contorted in a scowl. "If that's the way it has to be." She slammed Stephanie's head into the closet door. The woman collapsed in a heap, a trickle of blood smeared on the wood. Cora ran a finger through it. It *was* blood, not oil. Cora turned and flicked off the lamp, plunging the room into darkness once again. She crouched beside her erstwhile broodmate, and the room swam.

“Are you sure she went to Stephanie's house?” The two Prometheans dashed headlong down the street, ignoring the cries of surprise and annoyance as they barreled past people shooting the shit, the laughter of neighbors smoking out on the stairs, the mocking calls of “where you goin’?”

“Positive,” Nadia replied. “And if I'm wrong, what's the worst that could happen?”

“Oh, I don't know,” said Prin. “Breaking and entering, angry mobs, SWAT teams? Cora murdering Stephanie and trying to rebuild her?”

“Okay, you've made your point.” Nadia swerved past a late-night skateboarder. “But I'm pretty sure!”

“We need to move faster.” Prin grabbed Nadia's arm and pulled her to a halt. “Hop on.” Nadia nodded and climbed up to perch piggy-back atop her throngmate. Prin sent Pyros sizzling through his body, inhaling slowly as his legs elongated and firmed. She couldn't take the time to address the abrupt panic of the few onlookers who caught glimpses of his dead, wrinkled flesh behind the illusion. She just took off like a desperate gazelle.

They turned a corner and stopped in front of the tall brownstone. The second-story window above was dark. Prin put Nadia down. “Now what?” she asked.

“What do you think?” said Nadia, charging up the stairs. She grunted, planted her palms to grip the doorframe on either side of her, and thrust both feet into the door, ripping it from its hinges.

“Nadia, wait!” Prin raced upstairs after her, trying not to think about the shouts of the neighbors their disturbance had woken up. She caught up to find Nadia stepping across Stephanie's bedroom toward the lamp.

“Don't.” Prin glanced around the room, unhindered by the dark. “It'll draw attention.” She took in the telltale signs of what had happened — Stephanie unconscious, not asleep, and crumpled on the floor by the mirror; the streak of blood on the closet door; the strands of hair near her body. And more than that, the warping in the air that smelled to his Pyros-enhanced nose like ozone and spring rain. “Corazón was here, all right. I think she knocked Stephanie out so she could hunt her.”

“Then what are we waiting for?” The Frankenstein stared into the darkest corner of the room, concentrating on what made Cora who she was, on the storm in the dead of night. Everything twisted around them, splitting into overlapping afterimages of itself.

“This place is a part of her dream now,” said Prin, his voice tinged with wonder as the four walls seemed to stretch out into infinity.

“How touching,” Nadia spat. The Pyros inside her shone through her skin, lighting her up like a beacon to ward off the gloom. Prin lifted Stephanie's body and placed it on the bed, carefully arranging it until Nadia said, “Not now, we have to find them. Come on.”



Kelly drank deeply from the thermos of coffee she'd brought along. During her nap she'd played her card, and it had paid off. The tingling in her limbs meant that something was wreaking its havoc, and she knew she wouldn't be alone by the time she walked into that apartment. She'd heard the rumors about this neighborhood, seen the reports: weird incidents, nonsense complaints that couldn't be corroborated, one teenaged girl begging to be admitted to the hospital's psychiatric ward. The monster and its cohorts had shown their true colors one too many times around here, and now these people would get the chance to retaliate, thanks to their protector. The call to arms was her birthright, too. Just like her duty.

Spotting a figure rushing down the street, she rolled down the window and leaned out to get a better look. Something with proportions all wrong for a human being stood in front of Stephanie's house, while something else smashed in the front door as though it were made of paper. She pulled her father's pistol from its holster — she'd taken to calling it Probable Cause in her mind, ever since it had killed the first monster she'd met — and got out of the car. Already, people were coming outside, curious or irritated, and looking for someone to blame for their sleepless night. The weirdos they had seen running by a minute ago seemed like prime candidates.

Kelly jogged across the street and flashed her badge to everyone gathering outside the house. “Listen up!” she called out to her impromptu *posse comitatus*. “Detective Anderson, NYPD. We've got three suspects inside, presumed dangerous, and one civilian. Her life is paramount, but we're shooting to kill, got it?” The miniature army roared its enthusiasm, lingering dreams of glorious combat resounding in their minds. “Let's go!”

They swarmed up the stairs and into the building with Kelly leading the way. She warned them back at the threshold of the bedroom, coming in to check Stephanie's pulse and survey the evidence with her flashlight. The monsters had all been in this room, and she sensed the remnants of their passage elsewhere like smoke in the wake of a lightning strike. Only one route was left to follow.

She corralled the posse inside, packing them in like sardines. She reached out with her mind, following the nightmare pathways that she knew were there, wrenching open the darkness to allow the light of justice to pervade it. The room grew murkier and vaster, blurring in her sight. Where the doorway should have been stood a steel vault door with an enormous padlock. “Stand back!” she shouted, as notes of alarm rippled through the group. With a few well-placed shots, Kelly shattered the lock, and with help she shoved the heavy door open. “Go, go, go!”



This time, the Beast — the Horror — didn't hesitate. Her claws dug into the pianist's flesh and dragged her through her own dreamscape, past seats now filled

with jeering audience members, through the door that led from the concert hall into a capacious mechanic's garage. The lightbulbs above wavered and swayed, casting the whole operation in a dim shifting gray. The crackle and clangor of welding machines and hammers filled her ears.

The monster flung Stephanie onto the rough floor. She looked up to see a sla-vering hound-woman with cumbrous fangs thrusting out of a mouth too small to hold them, gouging grooves in the cement beneath its feet with its naked claws. She scrambled away, stumbling to her feet blindly. "Help! Help me!" she cried out, but the noise of the workshop devoured the sound. A welder nearby flared briefly with light, and in that light she saw the gears that turned like clockwork all over her body. With a strangled, wordless shout she ran. Occasional sparks illuminated enough to show her bits and pieces of what was happening, until she realized with a lurch of dread that the garage wasn't building cars. It was building faceless, person-shaped things that looked just like her, rolling out like factory-standard products from an assembly line. She shuddered and kept running.

Cora watched her prey's flight, watched as the full horror dawned, threw her head back and howled at the sheer pleasure it brought her. But it wasn't enough. Sparks still didn't *remember*. The hunt was on.

Elsewhere, Nadia and Prin sprinted through a dark subway station; the platform and the tunnel extending in both directions as far as they could see. Every so often, the N train screamed into the station but never stopped, its neon lights quavering, its brakes shrieking against the rails. Soon, a mass of people with a uniformed police officer in the forefront emerged from the darkness ahead. The policewoman's flashlight carved a meager swath, but in Nadia's light they came clearly into view.

"Oh, hell," said Nadia.

"Maybe we can reason with them," said Prin. "But given our track record with Cora's enemies, I doubt it."

"Hold it right there!" the officer called out. "I know you're working for the monster. Surrender now or we will open fire."

"Working for her?" Nadia called back. "Where you do people come up with this stuff?"

"This is your last warning," said the officer.

"Prin," Nadia murmured quietly, "get out of here. Go find Stephanie and Cora. I'll handle them."

"Are you sure?" Prin glanced at her.

"Don't worry. I have a plan. I think."

Prin's face was a mask of clear skepticism, but she nodded and vanished as soon as she reached the limits of Nadia's light. Nadia turned to give the crowd a smile. "Well, you came all this way, I wouldn't want to disappoint you."

The officer — Anderson, Nadia saw now on her nametag as she came closer — smirked, hooking a finger around the trigger of her pistol. "You have no idea

what your boss is in for,” she said. “You think I would come here with just any weapon? This Beast-killer has been in my family for generations. Every bullet in it has your master’s name on it. Move aside and she’ll be the only one.”

“Sure. I’ll move aside.” Nadia stepped to the edge of the platform and dropped down. The third rail hummed. She didn’t know whether electricity in the Lair would act like normal electricity, but she had no time for experimentation. Anderson and her posse cautiously peered over the edge to see what she was up to. She grinned up at them and stepped onto the third rail. The power of Pyros coursed through her, filling her nigh to bursting. “Come and get me,” she said through gritted teeth, her voice raw with fire, the industrial staples holding her mismatched parts together revealed as her light burned with blinding intensity and the tunnel filled with sparking current.

Anderson fired and hit the Promethean square in the chest. Seconds later, the bullet pushed itself out of her skin and clattered on the track. The policewoman gestured for her people to back off, and followed her own advice. “Find the monster!” she yelled.

Nadia yelled back without words, leaping up onto the platform. She landed swinging.



Prin crouched atop the speeding subway car until it dissipated into dust under hir, sending hir rolling across hard, slick ground. Sie’d reached the heart of Cora’s Lair. A vast, barren plain studded with rocky formations opened its wide arms beneath a yawning sky, moonless, and choked with black clouds. Thunder rumbled from every angle and a deluge of rain pelted down to soak hir. Periodic flashes of lightning provided the only light, but Prin had no trouble navigating without it. Sie felt the presence of the Horror as though it had an Azothic radiance of its own, though sie’d never mistake it for another of the Created. Cora’s power always seeped into hir senses like dirty rainwater, nothing like the bright, clear burn of the Divine Fire. Sie inhaled deeply under the raging storm that invigorated hir and kept moving.

Cora was close by the time Prin turned a corner past an outcrop and found Stephanie running straight at hir, blind in the dark and half-deafened by the thunder. No, it was *Sparks*, somehow. Her sleeping consciousness portrayed her this way — probably the result of Cora’s meddling. Shouting did nothing, so sie reached out and grabbed the human by the shoulders. Stephanie flinched back, but Prin held on tight so sie could speak close to her ear. “It’s all right! I’m here to help you!”

“What a hero,” said Cora.

Prin looked up to see the ghastly creature looming on top of the outcrop, silhouetted in a lightning strike. “Corazón!” sie shouted. “Stop this!”

“That’s *la Corazón* to you.” The monster bared her teeth. “Destroyer of lies.”

“You want to talk about heroes?” Prin pointed back the way sie’d come. “There’s one out there with a small army looking for you. You’re lucky Nadia

decided to keep them busy.” Sie reached up with a hand, as though sie could grasp Cora’s from here. “You do still care about Nadia, don’t you? I know you’re in there somewhere.”

“This is what you never understood about me, Prin, even with all your poking and prodding.” She spread her arms. “What stands before you isn’t ‘the thing that lives inside Cora’. This *is* me. It’s always me, it’s always *been* me.”

“Fine,” Prin barked, dropping hir hand, “but leave Stephanie out of it! She fought hard for the life she has, don’t take it away from her!”

“I just want her to *remember!*” The last word came out as a furious roar, exploding with a gale force that threatened to tear Stephanie out of Prin’s grasp and send her flying. Prin flung hir arms around the human and rearranged hir Azothic radiance into a shield to shelter them both, glad it was too dark for her to see hir withered face.

“But she refuses,” Cora shouted down, as the storm smothered the echoes of her roar. “So I’m going to take her apart, clockwork piece by clockwork piece. And when I crush that chrome ticker of hers, she’ll wake up and she’ll know. She’ll come home to us.”

“This isn’t right!”

“Ask Nadia if she cares about what’s right!” Cora’s hideous features contorted with malice. “Look at you. You’ll never be human. The way people feel isn’t about right and wrong, Prin! It’s about what’s in your *heart*.”

“It’s not your heart that concerns me,” said Prin, putting himself firmly between Stephanie and the Beast. “It’s your stomach. So if you’re determined to do this, you’ll have to get through me.”

“*Gladly.*”

“Stay here,” Prin told Stephanie before sie flooded hir body with Pyros, bucking and writhing as hir flesh and bones transformed. What scuttled its way up the vertical face of the outcrop to meet the Horror was more similar to it than to a human being, a monstrous barghest as black as the sky.

Stephanie huddled in the pouring rain below. Terror transfixed her, as much as her instincts told her to escape. All she could see above were the sparks of claw striking against claw. When the sparks stopped, she knew that either she was about to die, or she was saved. She almost threw up, waiting to learn which.

Prin landed hard on hir back below the outcrop, the impact jarring hir back into hir usual form. Had sie been human, sie would have broken hir spine. As it was, Cora had snapped hir right tibia in half, and sie was covered in deep lacerations and out of Pyros. Sie thought, I can still move. I’m not so fragile as all that. Better me than her. Sie dragged himself across the wet rock in time to throw himself into the path of Cora’s leaping blow. Pain ripped through hir chest along with the Beast’s vicious talon.

“Get out of my way, Prin,” Cora growled, kicking the Promethean aside. Her hide was rent with long bloody scratches and she moved with a limp, but

the fight was over. She lunged with one enormous paw to pin Stephanie to the ground, and opened her massive jaws.

“Stop!” called a voice over the rain.

Cora looked up. Detective Anderson stood not thirty feet away, leveling a heavy pistol and a flashlight at her. “You’re not welcome here,” she snarled.

The officer didn’t bother with banter or taunts. She pulled the trigger. Cora expected to laugh it off, but the bullet pierced her like an icy dart. Her muscles spasmed painfully. “What did you do?” she gasped.

“Nothing but my job,” said Kelly. She tensed to fire again, but something slammed into the back of her head and she collapsed, Probable Cause slipping from her grasp. Nadia appeared out of the gloom.

“Thanks,” said Cora, grinning.

“Don’t thank me,” Nadia snapped. Her eyes fell on the pistol. She stepped over Kelly’s inert body and picked it up.

“What are you doing?” Cora protested. “I thought you’d understand, of all people!”

“I understand just one thing.” Nadia slowly advanced, keeping the gun steady even while her voice shook with rage. “That cop said this weapon is a Beast-killer. That’s all I need to know.”

“Nadia...” Prin smelled the rising bile of his thronemate’s Torment, drowned in her breathtaking passion, and fell silent. She was in no shape to pull Nadia out of this now. It was too late for Cora. Too late for the throng.

“You’re going to *kill* me?” Cora’s voice rose to a hysterical pitch. “Nadia, we’re family! I just want us all together again!”

“I don’t care *what* you want!” Nadia’s eyes were wild in the lightning’s white-hot light. “You think I don’t miss her? You think I wouldn’t give anything to have her back? You selfish bitch, you have no idea what she went through to get here, and I am sick and tired of your entitled, hypocritical bullshit! You are *not* one of us! You never were!”

“Nadia, wait —”

The gunshot was louder than the thunder, as was the one that followed, and the one after that. The Horror toppled in dreamlike slow motion. Nadia had nothing else to say. She stomped over to Stephanie and grabbed her wrist, pulling her roughly to her feet. The woman had no argument and offered no resistance, letting the Promethean yank her away into the darkness.

Prin tried to summon outrage, but it wouldn’t come. Instead, she crawled over to Cora’s bleeding form, turning it over so she could see her face. Her breathing was shallow and labored. “Prin?” said Cora.

“Yes,” said Prin, not sure what else to say. What does one say when a sister is dying?

“I didn't want to die like this,” Cora said. “Not looking like this, not with you here.”

“What do you mean?”

Cora coughed, and blood trickled from her deformed canine jaws. “You thought I was like them, didn't you? You thought of me as human, just...with a monster inside me somewhere.” Her paw came up to cradle Prin's beaten face. “It was the one illusion I kind of liked.”

Prin took Cora's hand thoughtfully, a realization crystallizing inside his mind like snowflakes forming out of shapeless clouds. “That's what family means,” she said. “People who are allowed to see you at your worst. You've seen us that way too. That's right, isn't it?”

“Heh.” Cora's lips curled up around her jutting fangs. “Yeah, sounds about right to me. You'll get to your New Dawn yet.”

The rain stopped. The clouds began to part, revealing a star-dusted sky that lasted only a heartbeat before the whole landscape faded like a dying mirage.

• • •

I woke up feeling numb. I thought I was soaked to the bone, but everything was dry. My head hurt. I sat up and turned on the lamp. The weird lady from the coffee shop was pacing around my room like some kinda crazy axe murderer and it looked like she'd punched a hole right in the wall. I screamed.

When she turned to look at me I thought I was a goner. The only thing I could think was, Steph, stop being such a wussy little pushover! So I stood up on the bed and grabbed the curtain rod. I pulled it right out of the wall and brandished it at her like it was a club or something. “You better stay back or else!” I yelled at her.

She stopped short halfway to the bed, like I'd splashed her with cold water. She stared at me for a while, until my curtain rod was drooping with uncertainty. “I...I'm sorry,” she said. She was like a totally different person.

“Um. Okay,” I said, all my bluster gone. I felt like I'd been sleeping for days. Was that other woman in my room just a dream too? Yeah, had to be. “So, are you here to steal something, or what?”

“What? No, no.” She stood at the foot of my bed and gazed up at me without saying anything else. She reminded me of how my mother had looked when I left for college.

“Well, I don't have much worth stealing anyway,” I said. I sat down. “What are you doing here then? How'd you get into my room? Who are you?”

She smiled. “I'm Nadia.”

“And?”

“And. Oh, right,” she said, shifting from one foot to the other. “The front door's sort of...destroyed. Sorry.”

“Destroyed?” She winced when I shouted. I got a funny feeling, like my exhaustion and stress this week was all her fault, and maybe other stuff too. Was she stalking me? Was that why she was always in the cafe in the morning? “I think you should leave now, if you're not a burglar,” I said.

“I guess you're right,” she said. She suddenly slumped, like she'd recalled a huge burden she had to bear. “I just want you to know, I miss you. I know that doesn't make any sense to you, and I promise you'll never see me again. But I do. I miss you.”

“Get out!”

She hugged herself and left. I thought I heard her sniffing down the hall. Then she was gone. I thought about the nightmares I'd had, how vivid they were. I looked down at myself just to check and make sure I wasn't a robot or anything — which was stupid, obviously I wasn't a robot. Still, it made me sick to remember the dreams. They were too familiar, like some childhood memory I'd repressed or a photograph I'd buried at the bottom of a box so I'd never have to look at it again.

I got up to make sure nothing was missing. My room was a mess. Had I done this in my sleep? I picked up the blankets and folded them, moved the lamp back to where it belonged. Something on the closet door caught my eye. Was that blood? I trembled as I turned to look in the mirror. My face, my eyes, everything was normal. I sighed in relief, until I noticed the cut and the bruise on my forehead. I ran my fingers over it.

The woman in the shadows wasn't a nightmare. She was real. She was real, and every time I turn off the light now I think I see her. I threw out my watch. I bought a nightlight. None of that got rid of the dreams, though. They're just different now. Not nightmares so much as distant pictures behind glass, and if I lie still for a while right when I wake up, I feel sad. Sometimes I wake up crying already.

I miss her: Somebody. I don't know who, but I wish she were here.



TRINKETS

By Lauren M. Roy

“This place is a shithole.”

“A *townie* shithole.”

Dav and Galen aren't wrong. The place in question is a townie bar, run by three generations of Stowes, frequented by three generations of Colebridge residents. Usually, we'd drink over at Jana's place, or bring our booze to the park, but she'd wanted to come out tonight and this is where the cheap drinks are. That, and Jana's hungry. She's kicked back in her chair, eyeing the regulars at the bar the way some people eye a dessert tray. When she shifts, I feel her shoulder brush mine, even though we're a foot apart.

Jason sits hunched over his beer, trying to make himself small as possible next to Jana's bulk. He didn't want to come out tonight, though I know he has to be hungry. Every time Jana's laughter booms out across the bar, he flinches. Her laugh draws attention, and even though Jason and I are technically townies, too, he doesn't want to be spotted. His family and mine have lived here a good three-quarters of a century, but small town bullshit means some last names are more important than others.

High school was more than ten years gone, but that's easy to forget in a town no one ever leaves.

It doesn't take long for the elbowing and nudging to start. It gets more exaggerated with every round, until one of the former running backs comes over and leans down next to me. “Miranda. I thought you'd dropped off the planet.” He speaks to me but the gaze and the smirk are directed at Jason.

I want to send him packing, say something that'll make him wet his pants and run back to his frat bro friends, but this isn't the place for it. To a point, it'd be shitting where we eat and Jana frowns on that. Instead I clap a hand on his shoulder, turn him so he has to look me in the eye. “I haven't yet. Shane, right?”

“Yeah.”

“My friends and I are having a conversation, but maybe I can catch you later?” The odds of him taking the hint and walking away are lousy, but it's worth a try.

He doesn't take it, shifts his gaze past me. "Hey, Jason," he says, that syrupy, drawn-out, fake friendliness made worse by his drunken slur. "Hey, buddy. How are you? How've you been?"

Shane was huge in high school. He graduated and went straight to work for his dad's landscaping company, so even though he got a little thicker around the middle in the intervening years, he's still muscle under the pudg. Jason looks like a reed next to him.

But that's why we've got Jana. My hand's still on Shane's right shoulder when hers comes clamping down on his left with a meaty smack. He lets out an *urk* at the force of it, and turns to peer at her. His muscles tense beneath my fingers as he gets ready for a brawl, then loosen when he realizes the dude who just dared lay a hand on him isn't a dude at all, and he dismisses her as a threat.

That's a mistake.

"What my friend is too polite to say," Jana rumbles, "*is fuck. Off.*"

His mouth flaps a second while his brain catches up. Jana leans forward a little, looming even more, and it's suddenly *very* crowded at our table. Shane trips his way back to his feet and stumbles over to his bros. By the time he gets to them, he's all eye-rolling and shrugs and pretending he didn't nearly scream like a little girl. But I saw the way he waddled, like it took all his control not to let his bowels loose right then and there.

Dav snickers. He's never been Jason's biggest fan, but if nothing else, Jason makes good bait. And in the end, he's family. None of us would let anything happen to him.

Jana swigs down her beer and orders another. "So, that's dinner sorted," she says.

She doesn't mean it, not literally, but Jason looks like he's about to throw up anyway.

• • •

When I met Jason, I was a lifeguard and he was a swimmer. I never had to save him while I was on duty, hardly even interacted with him that whole first summer. I stayed up on my chair, observing my domain from eight feet above. I probably wouldn't even have noticed him if it wasn't my job to have an idea of who was paddling around at all times.

Not that Jason paddled much, mind you. He was content to set himself up in one of the far edges of the pond, away from the aluminum docks and the rope-chain of buoys that separated shallow end from deep and acted as a kind of social corral. Parents with little kids stayed closer to shore. Teenagers ducked beneath the docks and the buoys to go flirting out in the middle. Wasn't much reason to go around to the other side, where the water was unmarked and the woods encroached until the beach was only a ten-foot strip of sand.

At five o'clock, everyone had to get out of the water. *The lifeguards are now off duty*, we called. *Swim at your own risk*. Thirty seconds' worth of ceremony to keep the town from being liable if anyone went and drowned at 5:01. Most of the kids were back in the water before the echoes faded off the pond. Jason waited at least a little longer — until I turned in my bright orange vest at the guard hut — before immersing himself once more.

The park closed at sunset, but the only barrier was a metal gate you could walk around or duck under. People went back in, to drink, to hang out, to wander through the woods and scare your friends shitless.

I was one of the trespassers, too, of course. I was seventeen and it was a small town; wasn't much else to do. Rather than try to insinuate myself into whichever group was passing around a dusty bottle of least-likely-to-be-missed from their parents' liquor cabinets, I went back to the lifeguard chair. Sometimes with a boy, usually alone. Mainly I liked to sit and watch the stars wheel overhead, listening to voices drift through the trees. Most nights I saw Jason's dark silhouette on the sand across the pond, sitting with his knees drawn up to his chest, staring out over the mirror-still water. I copied his pose, imagined we were two halves of the same whole, reflecting each other the way the pond's surface reflected the moon.



I like it better when I can plan ahead, but it's been a lean few weeks. The last few nights, my own Lair's been trembling as Jana's Horror stomps around hers. Her footsteps reverberate through the Burrows, setting the leaves of my trees shaking, sending ripples across the water of Jason's pond. I imagine even the shadows in Dav and Galen's shared Chambers shiver. It's a small damned town, and there's nothing bigger in it than Jana. For a while, that was what kept her fed. Even a town like ours has its bad neighborhoods, and she lorded over the down-and-out, told the gangs what to do, how to commit their crimes in a way that kept people afraid.

Until, that is, the new police chief got sworn in. Jana's been laying low for a month, playing it careful while she figures out what to do about Chief Bessette's pledge to straighten out the criminal element or send them packing. It was fine at first; she went with Dav and Galen when they raised hell in the posh section of town. Break-ins that never tripped alarms, smashed windows that had the selectmen investing in baseball bats and Maglites — not that they'd have done any good. It got the focus off Jana, but not her people, and the three of them backed off before someone got too brave and decided to play hero. But she's still not sure whether the Chief can be bribed or manipulated or just plain needs to be run out of town himself, and it's made her growly. Both her attitude and her stomach.

So now it's my turn to feed us, and Shane's the best candidate. I time my bathroom break to one of his; seems our little chat made him have to go, and once you break the seal, well. You could've set a watch by his bladder after that

first trip to the can. Now he's drunk enough, and arrogant enough, and questioning the size of his balls just enough that when I plant a hand on his chest, he's ready to try again.

I don't let him do much more than leer. My fingers play with the pendant around his neck, one of those thin, twisting cornicellos. Back in high school, he called it his *Italian horny charm*, and pointed it at whatever girl he was scoping out that lunch period. It's supposed to ward off evil, but if *I* count, nothing's happening. "I need some air," I say. "How about you?"

He doesn't even wave goodbye to his bros.

The park's only a five-minute walk from the bar, across one busy street and down a much quieter one. We go in the back way, down the trail that leads to the row of log cabins the day camp meets in on rainy days. The park's empty this time of year, just past Halloween. Once school starts back up, the novelty of trespassing after hours wears off quick. By the time fall nights get their bitter, first taste of winter chill, the kids have discovered much warmer places to loiter.

He's sobered up a little as we walked, enough for a touch of common sense to creep in, for his lizard-brain to wake up from its beer-drenched nap and remind him that walking off into the woods late at night is a bad idea.

Which, hey, good for him. Except we've already stepped into the inky shadows that mark the edge of Dav's Lair, and there's no way Shane knows how to get out again. I lead him in farther, let branches brush at his face and roots make him stumble.

Part of me almost feels bad for him. Shane was loud and obnoxious back in school, sure, and if he ever gave me the time of day, I don't remember it, but ignoring someone isn't a crime. Then I think about the way he zeroed in on Jason, the cruel glee that crept into his voice as he said *hey, buddy*, and whatever fucks I was starting to give about Shane evaporate.

He's getting nervous now. His breath comes in ragged gasps. In what little light Dav and Galen are letting through, I can see how wide his eyes are, how they roll towards every snapped twig and half-heard rustle. When I reach for his hand, his skin is clammy. I don't hold it for long.

I know the twists of this maze, but Shane doesn't, and losing him is only a matter of ducking behind a gnarled and twisted old oak and letting him stumble past, calling my name. I don't answer. Why would I?

The hunt is on.

It's for Jana more than any of us, and even though we're chasing Shane through Dav and Galen's nightmare woods, conjuring roots to send him sprawling, whispering in his ear, tracing icy fingers down his spine, we're driving him inexorably towards her. She's a dark shape through the trees, and when her Horror plucks him from the ground, lifts him up and up and up so he can look her in her red, red eyes, I can't help but be in awe.

Shane shrieks. Dav and Galen echo it, mocking him with his own fear. Moonlight breaks through the clouds, but it brings him no comfort. Part of me is up there in the sky, my shadow skimming over the lake, dark wings beating in his ear, a talon grazing across his cheek. Above us all, Jana laughs.

He blacks out before she can lift him to her mouth, but that's fine. Like I said, she wasn't *really* going to eat him.

We leave him on the beach in the real world, roll him out of the Lair and close the path. Tomorrow he'll wake up cold and hungover and more than a little ashamed.

I take the charm from around his neck, and realize Jason is nowhere nearby. I haven't seen him since I left the bar.

• • •

The summer we met, Jason spent the days scouring the beach. He pawed through the sand methodically, sorting rocks and found objects into different piles at the edge of the pond. The pond itself wasn't even natural. Officially, it was a sand-bottomed pool, built by the town in the sixties. It drained into the real pond — the one no one's actually allowed to swim in. They replaced the sand every spring, claimed it was a hundred cubic feet of genuine beach sand, but the way it always felt beneath my toes, the way it stained the soles of your feet, I suspected it was construction-grade stuff, probably bought from the contractor who owned half the town. Which made it unlikely Jason would find seashells or anything more interesting than a hunk of gneiss.

I started leaving him things to find. Loose change, at first, then foreign coins from the souvenirs my aunt sent home from her travels. It was easy enough to slip out of the house early in the morning and make it to the pond before the crew from the parks department raked the beach smooth. Dig a hole, bury my fake treasure, get out before they covered my tracks.

He started bringing a box with him to put his finds in. Everyone in town who took Mr. Tucker's wood shop class had a box like that. Jason's was prettier than most, sanded and varnished, brass hinges, working lock. I got a good look at it when I strolled around the pond on break. Up close, it made me think of shipwrecks and sunken treasure. Sometimes, when I went past his little patch of beach, I could swear I smelled the sea.

You see a lot when you have a view from above. People forget you're there, forget you're watching their little dramas unfold. I heard parents' whisper-fights while their kids splashed about at the water's edge. I saw who was making eyes at whom, and noticed when they slipped away to meet behind the concession stand. I noticed when their boyfriends or girlfriends or spouses realized they were missing. I watched cliques form and break up and reform, got to the point I could tell who would be booted from the group, who would be invited back in.

I saw how little people valued what they had.

The pool's water source was a natural fresh water well. Something about the water's iron count reacted with the chemicals the pool was treated with, and turned the whole thing a rusty shade of brown. Safe to swim in, but murder on your bathing suit. Only people who were new in town wore white to the pool. If it discolored your clothing, went the reasoning, what would keep it from tarnishing your jewelry? Of came the necklaces and rings, off came the anklets and charm bracelets.

I got good at filching them. Just the cheap ones, the trinkets my classmates bought for each other at the mall; I wasn't ready to steal something that could land me in jail if I got caught. So I took those necklaces that split into a lock and a key, the half-hearts that read *best friends* when joined together. Claddagh rings with plastic gems, won out of one of those crane games at the arcade. Charm bracelets with pompoms and soccer balls and a hundred little things that symbolized all the friends you had: the more they jingled, the better the challenge.

I only took them from the about-to-be-betrayed. Soon enough, it became an omen: if you lost your pretty, you were about to lose your friend.

I don't know if Jason had any idea what was going on across the pool. He found the trinkets I left for him, that much I knew. I kept an eye out for his moments of discovery, the way his whole demeanor changed as he brought whatever I'd left to the water's edge and dipped it in to wash the sand away.



Jason lives in the single-story ranch he grew up in. His grandfather and his dad built it together, back in the seventies. The land and the house were a wedding present for his parents, back in the day you could afford to give your kids that sort of present. When we were kids, you were almost guaranteed to see one of the four Standish siblings playing in the yard as you passed by, or Jason's mom out watering the garden, or his dad cobbling something together in the garage. Over the years it's dwindled down to just Jason, on his own in a house that used to be over-full.

He doesn't answer when I knock, but I know he's home. I let myself in with the key he gave me forever ago. He's in the den with the curtains closed, sprawled on the couch but not asleep. One arm hangs straight out, palm up, and I let Shane's charm and its chain pool into his open hand.

He opens his eyes and blinks up at me. "We should have left him alone."

"Please. He's a dick. He had it coming. He'll tell his friends he got drunk and had a nightmare, and maybe next time he'll think twice before he tries stirring shit in a bar." He doesn't sit up or shove over, so I plunk down on the floor. "There's a reason we're higher up on the food chain than he is."

"That was the lesson? Don't stir shit? Because it mostly just felt mean."

"You've been at this longer than I have. You know we're not exactly the sunshine and rainbows crew."

“*They’re not.*”

There it is. We’ve had the argument a million times already. Jana and Dav and Galen revel in being Begotten. Hell, I do too. It feels good to fall asleep and spread my wings, to be the dark shape in the sky, to let my shriek echo off of red stone cliffs and chill the blood of my prey. It’s what we’re born for. Why should any of us apologize for it?

“It’s reckless, Miranda. Someone’s going to get hurt.” He doesn’t mean the good people of Colebridge.

“Well. We’re good for a few more days, anyway. Jana had a good night last night.” I don’t make promises to talk to her, and he doesn’t expect one. Last time I tried, it didn’t go well. “How about you? Are you feeling all right?”

He lets the chain dangle from his fingers, watches the squiggly charm swing like a pendulum. “I’ll be fine.”

• • •

I only dragged Jason out of the water once. It was August, those long hot days before summer winds down, where the start of school is so close you can feel the days slipping faster and faster towards fall, and the end of freedom. Something about that time of year brings out the worst of the kids in Colebridge, like if they don’t leave their mark on the summer somehow, the whole three months were wasted. I wonder now if that’s Jana’s influence, whether she’s even aware of it.

Back then, though, I didn’t even know she existed. I didn’t even know the Children were out there. I was a girl going into my senior year, watching Labor Day approach with dread.

I didn’t sleep much, those days. My dreams were full of the pond and the empty beach, my chair higher than the trees. I knew the rungs were rotten, that if I tried putting my weight on one, it would break and down I’d go. Something terrible perched on the chair behind me. I heard its wings rustle as it shifted from foot to foot. I couldn’t dive off and aim for the pool, either – dream-me knew there was a monster in its depths.

So I stayed out late, and I wandered the park. One night as I circled back through the woods, I came out on Jason’s side of the pond and found he wasn’t alone. I heard their low, cruel laughter before I saw them: Two kids, bigger than him, older than us both. One had him by the wrists, the other by the ankles. He didn’t make a sound as they swung him between them — towards the woods, towards the water, *one, two, three!* — and let him arc out over the pond.

My scream drowned out the sound of his splash. It could’ve gone poorly for me; there I was, witness to either a cruel prank or an attempted murder, no one else around. They could have knocked me out and thrown me in after him. It took me a long time to understand why they *didn’t*. I rushed down the beach toward them, arms stretched out like I could make myself look bigger and scare them off.

And they ran.

Jason hadn't surfaced.

I dove into the night-dark water, aiming for where I thought he'd gone in. They hadn't thrown him far, but he'd settled into the soft, silty mud when he sank. It sucked at him, bogged him down as though something had burrowed beneath and claimed him.

But I had him, pulled him onto the beach and got him breathing again, my first aid training coming in handy after all. When he awoke, he said, between gasps, "I could have... I could have..." Then he pointed out to the middle of the lake, where the last ripples were dissipating. The surface churned in the center; an inky shape slapped the water and slipped below.

I didn't know what he was, not yet.

• • •

Things get quiet for a week or so. Jana's working her angle with the cops, figuring out who's got strings she can tug to get to the Chief. Brute force is great when she's hungry, but the truth of the matter is, she likes being the boss. It's sweeter to her when people fear her not because she could break their bones, but because she could break their *lives*.

It's not my thing. I leave her to it.

Shane's fine, just like I told Jason he would be. I see him out on the town common, digging up dried-out chrysanthemums and preparing the grounds for the Thanksgiving displays. He seems like he's about to avoid me, but sets down his spade and falls into step beside me.

"Hey, uh. How trashed was I the other night?"

"Pretty bad. I walked you home and you said you were going to sit on your steps awhile, get some air." The lie comes easy enough, and I go on before he can dig too deep for a memory that's not there. "I figured you'd rather puke outside than in, and, well." I sidle closer, remind him how much bigger than me he is. He takes an involuntary step back. "I wasn't going to force the issue. Did you fall asleep out there?"

"You could say that. I guess I wasn't done walking." He lets out a sheepish chuff. "I made it to the park somehow. Spent the whole damned night on the beach. I'm lucky I didn't drown."

"Damn," I say, and I'm about to follow it up some vague *maybe you should watch how much you drink* admonition, when he cuts me off.

"Like that guy senior year. Do you remember that? The body they found?"

Suddenly, I don't want to be reminiscing with Shane anymore. "Yeah. I uh. Hey, glad you're okay. See you around."

He calls after me ("Did you notice if I had my necklace on?") but I'm too busy getting the hell out of there.

Of course I remember the dead guy. For good reason.

• • •

What do you need to know about my Devouring? I stood on my impossibly high lifeguard chair, alone but not. A dark shape wheeled above me. It swept me up in its talons, and soon enough – once I stopped sobbing with the fear of falling – I found its wings were mine. That’s all you need to know.

• • •

Fine, that’s not entirely fair. Or true. I dove off the chair, tired of being afraid. I chose death by the sea monster — pond monster? — lurking below. Only, the bird caught me before I hit the water. But I saw the monster surface, and I was sure I knew its name.

I wanted to talk to Jason before school started, seek him out while we were both awake and see if he ever had dreams about me falling, if he watched me from just below the water. I wanted to ask him about that night on the beach, if he knew who it was that had thrown him under. But then his family got in that car accident, and he spent the end of August attending his mother and brother’s funerals, and sitting vigil beside his sisters in the hospital, and then he was attending funerals all over again.

Jason was banged up but not badly hurt. His dad hadn’t been with them. Faulty brakes, the police said. Terrible tragedy.

Compared to that, the dead out-of-towner was almost boring. Man gets drunk and trespasses —not necessarily in that order — and drowns. Maybe someone would’ve paid more attention to it if the town weren’t still mourning the Standishes. Maybe they would’ve noticed how someone had gone and raked the sand around the body before the morning’s parks crew got there, as though covering their tracks.

All Jason ever said about it, when I pieced it together years later, was *some asshole tried to kill me. Twice. I got him before he decided to burn down the whole town.*

• • •

I go back to Stowe’s Tavern a couple of times over the next few days. Sometimes Dav and Galen come with me. Jana’s busy; Jason’s refusing to come out. Dav asks after him, but it’s perfunctory. I could say *He’s on the moon* and it would get the same reaction. Sometimes I think Dav and Galen wish it was just the two of them and Jana, like Jason and I are the ones who don’t belong in Colebridge, even though we’ve lived here all our lives.

Galen at least pretends to give a shit. “Is he all right? Should we be doing something?”

I have my own ideas, but nothing either of them can do. They seem relieved when I shake my head.

Shane's with his bros at the bar, alternating beer and water. He tells the story of his bender and his "weird-ass dream" on demand, and it earns him an audience. And free drinks. The story gets weirder and louder, and farther from how it actually happened with each iteration. By the time last call rolls around, it's become a comedy. Shane's bros are in stitches and they're planning a trip to the park so Shane can act it all out for them.

Dav wants to follow them into the woods, remind Shane just how terrified he was at the time and spread the fear to his asshole buddies, but Galen vetoes the idea. "Too many of them," he says. "And no lesson in it."

Dav grumbles, but lets it go. They head home. I head to Jason's.

He's on the couch again — still? — with his box of trinkets spread out on the floor. I recognize most of them, know which ones came from me, which ones he acquired himself. "You don't have to hang out," he says. "I'm not great company right now."

I clear a space on the floor, pretend not to hear him huff as I touch his prizes without permission. "I'm staying over. Toss me a cushion."

• • •

Jana found me first, her footsteps thumping along the beach. It's a wonder the chair didn't tip and spill us both onto the sand when she climbed up to grin at me. Not that she had to climb far: Jana's six and a half feet tall. She probably could have stood on tiptoe and had the same effect, but she has a thing for theatrics. "Campers in the woods telling ghost stories," she said, her voice like a rumble of distant thunder. "You in?"

We'd never met, but I felt my Horror stirring, had a sudden, fierce urge to perch on her shoulder and let her point me at our prey. I flexed my hands on the chair's arms, felt talons digging into wood, and she laughed. "I'll take that as a yes."

I didn't even see Dav and Galen that first night, only felt their presence as they slipped among the shadows. I was up in the trees, snapping branches, startling night-birds out of their nests.

It wasn't my kind of hunt, not really, but it felt good anyway. It felt *right*. Wasn't until the next day, when I went home and lolled about feeling happy and full and languid that I recognized it for what it was: for the first time in I didn't know how long, I belonged to something bigger than myself.

• • •

I wake up in Jason's Lair, feel his Horror stirring about beneath the water. It gets a bit claustrophobic in here, even though I trust him more than anyone else in the world. I'm in a cavern, its roughhewn walls terribly close, no room to spread my wings. I know if I follow the path, I'll be fine, that eventually the fog

will lift and the slow dripping sounds will fade away. Soon enough the sky will open out above me, vast and beautiful, and I'll be able to fly.

But I'm here, with him, even though I know he's also in another place, still awake next to my sleeping, wingless form, still sifting through his treasures. The waters roil as the Horror dives deeper, then it's gone. I have an idea where it's headed, off toward the Chamber that touches the pool in the park. The Heart of his Lair, I'm fairly certain.

It's not until morning that I remember that's where Shane and the bros were headed, too.

• • •

No one really leaves our town. We graduate, we go to college nearby, we get jobs within a ten-mile radius and move two towns away at most. We come back for Homecoming and parades, and flood the field behind the junior high for the fireworks on the Fourth of July.

Now and then you hear about the person who got out, moved across the state or the country and hit it big.

We say their names and list their accomplishments and say *good for him*, but what we really mean is *fuck that guy*.

Jason got out. He got through senior year somehow, and got accepted to college out in California, as far away from Colebridge as he could get, just about. I figured he must have been happy out there, away from all the bullshit he'd gone through here. When I said good for him, I meant it, even if no one else did.

Then his dad got sick, and he came home. He didn't go back to school after it was over, didn't seem to want to do much of anything. It scared me nearly as much as my dreams used to.

I brought Jana around to meet him, and Dav and Galen, and convinced them he belonged with us. I figured he needed a family, since he'd lost his in such a short span.

• • •

There's a new guy at the bar. I shouldn't care — even Colebridge gets its share of visitors. He's probably someone's friend or cousin visiting from out of town, but he's not really talking to anyone. His eyes stay fixed on the football game, but he's listening to the conversations all around him. I'm glad it's just me tonight, glad that Jana took Galen and Dav off to raise hell elsewhere, glad that Jason's still insisting on staying home.

Shane's back, and the newcomer's ears perk way the hell up when he starts in on the weird-ass dream story.

That's when I recognize him. I catch his silhouette, and suddenly I'm standing on the beach watching two guys throw Jason into the water. The first one's dead. The other one... Here he is, sipping whiskey and listening to a story that's all about us, as twisted as it's grown. I keep my hands flat on the table, afraid that any move I make will attract his attention.

Maybe the only thing that saves me is, Shane's telling his story to a woman. Which means he erases me from it. You don't tell your current conquest that this all happened while you were drunkenly trying to score with that lady right over there. Besides, he's added a new variation to his tale – how we totally have a pond monster. How he dreamed of it last night. Some of the bravado leaves his voice as he tells the story, and his group of bros get awfully quiet, like they've all seen it, too. The girl thinks it's all part of the act, wingman theatrics maybe, but I can feel the fear that shivers through them. *What did you **do** last night, Jason?*

I want to bask in it, but I can't. Not here. He'll feel it.

When I'm sure I can do it without my hands shaking, I text everyone else. *Meet at Jana's ASAP. DO NOT HUNT TONIGHT.*

• • •

Dav and Galen came to Colebridge for a change of scenery, they said. Well, Dav said that. Galen gave him the sort of look that conveyed annoyance, disappointment, and being tired of your friend's bullshit all at the same time.

Dav looked to Jana, but she was no help. She had her nose in the fridge, picking out a beer. "I got careless," he said. "We had to leave in a hurry."

Galen pondered this for a moment, then nodded and let it drop. I got the sense this was an ongoing discussion between the two of them. Since this was the first time I'd actually hung out with them — outside of stalking prey — I didn't think it'd be smart to push for more. Or seem like I was taking sides.

Jana'd brought me to their apartment unannounced, and the place looked like a hurricane had gone through: clothes scattered everywhere, tottering piles of books stacked beside chairs, dry goods from their last shopping trip still in plastic bags. They'd made room for us at the kitchen table by piling several months' worth of accumulated junk mail onto the couch.

It wasn't that the place was dirty, just cluttered. Chaotic.

We did the things anyone in Colebridge does on a Friday night, I guess: ordered pizza, drank beer, talked about whatever. We played a trivia game. Dav tried to cheat; Galen guilted him out of actually doing it without uttering a word. I learned over the course of that night and the months that followed that that was how the two of them worked. Dav proposed something reckless, Galen talked him down. Dav got angry, Galen soothed.

If Dav was the raging wind, Galen was the eye of the storm.

I didn't know where I fit in, among the three of them. They accepted me, and for a while that was enough. When I brought Jason into the brood, I guess I thought we'd be complete at last, that he and I would fit together the way Dav and Galen did, with Jana leading us all.

Jason never stood against them, never questioned Jana's authority unless it was through me. They didn't like him; he didn't like them. Some people just

aren't meant to be friends. If that was all there was to it, I would have let him drift back into solitude.

But you don't get to pick your family, now, do you?

• • •

Jason doesn't show up. Maybe it's for the best, because Dav's furious. Jana opens a Pathway, ushers us all through. She doesn't trust us not to have a knock-down, drag-out in the real world, I guess. She's the Apex for a reason.

Soon as we're through, we're in a Chamber that feels an awful lot like Colebridge High's principal's office. Jana's in the principal's chair, and Dav's leaning against the desk like some kind of administrative enforcer. He jabs a finger at me, leaving trails of shadow like afterimages. I feel about two inches tall.

"You brought him into the fold. *You* fix it. This guy's here for Jason, to finish the job."

Galen's nowhere to be seen, but his voice is soothing when it comes out of the intercom. "If he felt what we did to Shane, Jason's the only one who *wasn't* involved. This could be on all of us."

The room lurches like we're at sea; the smell of brine floods my nose. Before I know it I'm perched on the back of the chair, arms and legs forgotten. The water is ankle deep, rushing in from I don't know where. Jason's here after all; his Horror slides along beneath the brackish surface. "It's my problem," he says.

"Nice of you to join us," Dav snarls.

"Fix it," says Jana. She hasn't left the principal's chair, but it's grown taller. I have to crane my neck to see her stony face far above.

Jason doesn't answer. The sea recedes. I can't be sure, with her face composed of granite, but once he's gone Jana seems shocked. I don't think any of us thought him strong enough for his Lair to bleed into hers like that.

"Dav and Galen, with me. Miranda, get out," she says, and the door swings open, leading back to her apartment.

• • •

I kissed him once, just after he became part of the brood. It felt like something I ought to have done long ago, like something I'd been meaning to do for years but just kept forgetting. He allowed it, for a little while, then pulled away. "Don't."

"Why not?"

"Because the people I care about have a habit of dying."

"I'm different. I'm not..." *Not human. Not like them anymore.*

"Please don't," he said, and that was the end of it.

• • •

All the lights are on in his house when I get there. It's two in the morning, and the front door is wide open. I can see the shambles that is his living room, the lamps on the floor, the cushions tossed, the splinters of the kitchen table. I wonder how the neighbors slept through whatever went down here, but maybe they didn't. Now that I look for them, I see curtains twitch in the house across the way. A siren cuts through the air, but it's on the other side of town and moving away.

It's not a lot of help, I suppose, but it'll do. Whatever hell the other three are raising will buy me a bit of time.

The house is empty, no sign of Jason or our stranger. His box of trinkets isn't in the den, and I know where it — and Jason, and the man from the bar — must be.

The fastest way to the park is through the Hive. I step through into the Chamber here at his house, feel my wings unfurl as soon as the cavern appears around me. I hate flying in such close quarters, but it's faster, even with the tips of my wings brushing the narrow walls to either side. Then I'm out, streaking along the Burrow that leads across the Dream, across Colebridge, to the pond.

For a while it's one path, a river rushing along beneath a sky spattered with too-close stars, the trees on either side as wide around as houses. Jana's forest makes me feel tiny, but I know my way through it, and know those fast-moving waters will lead me straight to Jason.

The Burrow branches at the park, the river turning sharply down on one side, a break in the trees on the other. The heart of his Lair and the heart of mine, right next to one another. I wheel upward, towards my own, feel my talons grip on the back of the lifeguard chair.

They're below me, on the beach. Jason's curled around something that glows softly. I've never seen his box of trinkets in the Dream, but that's what it must be: those cheap plastic charms and corroding, fake gold-plated chains transformed into objects of beauty. The water roils with his Horror's fury as the man from the bar advances on him.

Leave it, I want to scream. *Drop it and run*, but I realize he can't. I think back to the last few days, how that box has hardly been out of his sight since...

Oh. Oh no.

Since I stole Shane's charm for him.

I throw myself off the chair, into a steep dive. Wind rushes past me. I make no sound but the ruffle of feathers, but the thrashing water covers it. Or ought to. He turns toward me, and too late, I see the harpoon in his hands.

I scream as the tip drives into me — as my momentum drives *me* into *it*, and feel this new, terrible weight in my chest. Instinct makes me thrash, drives the pain higher and higher, and I find I'm beating my wings despite the agony. The barbed point means it's not coming out anytime soon, and he doesn't expect me to lift off the ground.

Doesn't expect me to dig my talons into his forearms — which have yet to let go of his weapon — and *take him with me*.

We're gaining altitude, and I wonder how high I should carry him before I drop him, wonder where there's a good, hard, rocky place to smash him against, when I feel the resistance.

I've never really seen the Horror that lurks beneath Jason's waters. I've thought words like *massive*, and *writhing*, but the sheer immensity of the thing that rises from the depths is beyond anything I'd imagined. Tentacles curl their way around the interloper's legs, wrap themselves around his waist, and give them an experimental tug. Not so hard it yanks me out of the sky. On the contrary, it's a move that asks me, *are you ready?*

I am.

I lurch up, as hard and fast as I can.

Jason pulls down.

And after an awful moment of strain, there's an even worse moment of release. And that's the end of the Hero.

• • •

Then his weight is gone, as I let what's left of him fall from my talons. But the harpoon is still there, and I'm falling.

I've had this dream.

Straight into the water, plummeting toward the monster below.

It catches me. *Jason catches me.*

• • •

It fucking hurts, you know, having a spear through your chest. I don't remember much of the next few days. There are flashes: Jana and Dav and Galen arriving at the beach, being lifted in her arms and carried home. It felt like she got me there in all of three steps. Maybe she did. Jana's tall as the trees when she wants to be. Or maybe that was me fading in and out. Or maybe the periods of black were Dav and Galen keeping anyone from seeing a six-and-a-half-foot tall woman carrying little impaled me through town.

I remember the awful sliding feeling of the spear coming out. I couldn't sit up for two weeks, while the holes knitted themselves closed.

Jason's a terrible nursemaid, but he's trying. Somehow it got to be January while I've been mending. We talk about how fast the years turn. We talk about this town that no one ever leaves, and how the pond's starting to feel a little small to him. He says he might like to give the ocean a chance. I imagine the salt breeze beneath my wings, my shadow flashing over the waves, and hope the summer gets here soon.



PREMEDITATION

By Dave Brookshaw

Three Years Earlier

Sandhya's eyes snapped open, the dim light of pre-dawn stabbing like the worst migraine she'd ever had. She thrashed, half-trying to move as her Horror would, losing control of her limbs, and fell out of the bed. The two-foot drop onto the hard wooden floor barely registered, as she gasped for air, feeling like she was simultaneously drowning and about to throw up.

Is this what it's like? She thought, panicking. Is this what I do to them?

The lights came on, making her wince. Hal stood next to the switch, near the foot of the bed; leaning against the wall, groggy. He shook his head to clear it, and saw her.

Sandhya felt the shaking subside, blinked back tears as her vision cleared, and groaned. She pushed herself up on one arm, and looked over at Hal.

He was staring at her. Their eyes met. His expression became grim, fixed.

"That was *you*." He spat.

"...Wait..." She croaked, and coughed, trying to clear her throat.

He reached across the wall to the mantelpiece, still keeping his eyes on her. *Like I could turn on him at any moment*, she realized. His fingers found his wand among the mantle's clutter.

She'd laughed when she'd first seen his wand. Made the obvious jokes. Double-entendres. She'd played with it yesterday, until he'd irritably snatched it back and put it up there. An instant of hurt pride, soon forgotten.

It was a lot less funny when he pointed it at her like a weapon.

"If I ever see you again. If you ever try anything like that again on me or mine—" His rage was cold, controlled.

"Hal... Wait... I don't... I didn't..."

"—I will *end* you."

She tried to protest, but her words caught and cut off. The blood roared in her ears as though she was fainting, and for a brief, horrible instant she was *nowhere*, until she fell, and landed among a heap of her discarded clothes. She was in the woods near campus, faint morning mist clinging to the trees. Birds, startled from their perches by her sudden materialization, beat the air with their wings and cawed to one another in alarm.

Shivering and damp from the mist and dew, she hurriedly dressed. As she pulled her shirt on, the feeling of humiliation grew. Somewhere else, her Horror hissed its displeasure. The pangs of the familiar hunger came almost as a relief. Whatever Hal did hadn't done permanent damage, as far as she could tell, but the Horror was denied a meal, and she'd lost an ally.

Half-heartedly brushing twigs off herself, Sandhya Tembhekar, child of the Dark Mother, resolved that she would never get involved with mages again for as long as she lived.

• • •

Present Day

Sandhya waited, listening to the cheers in the distance as the runners approached her position. Her Horror coiled and uncoiled in anticipation as the prey drew near.

“Here they come” said her fellow volunteer (whose name, she dimly recalled, was Chad. Or Chuck. Something with a Ch- sound anyway.) *Well, obviously*, she thought, but smiled for his benefit.

The frontrunners rounded the bend, panting. Eight miles into a 10-mile event. Sandhya and Chad (definitely Chad) held disposable cups of water out into their path, snatched by the grateful athletes.

Ten minutes later, before the main pack arrived, the event ambulance drove past, lights flashing.

“Ah, hell” murmured Chad (maybe Chuck). “Looks like someone got into trouble.”

Sandhya felt the Horror settle, happy for the moment. Another leader humbled, another meal in her Horror's belly.

It wasn't exactly lying in wait within a river to bite passing princes, but even nagas had to move with the times.

• • •

Two months later, Sandhya watched from a bench outside as Charles Foster's family retrieved his belongings from the residence hall. She'd only seen him once more after the run, running into him by chance as he walked to class with his friends. She'd heard those friends as they went their separate ways, asking how he knew her.

He'd gone missing the next day, but she didn't know anything about it until workmen found his body. She'd found out while having lunch with her fellow researchers, when her lab partner Kelly brought it up.

"This university is going to shit," Kelly had declared, waving a fork for emphasis. "Four students dead this year already."

"Accidents?" She'd asked.

"OD'd, the cops said last time. They keep turning up in the old library—"

Kelly continued, espousing her idle theories about underground raves, how it was taking so long to demolish the old library despite the new one being open for years, why the university needed to pull its finger out and hire proper security, and a handful of other tangents while Sandhya nodded, pretending to listen.

She was going to have to look into this, and she already knew what she'd find. By the time Charles' family came she'd confirmed those suspicions.

She sat out there, long after the Fosters drove away, after the sun went down, thinking through her options, not liking any of them.

I have to give him a chance, she decided.

• • •

Late that night, Sandhya watched a group of drunken students stagger home past the abandoned library, oblivious to the scraps of police tape in the gutter. She checked, and when no one was watching, hopped the builders' fence before climbing up and through a broken window.

Kelly's right about one thing. The security is shit.

Inside, the concrete shell of the library — books and fittings long gone — held a dusty chill. She headed for the stairs, knowing he'd be on an upper floor, somewhere with a vantage from where he could watch for prey.

On the fifth floor, she found him. To her eyes, he was a short, middle-aged white man, huddled in a heavy overcoat against the chill. His boots were thick with dried mud. That wasn't all she saw — at the same time, he was a bent-backed, round-eyed creature with pallid skin and needles for fingers, limbs snaked with IV lines. She knew that to him, she wasn't just an Anglo-Indian woman dressed in jeans and a hoodie. He could see her Horror, just as she saw his.

"You're back" He croaked.

"You're getting careless, Vance. Someone's going to notice you."

The other Beast let out a single harsh laugh.

"They came in here. Looked right past me. The only one who knows is you, and it's because we're the same."

Sandhya grimaced.

"We're nothing alike. I feed in this world, and I leave them alive—"

“You’re in denial.” He snorted. “Still swallowing what your Devourer told you about *lessons*.” The last word was a mocking sing-song.

“She *also* said that if our Horrors fed in the Dream, the prey only suffered a nightmare. You’re killing them. Needlessly.”

“Safer this way. No one left alive to be a Hero and come after me like they came after her. You learned every lesson except the one that killed her.”

She took a deep breath, felt her Horror’s restlessness, irritated by the arrogance.

“Vance, please. You don’t have to *kill* them. A few roofies in a bar and you’ll be just as fed.”

“And open myself up to getting caught.”

One more try.

“Please.”

“It bothers you because you want to join me. Because you know that I’m right. We’re not teachers, Dr. Tembhekar, we’re not human. We’re monsters. And we’re alike more than that — your fangs are just like my fingers. We both exist to be the fire in their blood.”

She shook her head. He gestured out at the night skyline, streetlights glinting below them, lonely figures of those still up walking past.

“Stay tonight. Maybe we’ll catch a meal together. If we both feed, we can link our Lairs, become a brood. You wouldn’t have to be alone, clinging to the nonsense Erica taught you.”

She backed away a step, and shook her head again.

“I can’t do it, Vance. I still believe in our purpose.”

As she reached the stairwell she paused, shaking. Vance called back to her.

“When you accept what you are, I’ll be here.”

She descended, and felt a mixture of fear and resolve growing with every step.

Not one more.

In an instant, she knew what she had to do — she could picture it in her mind’s eye, as clear as the water of her Lair.

She just hoped he’d calmed down by now.

• • •

Sandhya stood on the platform, watching the minutes click forward on the information screen above her. Only a minute to go.

She’d spent the train down to London feeling like she was marching to her death, and then the tube to the meeting place (different station. Best not to let Hal know which line she came in on, in case he was hostile) fighting the urge to

get off at every stop. Go home. Keep her nose down, and hope that the problem went away.

The train beside her pulled away. The last of its disembarked passengers gradually dispersed.

He hasn't shown up.

She picked up her bag and started heading for the exit, relief and disappointment mixing, trying to decide what she'd do *now*. She needed somewhere quiet to think.

Following the crowds at the station entrance out into the street, squinting in the sunlight, she felt someone take her arm firmly. She yanked it, trying to break their hold, and turned sharply to fight the mugger, or warn off whoever thought they could—

“Take it easy” he said, cheerfully, his eyes supplying the warning.

Halcyon.

“You're late” she bit out, and tugged at her arm again. He let go, and smiled humorlessly.

“The crowd was a good idea. What do you want, Deeya?”

“I... Can we go somewhere to talk?”

“Anything you have to say to me, you can say right here” He spread his hands, indicating the people all around them. “No one's listening.”

“When we...” She trailed off, shook her head, then started again. “When you threw me out, you hurt me. More than I've ever been hurt.”

Hal frowned.

“You contacted me because I hurt your feelings?”

Sandhya rolled her eyes.

“Not like *that*. You *hurt* me. I thought you'd killed me. And you threatened that you would.”

The mage looked confused now. Her Horror liked that.

“And...?”

“I need to know if it was just talk, or if you can actually do it.”

• • •

The waitress put the drinks down, wished them a good day, and left. In the end, she'd intrigued Hal enough to hear her out, and they'd gone to a nearby pub.

“So. You look well. Fed.”

Enough.

“Okay. Hal? I need your help. I came to you to ask for your help. But the whole ‘sneaking up on her when she thinks you've bailed’ trick, and all these tiny jabs? Quit it. I am *trying* here, and you're not making it easy.”

“Apologies.” His expression said he didn’t mean it. “Let me try again. I haven’t heard anything about your activities through the grapevine, but you’re obviously well. If a bit different.”

She rubbed her forehead.

“I made a lot of changes. Learned how to manage it better. Gave up on things that weren’t working. Are you happy?”

“It’s a start.”

“How can I explain this to you with all these people around?”

“Please. As far as anyone listening can hear, you’ve been complaining about our coworkers back at the office for the last ten minutes.”

Smug bastard. She leant forward, annoyed.

“I *have to feed*, Hal. My kind, we don’t have a choice about it. I’m a naga. I humble those who stand above the crowd. Now, I’ve arranged my life so I can eat a little, often. Athletes. Top-flight students. Bright young PhDs. Make them stumble a bit, prick their pride, and I can go another week or two.”

“You went back to university.”

“Finished my doctorate. I’m a postdoc now. Students everywhere, and reversals of success are not unusual. No one gets hurt. What happened to you is what happens if I *don’t* feed; the naga hunts for herself, but even then, it’s not fatal. Dangerous for *me*, but — and no offense — they get over it.”

She stopped, thinking how to phrase the request. She had him listening, longer than she’d thought she would. He wouldn’t walk away now. If there was one thing she knew about mages, it was their inability to let something drop.

“There’s the other option, of course. I have access to a whole lot of controlled substances, and that’s leaving my own venom aside. How I’m feeding now is like grazing. It’s enough, if I’m careful. If I did more than embarrass someone, crossed the line between teaching them a life lesson and indulging myself, *killed* them, for real, I could go months. I could do all kinds of things. But I don’t.”

She made deliberate eye contact, held the moment.

“Hal. Someone *is*. And I need your help to stop him.”

She waited, while the mage drank, considering.

“All right. I’ll meet you back at your home.”

“What makes you think I’m ready to tell you where that is?”

Hal finished his drink.

“What makes you think I don’t already know?”

• • •

“His name is Vance. From what I’ve heard he’s the last survivor of a brood wiped out by Heroes a while back, though he hasn’t told me that himself.”

Hal paced in her flat, listening to her. He glanced down at the newspaper she'd handed him with Charles' obituary, then carried on looking over her bookshelves.

"Who did?"

"A vampire I've had a few dealings with in the last year. Apparently, Vance has been hunting here for years. He's got an arrangement with their leaders."

Hal nodded.

"So no local help is forthcoming?"

Sandhya shook her head.

"He's the only other Begotten I know of around here. We're rarer than you lot, or the leeches. We don't have night court. Even if there were others, what he's doing isn't technically against the rules. It just... No. You know what? We can talk about my motives later."

He raised an eyebrow. "Okay. Carry on."

"He hunts in ruins. Abandoned buildings. Draws lone victims in by confusing their senses, and turns it into a labyrinth he hunts them through. Toying with them, before he kills them by injection. The poisons he creates are part of his Lair, so when the Primordial Pathway ends, they vanish, but the damage they *did* is still there."

"So the police, finding bodies with injection marks, think they've overdosed."

"Right. He's *strong*. Older and stronger than me and getting stronger still. Imposing his Lair on the world like that to hunt, regularly? He could only do it if he feeds deep. And he can only feed deep—"

"—If he does it. It's a vicious cycle."

She nodded. Hal, thinking, idly ran his finger along the spines of books on the shelf. He pulled out a bound collection of chemistry journals, inspected a few pages, and put it back.

She waited. Finally, he turned around.

"Why not confront him?"

"I have. Well, I've tried talking. Trying to forcibly stop him... Confront him in this world, and his allies will find out. Confront him in the Dream, Horror to Horror, and he'll rip me to shreds. It's not a sure-fire thing, but my kind can tell who the greatest monster in our surroundings is, long-term; we call it the Apex."

"Biggest dog on the street?"

"Something like that. The Dream becomes touched by their presence. And it's him. Vance is the biggest, scariest thing for miles. What I need is an *advantage*."

"And you think I can deliver." A statement, not a question.

"I need this done in a way that doesn't lead back to me. Or, preferably, that doesn't raise suspicions at all."

“Do what, exactly?”

“If he would change his hunting pattern, and stick to it, I’d be happy. But he won’t. He sees it as weakness, opening himself up so some Hero can hunt him. So yes, I’m asking whether you can kill him.”

He didn’t answer.

“Hal? Can you do it?”

“Not alone. And not just with your help.”

• • •

Sandhya hated traveling by magic. They’d teleported back to her flat that first night, after meeting in London, and it brought the memory of being banished three years earlier back with a visceral reaction. The moment of nothingness had weighed on her for months. When Halcyon told her they would have to go to their first recruit with his spells, she protested. Then he’d told her how far they would have to go.

The warm air held unfamiliar scents, and the sounds of hundreds of people nearby were speaking a language she didn’t know. Hal opened the door from the room they’d appeared in, and led her out into a street that was more like an alley.

“Welcome to Marrakesh.”

“Why here?”

Hal looked back at her, leading her through the maze of cramped, narrow streets. Dozens of cats weaved underfoot, or sat in windows and doorways, staring at her. The street was less than six feet wide, and had more than three lanes of foot traffic in it.

“Vance’s realm is urban and maze-like. We need someone who can navigate through that environment, who’s immune to his tricks and traps. A contact of mine lives here, and she’s uniquely qualified. Also, unlike many of the beings we *might* recruit, her kind can make the trip we’re about to make. I met her five years ago, when I came to Morocco for.... Well, that isn’t important. What’s important is that she’ll help us.”

They ducked through a stall selling brass lamps. More cats darted beneath their feet.

“How can you be sure?”

“For her entire adult life, she’s wanted to find a specific person. This individual was arrested in the 90s — many North African countries took steps against their supernatural populations, quietly, around that time—”

“The Moroccan government knows that monsters exist?”

Hal’s expression was infuriatingly condescending.

“Of course it does. Every government does. *Anyway*. He disappeared, vanished into some secret prison if not killed, and for all her talents she doesn’t have the resources to find out what happened. That’s what we can offer her.”

“We can find him?”

“Oh, I already did. I traced him with magic, the day after I found out about her need.”

“You’re this woman’s friend? And you’ve been sitting on this for five years?”

He grinned.

“Keep your friends close, Sandhya, and always keep something to offer them if you need them in the future. We’re here.”

They’d come to a small courtyard, built around an ancient fountain. More cats lay in the sunlight, watching them lazily.

Hal tossed a coin into the fountain and waited. Sandhya looked around, half expecting someone to materialize out of thin air. Instead, after a few minutes, a woman strolled into the courtyard behind them. She was dressed anonymously in faded pants, a loose top and a headscarf. Sandhya found herself staring into the woman’s eyes, which were large and — she thought — almost golden.

The woman grinned, impishly.

“Who’s this?” She asked, in English.

“Sandhya, Najat. Najat, Sandhya.” Hal introduced.

• • •

They’d gone inside one of the buildings facing the courtyard, which turned out to be Najat’s home. (“Latest home,” she’d said.) Halcyon laid out what they were asking her to do and what Sandhya and Vance were while Najat poured them green tea.

“And in return... I found him, Najat. I can tell you where he is.”

Sandhya was sure she saw Najat’s eyes glint in the dim light as she took that in. She handed them their drinks, and sat on a cushion on the floor, thinking.

“And I won’t be in any danger?”

“You have my guarantee” Hal said, smoothly, before Sandhya could speak. She raised an eyebrow at him, and he winked back.

Najat nodded, and grinned again.

“All right. Sounds like an adventure!”

She looked at Sandhya.

“I said I’d help. You don’t seem overjoyed.”

“No— It’s... Thank you, sincerely, but, I have to ask... What *are* you?”

Najat raised her eyebrows.

“Excuse me?”

Sandhya blushed, embarrassed, annoyed at Hal’s obviously enjoyment of catching her out.

“I can sense monsters, and people like Hal who are connected to the supernatural. Something about their souls, but you...”

“Oh! That must be because I don’t have one.” Najat said, matter-of-fact, and poured herself another cup.

“I don’t understand.”

Hal leaned back in his chair.

“Your kind are fueled by the basic fears of humanity.” He drawled. “What do you call it? ‘The Primordial Dream’? All the nightmares hidden beneath civilization, culture, and story. Najat here,” the mage nodded to their hostess, “doesn’t have a human soul. She’s got what some people call a Nahual instead.”

“I’m a cat,” Najat said.

“You’ve got an animal’s soul? Like I have my Horror?”

“Deep in the human soul,” explained Hal “there’s a barrier, a boundary between humanity and the soul of the world, the animals, even the stars. Your Primordial Dream clusters around that boundary like... like rock pools after the tide’s gone out. The animal parts of the human race, where the monsters live. What you’re sensing is that Najat lacks that boundary. She’s a daughter of nature, in harmony with her animal nature. You’d find, if you tried, that your Nightmares slide right off her. And that’s how we’re going to bait him into our trap.”

• • •

Sandhya’s stomach had just about recovered from teleporting back to the UK. She’d set the sofa bed in her flat up for Najat, and stepped out onto the balcony for a breath of fresh air. A few flakes of snow drifted down as she stood there, listening to the late-night sounds of the other flats in her building. She heard the door slide open behind her.

“I thought this might be a good time.” Said Hal, quietly.

“For what?”

She glanced irritably up as the snow began falling heavier. Hal made a horizontal motion with one hand, as though wiping something, and she immediately stopped feeling it; the flakes now fell all around them, but not *on* them.

Show-off.

He shrugged. “I wanted to wait until we had Najat on-board, and we were set up. No matter how this conversation goes, I promised to help you and will uphold that promise.”

“And what is this conversation?”

“Your motives. You said we’d address them later, and now’s later.”

She closed her eyes, thinking.

“He’s abusing his power. He kills the people he feeds from.”

“So we’re going to kill him in turn?” He did not sound satisfied.

“It’s not the way we behave. We have a responsibility, a purpose.”

“You’re doing this in service of some higher power?”

“The Mother put us here to teach people that — okay, *what?*”

He didn’t reply for a moment, choosing his words.

“Have you heard of Peter Childs?”

She frowned.

“He’s famous for something?”

“Reality TV star, went to prison recently for a massive drug binge. His behavior wasn’t just down to fortune; it was his fame that possessed him.”

“I’m not seeing the relevance.”

“His fame *literally* possessed him, Deeya. We don’t know how it got through into material reality, but the astral embodiment of his celebrity took him over. Drove him to greater and greater excesses, feeding off the notoriety. It’s gone now, exorcised, but his life is ruined.”

Her Horror shifted.

“I’m not possessed, Hal.”

“Technically, no.”

“*Technically?*” Her voice rose, in warning. Hal shrugged.

“No, and neither is a Sin-Eater, but you are to Childs as they are to people ghosts take refuge in. ‘A higher purpose’? You, Vance, you’re both Goetia with delusions of grandeur. There’s no Primordial Mother, no higher purpose behind what you are. You’re the astral embodiment of a particular fear, no more, no less.”

He stopped, watching for her reaction. She tried to get hold of the rage steadily filling her, knuckles turning pale as she made fists. He spread his hands, conciliatory, but all she could think of was how fake the gesture looked.

“I am not saying this out of spite. I’m saying it out of concern. This man has breached *your* moral code, and for that you are going to punish him. That’s fine. That’s what all justice is, in the end. But when we do this tomorrow night, you owe it to yourself to be honest about it, and go in with a clear mind.”

“Get out.” She said, quietly.

“Take this advice, if you take nothing else. The best murders are premeditated.”

“Get the *fuck* out, James.”

He frowned, and all concern vanished from his face at the mention of his secret, human, name. Her Horror whispered, momentarily satisfied by her tearing through all his careful layers of pride and magical dignity.

Stiff, he walked past her into the flat.

“Meet me where we discussed at four tomorrow afternoon.”

He nodded to Najat as he passed her, and left. Sandhya exhaled, realizing she’d been holding her breath.

The shapeshifter cocked her head, and looked back at her.

“Is everything all right?”

“It will be.” She paused. “You know how some people think the universe revolves around their worldview?”

Najat nodded, serious.

“Yes, they can be like that.”

“Mages?” She asked, staring at the closed door.

“Humans.”

• • •

They spent the last day before committing murder trying to take their minds off it. Sandhya took Najat out for lunch, and indulged her curiosity about the shapeshifter, asking her about her people.

Najat had inherited her gift from her father, a Berber nomad who’d settled in Marrakesh and had a brief relationship with her mother. Najat gave the impression he was no longer in the picture but not why, and Sandhya suspected she knew who the disappeared prisoner Halcyon was paying the cat-woman with was. The thought of Hal annoyed her, remembering the argument of the night before, and she lost track of what Najat was telling her.

“Something on your mind?”

“Sorry. Go on.”

“So the first I knew was when I was nearly a woman. I had dreams for months, cats watching me, some where I was one. And then one night — Bam!” She slapped the table for emphasis “Fur and claws.”

Sandhya mused, toying with her food.

“It was like that for me, too. Years of feeling like I didn’t fit into my skin, reoccurring nightmares, then realizing I was the thing I was dreaming about. But I only transform if I bring my Lair into the world. I’m not physically a naga. Your people, it’s more like werewolves.”

Najat made a face.

“Urg. Werewolves. Close, but there’s differences there, too. I’m not half-spirit.”

She didn’t reply.

Like me, but physical. No Lair, no Hunger. No risk of Heroes. Is this Hal twisting the knife?

“You okay?”

“Just thinking. We should get going. Don’t want to keep the wizard waiting.”

• • •

The priory sat high up on a hill overlooking the town and surrounding landscape. For centuries it has existed only as ruins, barely a handful of walls left, given over to grazing sheep. Halcyon had paid the farmer off, and by the time

Najat and Sandhya arrived, the mage and his assistants had erected a domed tent. Sandhya awkwardly greeted Ben, who had been Hal's assistant even three years ago. She'd always liked the man; he wasn't Awakened, but had the rare gift of being able to see Hal's spells and remember them. The other assistant was a young woman Hal introduced as his apprentice.

"My Shadow Name is Iona." She said in a Scottish accent, shaking hands and smiling pleasantly, "Claviger Halcyon has told me a lot about both of you."

Before Sandhya could ask exactly what Hal had said, the older mage interrupted.

"Sun's going down, Iona. I need you to get ready."

While the young mage busied herself outside, Hal, Najat, and Sandhya entered the tent. Three camp-beds with sleeping bags and blankets were set up in a triangle. Hal opened a holdall and handed headphones to the two of them.

"Last chance to back out." He said, watching her response. She silently shook her head, and he simply nodded.

"All right then. Get comfortable, ladies. You won't want to move around once I cast the spell."

Sandhya climbed into her bag, putting the headphones in. Despite not being hooked up to anything, once they were in her ears she was immediately plunged into dead silence. She lay back, and closed her eyes.

After what seemed forever, she became aware of a strange feeling, like a presence in her mind. Or, rather, a pair of presences. Halcyon had cast his spell, creating a link between her, his, and Najat's minds. At first, she felt alarmed, and then realized that it was actually Najat who felt alarmed, while she — used to sharing her mind with her Horror for years — could keep her bearings. She could feel Hal's mind, guarded and careful, deliberately not revealing much, while Najat's shock turned to excitement.

Okay, this is cool. Sandhya thought, and felt Najat agree.

If we're ready, thought Hal, *we can begin.*

• • •

Sandhya walked down the street, carefully stepping around the bricks, bottles, and discarded signs. The buildings towered, grey, above her. The road was wide, and empty of cars.

In fact, she realized, she was completely alone. Somewhere, close by, a riot was taking place. She could hear the chants and shouts just on the edge of her hearing, and smell smoke.

Turning around, she saw a large sand-colored cat sat on a window ledge, regarding her.

"You look different," said the cat, in Najat's voice.

“So do you” she laughed, and looked in the window at her reflection. The young woman she saw wore a sari. She reached up to touch the bindi she hadn’t worn since her Devouring.

“You’re a Hindu?” asked Najat

“Not for a long time.” She replied, quietly.

They walked, looking into side-streets whenever they passed, searching for Halcyon.

“Want to talk about it?”

“Hal said we’d appear as our souls’ self-images, but that in my case it’d be more like whatever was on my mind, because we won’t catch up with my Horror until we get to my Lair. I guess... After last night, I’ve been thinking about my beliefs a lot. How I got here. This,” she indicated herself, “is what I evidently think of as my starting point.”

It’s also how I looked when I met Hal, she thought.

“I heard you arguing. His Wizardliness got to you?”

“Something like that—” She stopped, peering ahead.

“Is that him?”

Suddenly, the street filled with people. Angry rioters facing off against police, throwing themselves at shields, being trampled on by police horses, being dragged out of the crowd and beaten with nightsticks.

Sandhya ducked a thrown bottle, trying to push her way through. She caught a glimpse of Hal’s face through the crowd, but then he vanished again.

“Najat! Can you see him?”

“This way!”

Keeping her head down, following the cat, she came to a line of police vans. Two blank-faced riot police were manhandling Halcyon into one.

Sandhya felt her Horror rise, hissed, and felt her venom course through her. She reached out and jabbed her fingers onto the policemen’s necks. They immediately fell to the floor, twitching, black veins pulsing on their exposed flesh.

“Are you all right?” She asked, holding her hand out to help him up. He scowled, batted it away, and clambered to his feet himself. Sandhya left her arm out for a few seconds, then lowered it.

“Najat’s in, too?”

“Right here” said the cat.

“Well.” Halcyon said. He closed his eyes, calming himself. When he opened them again he was dressed in robes, holding his wand in one hand and a heavy iron key in the other.

“Welcome to the Temenos.”

For what felt like days, but which Hal assured the others was hours at most, the three mismatched dreamers wandered from realm to realm. Sandhya had heard stories about the Temenos, or Bright Dream, from Erica. Her Devourer had failed to mention the constant feeling of being surrounded, even in what looked like quiet realms. Where her own Lair was peaceful, the Temenos was tumultuous.

Najat was in her element, padding ahead of them, asking questions constantly — what was this? What was that? What did that represent? Sandhya got the impression Hal was enjoying the opportunity to show off his long experience in the Inner Worlds, though. Or maybe he just liked having an excuse to not talk to her.

One thing remained constant, though. Just like he'd promised, back before they recruited Najat, when he first outlined the plan, she always knew which way they should go. It was as if her Lair were calling to her in a music she couldn't quite hear, guiding her home to it, deeper and deeper through the loud, busy realms of the human consciousness. Whenever they came to a choice of routes, they stopped until she got their bearings.

They walked from riots to revolutions, passing through the Indian mutiny, the French Revolution, the English Civil War. From there, they rode in the executioner's wagon to a realm where the astral facsimiles of people lined up for their turn being hung from colossal black gallows. They slipped through a doorway (Hal unlocking it with a touch of his Key) into political prisoners, then out into political scandals.

The common theme was her. They were searching for the powerful being humbled, the nature of her Hunger.

The realms grew quieter and quieter, less and less energetic, more and more foreboding.

"Sandhya," Najat said, as they walked through a forest. In the distance, an escaped convict wept at the sound of the approaching dogs.

Sandhya looked down at herself. Her skin had turned scaled, smooth to the touch.

"We're here," said Hal.

As they walked, the air grew warmer, the sky went dark. The sounds of the insects changed, and the trees themselves grew less European and more Indian.

They came at last to the shores of a wide, slow-flowing river. In the evening heat, the water sparkled, clean, inviting.

Najat let out a cry of alarm, and Hal nearly jumped out of his skin. A colossal snake, with Sandhya's face distorted with terrible fangs, slid past them, into the water.

Najat and Hal froze, silent, waiting for the monster to attack. They had a palpable feeling of being *watched*. Finally, Najat crept closer to the water, peering in.

“Was that what I think it was?” Najat

“Yes. That was her Horror. And since we’re here, it was her, too.” Hal replied.

He carefully joined Najat at the water’s edge.

“Sandhya. We’re in your Lair, so I know you can hear me. We’re your friends, all right? We won’t come into the water, just stay here, and wait for Iona to call.”

The water stirred as Sandhya swam, reveling in the unification of mind and Horror. The tip of her tail broke the surface, and rattled her assent.

Hal sat down. Najat paced back and forth behind him, keeping him between her and the water.

“You had to have an argument with her the day *before* we put ourselves at her mercy, didn’t you? It wasn’t tense enough for you.”

Hal gritted his teeth.

“I didn’t mean to.”

“No, you were just you. Look, you like her. It’s obvious you like her.”

“I like a lot of people.”

“Not that kind of like. Have you considered maybe she’d like you back if you didn’t score points off her all the time?”

“I hadn’t thought about it.”

“You haven’t thought about it?” She repeated, disbelieving. “She’s perfect for you — nerdy, weird, can paralyze people by jabbing them, and best of all if you get too...” She paused, searching for the right word. “...*Wizardly*, her inner snake monster will murder you in your sleep.”

Halcyon didn’t respond. Najat turned to look at him.

“You already did, didn’t you?”

He glared down at her.

“I don’t want to talk about it”

The cat laughed.

“You did! You rode the snake!”

“*Najat*”

“This explains everything!”

“I said I don’t—”

He held his hand up. Paused a few seconds.

“*Thank you*, Iona. She just cast a spell on my body, back in the Hallow.” He said, addressing the river. “She scryed on the library. He’s asleep.”

Hal and Najat walked up-river, following the serpentine Horror swimming just below the surface ahead of them. After several hours, they came to a bend in the river but continued on ahead through the forest, as the Horror snaked its way up out of the water and into the undergrowth. As they pushed through, Hal and Najat felt the scenery change. The air itself became colder and wetter, until a thick fog blanketed everything.

For a moment, Hal lost sight of the Horror ahead. Then, through the fog, he spotted Sandhya, back in humanoid dream form. She looked around, groggy, as though waking up. They'd reached the edge of her Lair, he reasoned, and she'd separated from her bestial self again.

Then he heard the sound, like a giant rattlesnake.

Ah.

Hal felt something shove him hard in the shoulders, flinging him forward with supernatural strength a split-second before the Horror lunged at him. The monster's fangs snapped shut where his legs had been, and he gasped for breath as whatever shoved him landed on him. He rolled, and got a split-second view of the Horror's face as it struck again like a cobra, biting the air where his head had just been. Someone grabbed his arm and pulled, hard, dragging him forward. He managed to engage his feet and run, while the rattle noise started again behind him.

Sandhya held out an arm to him, which he gratefully grabbed. She pulled him to her, then closed her eyes, concentrating. He looked back; the Horror, grimacing with displeasure, was withdrawing back into the undergrowth of the Lair. It couldn't follow them out of the Lair. Then he saw his rescuer. Her fur still had the same markings, but instead of the African street cat they'd made the Astral journey with, Najat was a hybrid of woman and feline, taller than him and standing upright.

"What the *hell*, Deeya?"

She grimaced, the same expression he'd just seen on the Horror's face.

"Sorry. I was... Crossing the threshold distracted me, and she acted on instinct. I got control just in time, but... Najat, thank you."

The shapeshifter nodded, and blurred as she returned to cat-shape. Hal spluttered.

"Instinct? It tried to kill me!"

Both women stared at him. He opened and closed his mouth. Finally, Najat broke the silence.

"...So, the one we are here to fight?"

Sandhya looked around.

"These are the woods where I last fed, or their reflection in the Dream, anyway. As the Apex, Vance's Lair will shadow all the Chambers nearby, so if we

hike down toward campus, we'll find his library. Hal — *Hal*. We can talk about it when we're done, okay? We need you now."

Halcyon composed himself, nodded, and started to cast his spells.

• • •

They walked through the fogged woods, making their way down the hills toward campus. As they descended, Sandhya started to hear whispering, then low voices.

"Can you hear that?"

Hal nodded.

"It's the Omphalos. The edge of the Dream. It must be near."

Najat cocked her head.

"I don't hear anything."

Hal smiled, satisfied.

"Good."

• • •

Vance's library, true to Sandhya's word, crouched over the Primordial version of campus, larger and more decrepit than in the physical world. The three travelers paused on the threshold to prepare themselves, then Sandhya pushed the doors open and walked in, Najat and Hal behind her. Once inside, she turned to close the doors again, and saw that from the inside, every building on campus looked broken and abandoned.

The light, already dim in the pale moonlight of Vance's Lair, grew dimmer. Shadows lengthened, stretching across the floor.

"He knows we're here." She said.

Deeper into the library, the corridors and rooms seemed to stretch. More than once, Sandhya looked back to find a door they'd come through no longer present.

"*Vance!*" She shouted, "*come out!*"

Suddenly, the lights cut out.

"Invading my Lair, is it?" Vance's voice changed, now croaking, his words coming from his Horror's throat. Sandhya couldn't get a clear impression of where he was.

"If you wanted to prove your point about feeding in dreams, you didn't need to go to all this trouble." The last word came, or so it seemed, from inches behind her. She resisted the urge to jump.

Instead, she closed her eyes, felt the connection to Najat from Hal's spells. The shapeshifter could see despite the darkness.

There. Vance's Horror lurked in a doorway, one needle-tipped hand gripping each side, its head swaying at the end of its long neck, sniffing the air.

Silently, he spider-walked across the ceiling toward them. He paused above them, ready to pounce, then dropped.

His needles went straight through her and Hal's necks. Or where they appeared to be, anyway. He clattered to the floor with the scraping of metal on concrete, jumped upright, and tried again to no more success.

"Sorry. We're not quite there," she said, pouring as much derision as she could muster into it.

Vance snarled, swiping the air with his claws. One passed uncomfortably close to where she actually stood, hidden by the illusion Hal had cast on their way in.

"Have you ever seen a cat catch a spider?" Hal asked, amused.

Najat, ignored while Vance focused on the humanoid prey, suddenly lunged, shifting into her hybrid form as she did so. Her claws stabbed into Vance's back, and she opened a surprisingly wide mouth before biting, hard, down on his vulnerable neck.

Vance shrieked and jumped, trying to throw her off. Najat let go, black blood dripping from her claws and fangs, and grinned as he spun to face her. She jumped back as the Horror lunged, twisted to land on all fours with feline grace, and *ran*.

The Horror charged after her.

"*You won't get out!*" he screamed. Sandhya and Hal simply ran after them, following Najat's retreating form as fast as they could. The maze of the Lair shifted around them, doors slamming shut and opening. At one point, she caught sight of herself in the distance, through a doorway.

He's losing control.

No matter how Vance tried to manipulate his Lair, though, no matter how confused she or Hal became, she could feel Najat's certainty of their route through the mental link. The shapeshifter's exhilaration poured into Sandhya's mind, and she found herself laughing as they ran.

"*This way!*" Najat thought, and took a hard right. Hal and Sandhya followed, and suddenly Vance was *behind* them, his own path crossed by his desperate attempts to contain them.

She barely had time to register the doors before the three of them burst out, into the mists of the space between Lairs. She slid to a halt on the wet grass, and looked back. Vance hit the threshold, his human dream-form erupting from his Horror as it slammed into the barrier.

"You want to die in the Dream?" he shouted, and they ran again. Over the sound of her labored breathing, Sandhya thought she could hear voices.

The mist swelled and thickened, becoming impossible to see through. The grass turned to bare earth. Sandhya was aware of a *shape*, a great looming stone

wall like a cliff face, that they were running right towards. It was covered in markings — handprints, letters, and glyphs.

Vance was right behind them.

Now, Najat! Thought Hal. The shapeshifter ran full-tilt toward the rock. Sandhya blinked, and a cave appeared, open before them. They ran inside, Vance on their heels, and went *down*, steeper and steeper, until she lost her footing and fell...

• • •

They landed in a heap on sand, Vance kicking and punching. She grabbed hold and held him fast. As they rolled, she squinted against the blinding sun.

A desert. We're in a desert.

She *hurt*. Wherever they were, she could feel herself blurring at the edges, like she was eroding away. She gritted her teeth through the pain, knowing that Vance — as the stronger Beast — was getting it much, much worse.

He howled. He wept. He tried to poison her before realizing it was a futile effort. In the background, she heard Hal chanting in the language of mages, then an invisible force pulled Vance away from her, slamming him into the ground.

She saw Hal and Najat moving toward her, but waved them back. Hal was covered in a shining aura, the light's edges fraying in the unseen grip of whatever had her and Vance's dreamed flesh. Najat, though, was unaffected.

"What have you done to me?" Vance sobbed.

"You lived your life like a stinging thing in a rock pool" she said, wincing, "welcome to the sea."

Vance screamed in pain. Sandhya felt her Horror's satisfaction, like a starving woman given a meal.

"You said we aren't human. That we're monsters. Other people," she looked at Hal, who seemed ashamed "have told me, at length, that we're just dreams. The thing is, we're *both*. We are the nightmares of the human soul; we exist to remind thinking beings that their Bright Dream is fragile. Everyone tells me that I'm an idiot to see a purpose in that...but they're wrong."

She crouched, feeling the pressure of Hal's spell keeping her from going to him.

"This is what's beyond the Dream. This is what denying your humanity looks like. Some beings belong here." She looked at Najat, who had become fully human, smiling wearily at her. "But we don't."

"Let me go. Please let me go." Vance begged.

"No. I won't. You can't open a Pathway from a desert; there's nothing for you to use. This place will consume you. I'm told that normally, once it cuts you down to the bone and you can't hold onto yourself any more, you wake up like our prey is meant to wake up. Scarred, maybe, but alive."

“That’s not going to happen, though” Hal said, matter-of-fact.

“My friend here has bound you.” Sandhya could see the realization in Vance’s eyes. “And when it consumes you, you’ll die. But don’t worry, Aaron. It won’t get that far.”

She pitied him now, watching him writhe.

“Hal will stay here to make sure you don’t get free, but I’m going to wake up now. I’m going to come to your library, stand over your body... and I’m going to feed. You’re immune to poison, just like I am, but I don’t just bite people. I *drown* them.”

She stood up.

“Goodbye, Vance.”

She nodded to Hal. The mage cancelled the spell binding their minds together — the spell that tethered her and Najat to his astral meditation.

Gasping, she sat bolt-upright on the camp-bed in the tent.

• • •

Days later, Sandhya stood at the window of the office she shared with Kelly, looking at the old library in the distance.

The police had found Vance’s body, of course, and added it to their list of “ODs.” They didn’t yet know that there wouldn’t be any more.

Sandhya concentrated on her Horror, felt the naga swim through the Chambers of her Lair. The monster inside was fully satisfied, for the first time in years.

Sandhya fed by bringing the mighty low. Trapping the Apex and killing him with his own power certainly counted.

She looked away from the library, to the quad below. Among the milling students, Najat and Hal were waiting for her. The mage was taking Najat home today, though Sandhya had promised to visit (the old-fashioned way, on a plane) and, she’d whispered in private, help out with finding her father. As for Halcyon... her Horror no longer expressed displeasure in his presence. For now.

Sandhya Tembhekar, child of the Dark Mother, Apex, started down the stairs. Her friends were waiting.



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Peter Woodworth is an English professor, game designer, and freelance writer, not necessarily in that order. He has written for the World of Darkness setting since 1997, working primarily in the Mind's Eye Theater division but with some tabletop credits with **Changeling** and **Hunter** as well. He has also accumulated fiction and game writing credits for Galileo Games, Evil Hat Productions, Magpie Games, Eschaton Media, and West End Games. You can find him online at peterwoodworth.com.





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