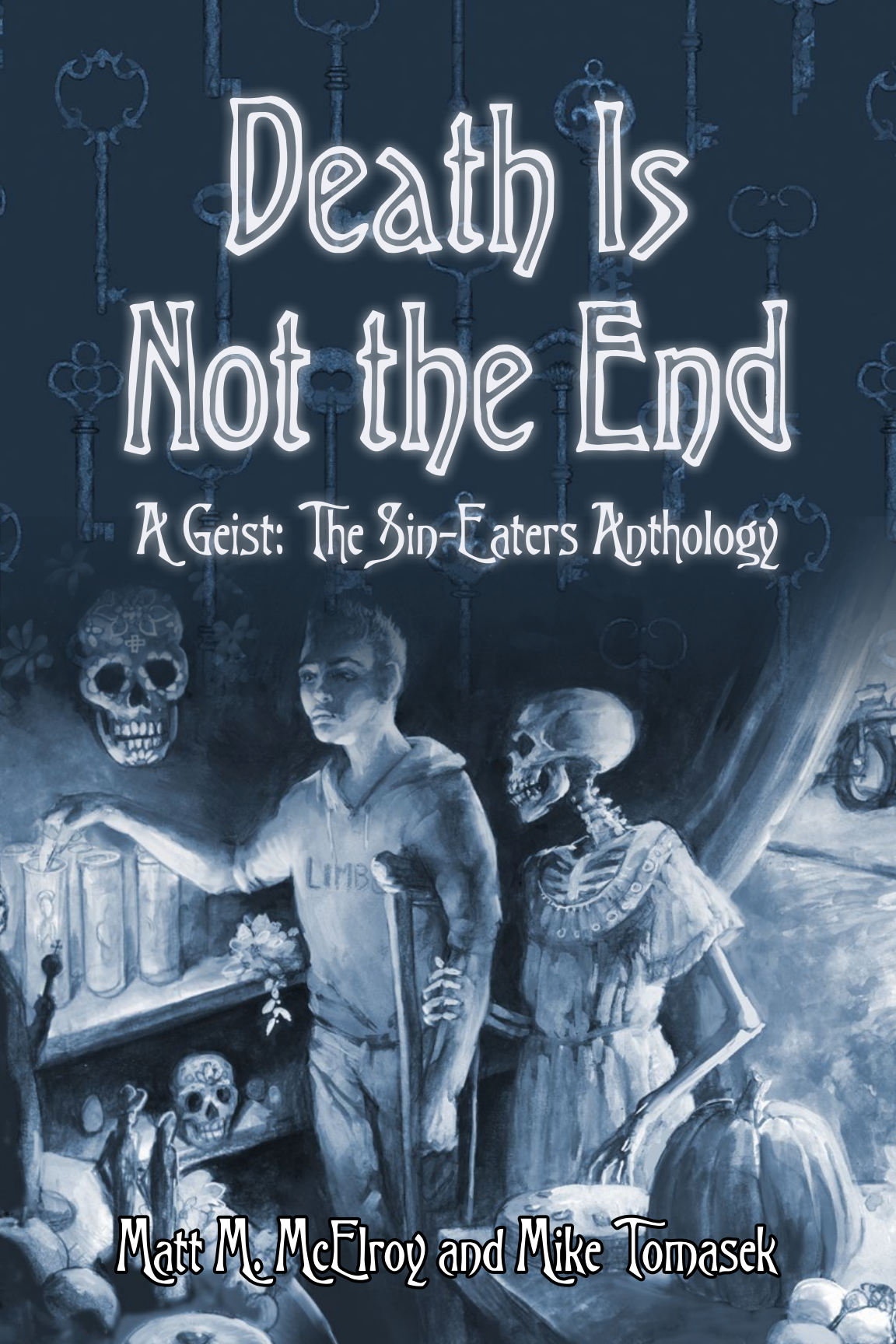
Death Is Not the End

A Geist: The Sin-Eaters Anthology



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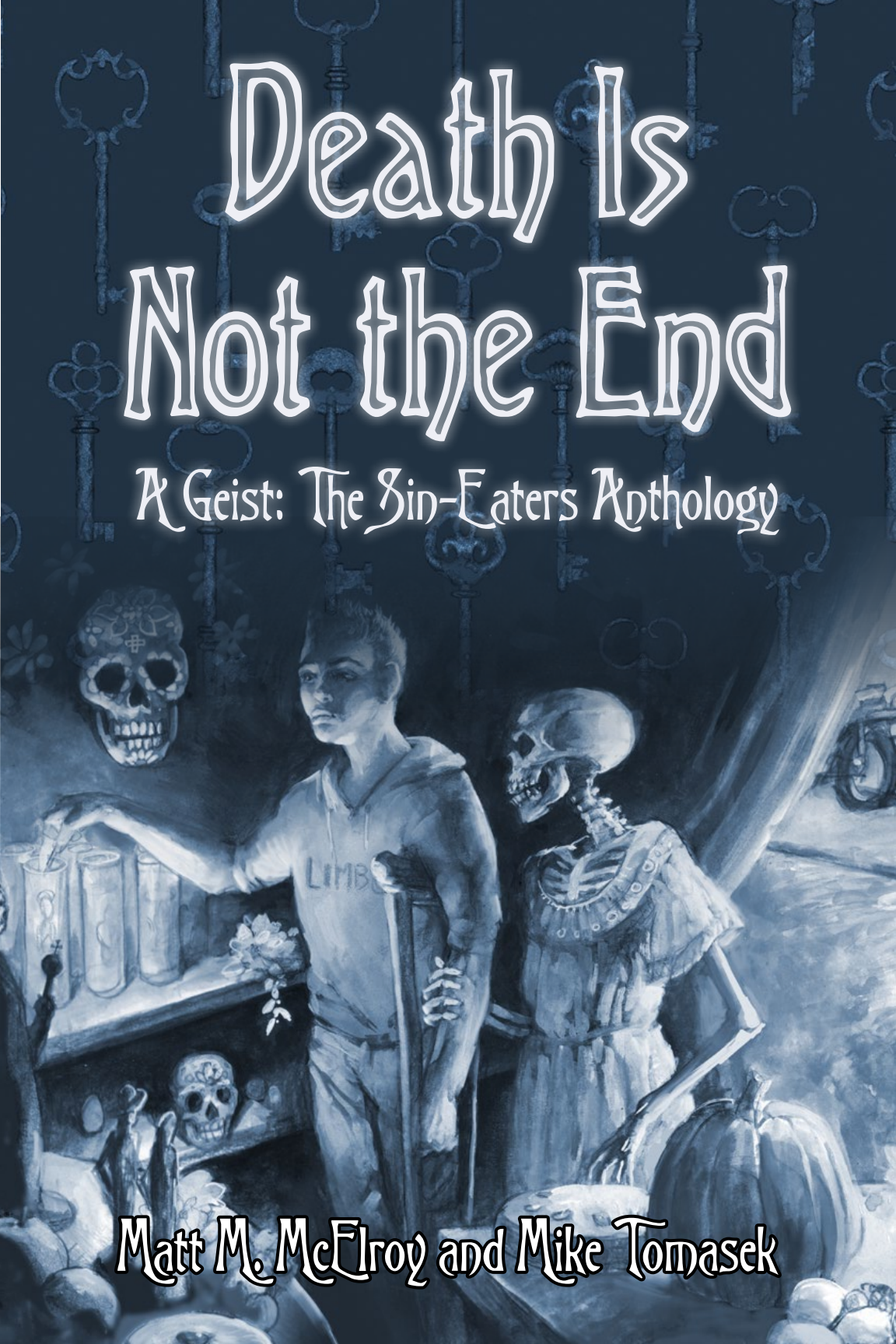

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Table of Contents

A Brighter Morning — Jose R. Garcia	4
Brittle Bargain — Lauren Roy	24
Ansia — Meredith Gerber	34
An Understanding — Danielle Lauzon	43
Feasting on Twilight After Dark — Monica Valentinelli	53
Lost at Sea — Renee Ritchie	63
Sacrifices — Pete Woodworth	72
Major Arcana — Vera Vartanian	83
The Bound and the Broken — Eric Zawadzki	95
The Notebook — Klara Horskjær Herbøl	108
Duly Owed — Neall Raemonn Price	117
About the Authors	127

A Brighter Morning

Jose R. Garcia

This story originally appeared in the ***Geist: The Sin-Eaters Second Edition*** *corebook.*

Prologue

Two women sat at the candlelit dining room table with their hands on the spirit board, unaware of the figure that hovered above them. Oliver knew them very well. Like all his tenants, Oliver had given them a "grace period," a time to settle into the house before he made himself known. He took that time to learn all about them. He knew that the older woman in the ponytail and long white t-shirt was named Jade, and that the younger woman in the full pajama set who kept her hair long and untamed was named Trisha. They were the daughters of Hari Patel, who still slept in his room on the other side of the house, where Oliver's parents slept when they were alive.

The Patels had fascinated Oliver from the moment they moved in. Hari was a single father who lived entirely within Oliver's walls, running a business from the room that had previously been a nursery and worshipping at a household shrine tucked away in a small closet. Jade and Trish left the house far more often. On bad days, when Oliver felt compelled to wander the house and recreate his own death, he'd watch them leave for school instead. Jade went to a university downtown, Trisha to a high school a few miles away. The schools had names he couldn't recognize and the subjects the women talked about sounded more like things that belonged in the pages of Amazing Stories than the world outside his window.

What excited Oliver most about the Patels was that Trisha could sense him. He was sure that he saw her looking at him from the corners of her eyes and that she shivered whenever he was near. He broke the grace period early, touching the bathroom mirror while she was brushing her teeth. She saw the imprint of vapor that his hand made. While it was disheartening to see her scream and bolt directly into the bathtub, the makeshift séance before him now was an encouraging sign. After years of reaching out and driving people away, someone was finally going to reach back.

Below him, the women talked.

"It's here," Trisha said. "I can feel it."

Jade rolled her eyes. Trisha couldn't see it through the dim light, but to Oliver it was clear as day.

Trisha laid her fingers on the planchette. "Let's get started."

Jade said, "Trisha, if this is some kind of prank…"

"It's not a prank. You saw the picture."

"The hand on the mirror? Anyone of us could have done that."

Oliver hadn't breathed in decades but his chest rose and fell as if he were hyperventilating. He grabbed at the planchette. Trisha lifted her hands from it, and Oliver's fingers phased through the plastic.

"I saw it happen, right in front of me!" Trisha said. "And it's not just that! Sometimes I can hear things."

"Like now!" Oliver yelled. "Right now!"

She knitted her eyebrows and looked up at where he was. Jade leaned over the table. The creak of the floor boards caught Trisha's attention. Oliver stiffened at the sound.

"Trish, it's an old house. It's going to make noises."

Jade moved back into her chair, making a louder creak. Oliver squeezed his eyes shut. He kept saying "No" to himself, each repetition less steady. "I know what an old house sounds like!"

Trisha threw her arms up, gesturing to the whole house. "This isn't it. You can't hear it?"

"What am I supposed to be hearing?" Jade stomped a foot into the floor. "This?"

Oliver clasped his hands on his ears. "Not now!"

Mid-day. August. School's around the corner. The whole family goes out for a drive but he's at home. Slept in. Oldest child but just can't keep routine. Feels bad, wants to make it up, starts making lunch for everyone. Sees a car roll up, rushes out to greet them. Only it's not the Packard like it should be, it's the shiniest Rolls Royce he's ever seen…

Trisha put a finger to her lips. "'Now.' That's what I heard, 'now.' Listen!"

Jade stood up. Another creak.

Four well-dressed men come out of the car. He knows them now, recognizes the leader with the grin that's far too wide. They're not just here for Father's money this time. Boy sees the shining glint of silver in the man's hands, and tries to run…

"It's just the pipes, Trish." Jade walked over to the sink with sure, steady strides. Creaks and groans rose from the floor with every step. She turned on the faucet.

"Dad told me about this. We just have to run the water for a bit and it'll settle out."

Trisha whispered. "I-i-it's not the p-p-pipes."

Jade turned and saw vapor rising from her sister's mouth. It glowed in the candlelight.

Goosebumps ran up her spine.

They catch him. Beat him down and break all his limbs. They stamp every tender part of his body until he feels bruises forming down his torso, between his legs.

The floorboards creak as they pull them up. They bring in a shovel, dig a hole right next to him.

"Your pa squealed about our little arrangement," the man with the grin says. He's still grinning, maybe even wider now. "So your kin's dead. They're gonna find them, but your pa loved you an awful lot. So I got something special."

The boy sees the silver thing. A hacksaw…

Jade took a step towards her sister. The dining room table flew into the air and fell over, slamming the spirit board into the wall. The kitchen cabinets all flew open at once and every dish flew towards her. One shattered on her head and she tumbled to the floor.

Every door in the house opened and slammed in a chaotic pattern. Hari ran out of the room, demanding to know what the girls had done. The circuit breaker behind him burst and he was silent. Jade rose from the floor to see her sister staring at a man standing before her, sliced into parts and held together by the thinnest viscera.

Trisha whispered prayers under her breath as Oliver shambled towards her.

"Help me," he said. "It hurts."

Part I

Leah wiped the sweat from her eyes and saw the Abandoned One standing before her. Long ago, when the riptide pulled her under, his large gray eyes and waxy skin had been a terror to behold. Now he was only a painful sight, both a reminder of better times and of her greatest failure.

The Abandoned One pointed toward the door. Leah put down the screw gun. Of course someone had come to see her in the middle of fixing the air conditioner. She stood up and popped her back.

She felt the sensation of a hard shove against her shoulder, the Abandoned One's way of asking if he should send the visitor away.

Leah mopped her forehead with a handkerchief. "No. I'll talk to 'em. Stay close."

She went to the door, the Abandoned One floating behind her. She looked over her shoulder and saw him smiling with his empty mouth. This was the first time they had spoken to each other for more than a moment in two weeks. She hadn't meant it to be that way, but the first week went by in a blur of crying fits and restless sleep, and in the second week she dived into fixing the house. Aidan's death seemed to have invited a myriad of problems into her home: The living room drywall cracked, the bed finally gave in, and now the air conditioner broke during the hottest part of the summer. The Abandoned One watched as she fixed these things, barely saying a word. Perhaps he was grieving in his own way, or feared that he would become his namesake if he left to take care of his own business.

Leah looked through the peephole. Mark wore his usual full business suit. The Open-Throated Saint stood beside him. He wasn't chatting over his phone's earpiece, which meant that this was serious.

She opened the door. Mark straightened his sweat-soaked tie. He smiled.

"Hot enough for you?" he said. The lacerations on the Saint's throat gurgled over, which was as close as she came to a greeting. Leah crossed her arms.

"Can we come in? Saint and I could really use some cool air."

"Air's broke," Leah said.

Mark's smile faded. He blinked the sweat out of his eyes. "Oh. Well. Do you want to talk about this in the car? It's probably boiling now, but after I start it up—"

The Abandoned One threw himself in front of Leah and loomed over Mark. The Open-Throated Saint growled and flexed her claws. He raised an arm to strike.

"That's enough!" Leah said to him. The Abandoned One looked at her, bewildered, and moved to the kitchen. The Saint glided forward. Leah glared at her, and she stopped.

"I'll just start over," Mark said. He raised his right hand, following traditional protocol. "As a High Priest of the Church of the Brighter Morning, I greet you, O High Priestess."

Leah sighed and raised her left hand. "I am honored to greet my follow traveler. What do you want, Mark?"

"We found someone. Old ghost, real old ghost. One of the parishioners knows someone who lives in his haunt. She got it to us before some con artist caught on. We need someone to help him pass on."

Leah grimaced. "You could have just called."

"You'd refuse if I did."

She nodded, too exhausted from the heat to lie. "You should get someone else."

"Leah, there isn't anyone else. The recruits barely know how to perform an exorcism, Oumil's taking a trip downstairs, I'm trying to make peace with Fifth Street, and Aiden's…"

Leah looked away from him. The Abandoned One reappeared in the entrance hallway. Mark cleared his throat.

"You're taking it better than any of us. You don't think so, but you put him to rest so quickly. I couldn't have done that."

"I wasn't going to let a Reaper take him," Leah said. "I'd never let anyone be trapped down there. Never."

"And that's why we need you. The word has to have hit the street by now, about the ghost, about what Fifth Street did to us. It's been so quiet lately, and the Saint's been telling me it's because no one's made a move. Not yet. If we allow one display of weakness, it's open season on everything we've worked for."

Leah wrapped her arms around herself. "Who is he?"

Mark pulled out his phone. "Kamala said that the witnesses didn't catch a name, but I did some research."

He swiped through websites and spreadsheets. "A lot of low-key hauntings that end in a huge outburst. The house is in Silver Star's old turf. They'd probably have taken care of it years ago, but no one's seen them since the Reaper attack."

He pinched out an obituary. "Here we are. The LaVoies all died in a car wreck, except for their oldest, Oliver. He went missing instead. Never found, foul play suspected but the case went cold. The old Krol family probably had a hand in it. Judging from the stories, I'd say he isn't very happy about not being found."

The Abandoned One rushed up, getting so close to the phone screen that his eyes took on a pale glow. The Open-Throated Saint inched forward but Mark motioned her to stay. The Abandoned One read the files with a wide grin.

"Kind of like you, huh?" Leah said to him.

The Abandoned One turned to her with expectant eyes. Leah's body was filled with a sad, nervous energy, but she felt a rising exuberance through her bones. She had to fight off the urge to smile. The last time he had felt so strongly about something that the feeling leaked into her body, she had been invited to join the Church. Following her geist's gut feelings was rarely a great idea, but what was there to gain out of denying him now?

"He wants to go, so I'll go," Leah said. "Any set time?"

"Tonight," Mark said. "The sooner we act, the better. Get your things together; I'll go make some calls." He clicked his ear piece on and walked towards his car. "I've got to negotiate the price with the clients. They've got to know we don't come cheap."

"Wait," Leah said.

Mark turned around, eyebrows raised.

"I need to pick up a new inverter. I'll give you the directions."

"Excuse me? Are you making me run your errand?"

Leah smiled. The Abandoned One took his place beside her, chest puffed up. "We don't come cheap, either."

Part II

Leah Washington arrived at the Patels' in the dead of night, heralded by silent and soft flashes of lightning. The Abandoned One kept watch from the top of her sedan. He phased through the roof and into the left-side backseat, right next to where Emptyface would have sat, had she still been bound to Aidan. Leah tried not to think about where she could have gone after the life faded from his eyes, his own geist unable to raise him. Her nightmares did the thinking for her. She would see Emptyface in chains at the bottom of a great ocean. Sometimes Aidan was with her. He screamed into the water, curses rising as bubbles.

The image of a thick, dark stretch of woods popped into Leah's mind, the Abandoned One's way of warning her of incoming danger.

She pulled up the hood of her black ceremonial cloak. The hood ended in a sharp point and had large white circles painted on both sides. "We'll have to deal with it when it comes."

The door was already open for her. The celebrants that Mark had wrangled had already scrawled the mixture of Enochian, Zaum, and Kobaïan words on the walls needed to keep the ghost calm. They had also spread aged rum in the corners of every room in the house to attract him to the scent. Everything had been executed perfectly, save for the presence of the Patels. Hari sat on the couch with a scowl. Jade and Trisha sat at his sides.

Hari stood up. "You are the 'High Priestess?'"

"I am the Cradle of the Lost," Leah said, "High Priestess of the Church of the Brighter Morning. You were told to leave."

Hari scoffed. "I have paid you to make a mess of my house. Were it not for a very close and persuasive friend of mine, I would not have let any of your people within my home. You work for me and my daughters. I will make sure that you do. You may begin your magic trick at any time."

Despite the temptation rising in her throat, Leah chose not to tell Hari that the Abandoned One had coiled its flexible Corpus around him like a python, staring at him with hateful eyes. Her gaze flicked over to Trisha. She squinted at her father, as if she could almost see the thing that ensnared him. Leah hummed in approval. Perhaps when this was over, she could talk her into joining the church.

"Very well, sir," Leah said. "Please return to your seat, and we will begin. No sudden movements."

Hari sat back onto the couch as the Abandoned One uncurled himself. He lost his footing and tumbled onto the cushions. Leah glared at her geist. He made the closest sound to laughing he could: a wheezing burst of air from his open mouth.

The celebrants, dressed in simple gray robes, gathered in a circle around her.

"My lady," one of them said, "None of us have felt the ghost's presence."

Leah pulled a flexible branch from her cloak. "We'll draw him out."

She raised the branch into the air. The celebrants began singing a wordless song. She drew hexagrams with the branch in each cardinal direction. In every corner of the house, thick, gray0yellow ooze grew from the rum-splashed surfaces. The ooze stretched out across the house and onto the branch. She let go of it and it hung into the air. The mass engulfed the branch, and beat like a heart as it expanded.

The Patels moved closer together. Trisha mouthed, "Holy shit."

"This is a trick," Jade said. "Something with mirrors or glue or…"

Hari said nothing. He balled his fists and pressed them into the couch.

Leah raised her arms to the sky. The Abandoned One embraced her from behind. "Now," she said.

He eased himself into her body, and a pleasant numbness ran through her. She opened her eyes, now a solid gray like her geist. He guided her hands to the ooze and placed her fingers where they needed to go. Together, they molded the material like clay, coaxing it into the shape of a human male.

"That's him!" Trisha said. "That's the ghost!"

Hari gaped at the figure. "He's just a boy. He couldn't be any older than you, Trisha. He did all this?"

The Abandoned One pulled himself out of Leah's body. Again in full control, she reached for the vial of cachaça in her cloak. She poured it all into her mouth, and spat it at the sculpture.

Oliver's eyes snapped open. He touched his forearm. He pulled away his fingers and strands of ooze flew off. He rubbed his hands over where he had been cut apart and found them smooth. He took in the room around him, now that he was able to see it with solid eyes. He smiled at Trisha. She raised a hand in greeting, her face caught between awe and terror.

Leah extended an arm to him. "Oliver LaVoie."

Oliver's eyes widened. "You know me?"

"What's keeping you here, Oliver?"

"I…" Oliver pointed to the kitchen. "I'm under the floorboards. I don't want to be there. I need to find my family. Can you help me?"

"Yes, Oliver. We know where they're buried, and we will put your body with them. Take my hand. You've earned a rest."

He reached out to her, then stopped before grasping her hand. "What about my family?" What if they're like me?"

"If they're still out there, we'll find them and put them to rest." Oliver's chest rose and fell, as if he were taking a deep breath. "All right. I'd like to say something before I go."

Leah smiled. "Of course."

Oliver turned to the Patels. "I just want to say—"

All at once, every window in the house shattered. Leah crouched down and covered her head with her hands. A dry wind howled through the new openings. The celebrants stopped singing. Oliver's body shuddered. Bits and pieces of it dripped to the floor, revealing the butchered ghost within. He grabbed parts of the melting ooze and tried to spread it on his Corpus, but doing that made it run thin.

"You lied to me!" he cried.

Leah motioned to the Abandoned One. He vanished from her side.

"I meant everything I said, Oliver." She reached out her hand out to him again. "There's still time! Take my hand before it finds you!"

Hari stood up. "It? What is this 'it?' I thought you had this under control!"

Leah opened her mouth to say something. A painful tightness grasped her heart, and she fell to the floor screaming. The Abandoned One was fighting something and losing. Her flock rushed to her aid, but an unseen force tossed them away from her, through the walls and broken windows.

Trisha grabbed her father and rushed for the door. A groaning came from below the house. She stopped in the middle of turning the knob, transfixed by the world outside.

"Trisha," Jade said, "Open the door!"

"I can't," Trisha said. "We're sinking."

The floorboards burst apart, revealing an empty void. The house split in two and tumbled inside.

Interlude I

Mark stepped into the Whiterock Building and shivered. The lobby was freezing in comparison to the muggy evening outside. He went to the front desk, darting his eyes to the corners of the room.

The concierge's voice broke his concentration. "May I help you, sir?"

"Yeah." Mark pulled out his phone. "I'm Mark Baker, and I'm here to see… Adam Wessel."

Adam Wessel was not a real person. The name was one of many that the Fifth Street Titans rented their penthouse apartment under. Two weeks of intense negotiation had led to this moment, and everything needed to be followed to the letter. The krewe almost certainly controlled the entire building. A single misstep could lead to a fatal "accident." His geist could bring him back from that, but the threat of continued violence against the Church would still be on the table, and he'd have to start from nothing.

Mark tapped a nervous rhythm against the front desk. What he had hoped would be a quick confirmation had turned into a back and forth between the concierge and one of the Titans. The Open-Throated Saint had left his side not long after came in. As far as he knew, she was skulking around the perimeter, checking for ambushes like he was. Did they know?

The concierge hung up the phone. "You're free to go, Mr. Baker. Take the express elevator up to Floor 20B."

Mark sighed in relief. "Thank you."

The Saint waited for him in the elevator. Mark asked her, "Anything I should know?"

She gurgled. Considering that she was here and not trying to tear someone apart limb from limb, Mark felt safe in assuming that they were safe for now.

He leaned against the wall and stared at their silver-tinted reflections. He put his hand into his pants pocket, where he kept two six-sided dice in a plastic baggie. These were the dice that Aiden died for.

The Church had found them after putting a murdered gambler's ghost to rest. They were loaded, and the gambler's death had left them hot to the touch. Anyone who asked a question with the dice in hand could roll them and get one or two numbers related to their answer. It wouldn't be much. They'd get the first two digits of a safe number or the true age of a target, and the querent had to figure out the rest. Still, such a pure symbol for the power of chance was hard to come by, and the krewe figured that it'd be useful for a ritual every now and then.

The Titans had bigger plans for the dice. They made their plans known when they brought some of their own to open fire on the Church's old cenote, in the middle of a meeting. The fight was brief but bloody. The congregation sent the would-be robbers running but came away injured. Aiden bled out on the floor despite Mark's attempts at triage. Emptyface reached into the air to grasp her dying partner's spirit, but it slipped between her fingers. Leah knew what was happening before anyone else did. Mark still had a bruise on his side from when she shoved him off Aiden's body. After Aiden died, the other geists rushed to their friend to save her from the rushing waters of the open Avernian Gate. The tide was too strong. Emptyface was gone for good.

The Titans made no apology. They declared war, citing the injuries that the congregation had inflicted on them. It was a war that the Church had no chance at winning. The Titans were larger and richer than they were. So while Leah mourned and Oumil recruited, Mark sought peace.

The elevator doors parted to reveal a gray hallway leading into a brightly colored parlor. Light piano music drifted in from another room. The Fifth Street Titans were throwing a party, and for the first time in a long while, Mark felt underdressed. The krewe chatted with their guests, their geists floating behind them, waiting for orders.

The Saint emitted a low growl. Mark shook his head.

"All smiles, Saint," he whispered to her. "Let's not have a repeat of this afternoon."

A man in a mustard-yellow tuxedo walked past him. Their eyes met, and the man turned on his heel to greet him. He motioned for his geist to follow. The spirit obliged, wriggling its limbless torso across the floor and leaving a slick trail of phantom intestines and blood.

"The 'Voice to the Silent' himself!" The man extended his hand. "How the hell are you, Mark?"

Mark grinned and shook the man's hand, ignoring the increasing rage he felt radiating from the Saint. He didn't know the man's real name. He didn't know any of their real names; revealing his own had been the first of their terms. Mediating from a severe disadvantage had been

difficult.

"Fine." He glanced at the Saint. Her eyes followed the handshake, up and down. "You're the "Golden Tycoon'?"

"The very same! Earthworm and I are happy to meet you, aren't we?" The Tycoon kicked the geist below him with his foot. It let out a dry cough. "Let's get straight to business."

He led them to the least ornate room in the penthouse, a sitting room with cream walls. The Tycoon patted the table. Mark pulled out the baggie and laid it there.

"There you are," The Tycoon purred. He pulled the dice from the baggie and examined them. They had one to six pips, like a normal pair. "You the real thing, honey?"

The dice clattered on the table. One die came up with eight pips, the other with ten.

"Wonderful!" He swept up the dice and put it in his breast pocket. "I can see why you wouldn't give it up."

Mark felt a buzz in his pocket. He pulled out his phone and saw a text from Kamala.

The barley tree lies broken. The krewe code for "we're in an emergency."

"I'm glad you like it," Mark said. "I need to go."

"Go?" The Tycoon frowned. "Son, we're not done discussing peace terms yet. Do you know how many medical bills you made us pay?"

"You got what you wanted!" Mark stood up. "Something's come up."

"You step outside of our door," The Tycoon said, "and I can't guarantee your little Church's safety. Might not be today, might not be tomorrow, but you turn your back now and there'll be a storm coming."

Mark walked to the door. He patted the Tycoon's shoulder on the way out. "I'll take my chances."

Part III

There was nothing to hold on to, no brace for the rapid descent to the bedrock below. Whatever lights hadn't broken in the impact were dark from the immediate disconnection from the power grid, leaving only the faint yellow glow of fungi growing on the bedrock's surface. The house shattered, burying Leah in rubble and dust. The thick, cold humidity hit her skin and made it crawl.

Through the dim light, Leah saw the Abandoned One standing between Oliver and a hovering sphere of chains made from bones. Most of the chains were colored and bound together so that they formed an image of an emaciated, grinning face. The rest of its chains were extended like tendrils, ready for an attack.

Trisha was nearby, screaming for her father and sister while tearing away wood and plaster from the remains of the house with shaking hands.

Leah flung rubble off of herself and ran toward the sphere. "You got want you wanted, Reaper! Leave!"

Though the thing only had painted eyes, she felt its gaze fall upon her. A scraping sound came from within. The chains on its surface parted; the face's grin opened wide. A wooden mask rose from the fissure: another human face, its agony rendered in loving detail. One of the loose chains

wrapped around the mask and pulled it off.

In an instant, the ball of chains became an old woman. A thin white shawl covered her tattered evening wear. She shook her head.

"Sin-Eater." She spat the word out like a curse. "I had the situation under control. The ghost—"

"Oliver," Leah said. She looked to him. He was frozen in fear, trying to find any connection between the woman and the being that once stood in her place.

The woman glanced at him, then back to Leah. "Oliver. He was already known to us. The Old Laws of the Arched Shelter demand a direct equivalent to any ghost lost to withering. The Cage of Wings requested that I be liaison for his transport. I expected a simple task, only to find an anarchist and her lackeys attempting to foil me. Were it not for your criminal incompetence, Oliver would be home."

"Home?" Oliver asked.

The woman's face softened. "Yes. Come along, now. The rest of your eternity awaits."

Oliver took a step towards her. "Do you know where my family is?"

The Abandoned One appeared behind him and tried to clasp his hands on top of Oliver's ears.

Oliver pulled the geist's hands off. "Ma. Pa. Danny and Claude. Have you seen them?"

The woman gave him a sad smile. "I haven't, but I assure you that they are in a much better place. Let's go see one of those places now."

"Dad!" Trisha yelled. Oliver stopped walking just before the woman could grasp him.

Trisha lifted her father's bleeding body from the wreckage. Jade, coated in gray dust, helped her settle Hari on the ground.

She laid her head on his chest. "He's still breathing, Trish!"

The old woman tightened her grip on her mask. The Abandoned One tensed his body.

"Let me bring them back," Oliver said to the woman.

The woman's smile faded. "No. Their fate is sealed."

Leah closed her eyes. Striking now would only buy them time, escape was the real goal. Hadn't Mark said that Oumil was down here? Even in this unfamiliar part of the Great Below, finding her wouldn't be difficult with the Abandoned One at her side. He could call out to Tempest-Bloated, Oumil's geist. Even if they were too far away to rendezvous, she could at least be a beacon to the surface.

A vision of being chased in the woods by a shadowy figure in a uniform appeared in her mind. She gritted her teeth. The Abandoned One was right: The Reaper would hear his call, and she would follow.

To her left, she heard the echo of running water from one of the nearby tunnels. If she could guide them to the nearest River and walk against its flow, they'd still be able to return on their own.

"They're still alive!" Oliver said. "There's still a chance for them!"

The woman curled her lip. "Everything in this land is dead. There is no room for them in the Arched Shelter, but I will gladly guide them to exactly where they belong."

"Then…" Oliver looked to Leah. His mouth fell open at the sight of her. Around her, fresh green grass grew between the stubbly fungi. The walls of the cavern shone with an iridescent beauty. Her black skin still flushed with life, even as the Patels' brown skin began to grow gray and sickly.

Oliver pulled up shaking fists. "Then I'm not going anywhere."

He ran at her with a right hook. The woman grasped his fist in her free hand.

The woman sneered. "Dear boy, you don't have a choice."

She went to slap her mask on. The Abandoned One leapt on top of her, coiling his arms and legs around hers. He stretched himself until her appendages snapped off. Her limbs vanished and the wooden mask flew into the distance.

"My mask!" the woman cried. She slid out of the Abandoned One's grasp.

Leah gestured to the echoing tunnel. "This way!"

Trisha struggled to lift her father over her shoulder. Oliver rushed to Hari's other side and lifted it up. They shared a look of surprise, then started running. Jade followed behind, left arm in a hastily made sling.

The woman skittered across the ground to her mask. An arm grew from her corpus and gasped for it. Leah raised her arms and swung them to her sides. The woman seized up. She fumbled around the cavern, missing the mask with every grab. Without her mask, she was as susceptible as having to relive her own death as any other ghost.

"What have you done, Sin-Eater?" she screamed. "Your tricks won't work! I know we're still below! You can't…"

The woman trembled. She looked up to an unseen person. She regrew her other arm and clasped her hands together in prayer. She shook her head furiously.

"Please," she begged to nothing, "Take me, not her! Don't!"

The woman thrashed on the ground. Her legs grew back during the struggle. After a moment, she smoothly rose into a kneeling position and raised her hands in prayer once more. Leah breathed a sigh of relief. By the time the woman finally escaped the looping vision of her death, they would be long gone.

She felt mirth bubble in her stomach. The Abandoned One watched the woman suffer with a smile.

She glared at him. "None of that. She's one of us."

The Abandoned One growled.

"I meant what I said. We will all see the dawn or none of us will. Go find the others. I'll catch up."

The Abandoned One shot her a puzzled look, but moved ahead. Leah closed her eyes and made a hexagram in the air.

"May the wind carry you somewhere new," she said. It was the Church's prayer for the dead, to encourage them to pass on. It was the first time she had spoken it since Aiden died.

Part IV

They followed the tunnel for what felt like hours. The sound of rushing water grew louder as they traveled, but the River was nowhere in sight. Without food, water, or medical supplies, their pace slowed to a crawl. When Jade begged to rest, Leah obliged.

Hari's eyes opened. His sunken eyes wandered around, settling on Oliver. "Such a troublesome boy," he muttered in Hindi, between labored breaths.

Oliver knelt down to meet his gaze. "Sir, I am so sorry."

"It wasn't your fault," Leah said. She had her ear pressed to the tunnel wall. She hoped to hear the sound of rushing cars or public transportation over the current. Instead she only picked up muffled screams and sobs. The Abandoned One kept watch some distance away.

Hari sat up. "It's yours," he said to Leah in English. "They said you would keep us safe."

Leah kept her ear to the wall. "I told you to leave. That was not just a suggestion."

"You let my house be destroyed." Hari wheezed. "You put my daughters in danger."

"No," Oliver said. "None of this would have happened if I had just run away or if I stayed quiet, or…"

"Shut up!" Trisha stood up. "It's nobody's fault! No one could have known this would happen!"

"You wanted to talk to him," Jade said.

Trisha sighed. "What's it matter, Jade? We're all exhausted, but blaming someone isn't going to get us out."

Hari let out a sharp chuckle. "You sound like your mother." His head rolled up to look at the ceiling. "I wonder if she will believe you when you return."

"When we return, Dad."

Hari said nothing. A pleasant, tinny melody echoed in the tunnel. Jade's eyes widened and she reached for her pockets.

"That's my phone!" She pulled it out. "I got a text!"

Leah turned to her. "Give it here!"

Jade tossed it over. Leah dialed a number. After a moment of silence, a voice came through an intense hiss of static.

"Baker Consultancy," the voice said. "This is Mark speaking."

Leah raised her right hand, for tradition's sake. "As a High Priestess of the Church of the Brighter Morning, I greet you, O High Priest."

"Jesus, Leah, is that you?" So much for tradition.

"It's me, Mark. I'm down here with Oliver and the Patels. Where are you?"

"The hospital," Mark said. "I had to drive us over. I've been trying to keep my story straight for the nurses for the past couple hours. Is the Reaper still tailing you?"

"I took care of her. We're trying to find an exit. Everything's still stone down here, but I can hear a River and voices. I don't think we're that far down."

"Oh, thank God. Oumil already knows what happened. We're getting ready to go down and look for you. I don't think it'll be too long if you're close to the surface. How long 'til your battery runs out?"

Leah looked at the phone. The battery was completely empty, but the phone still ran. "I don't know."

"Wonderful. Just stay on the line with me."

Hari gasped for air. "Dad?" Trisha asked.

He slammed to the ground and began convulsing. Trisha compressed his chest. Jade cradled his face.

"Come on, Dad, stay with us!" she said.

"What's going on down there?" Mark asked.

"It's Hari Patel. He's dying," Leah said.

"Do you have a Saint's Knife with you?"

"No."

"You'll just have to improvise. I'm getting in the car now."

Trisha laid her head on her father's chest. "Come on…"

Hari grasped Jade's hand and mouthed silent words. She blinked back tears.

Leah called out to the Abandoned One. "Give me something sharp," and then to Oliver: "Grab some of the dirt and make a circle around his body."

"Yes, ma'am!" Oliver gathered clumps in his arms. The Abandoned One felt along the wall for a chunk to rip off.

Jade stood up. "What are you doing?"

"Your father won't make it. I'm going to slow down the process so you can say goodbye."

Jade stumbled to Leah, eyes red and overflowing with tears. "He's not going to die."

"Jade, he's wasting away. Before he rises as a ghost, we need to help him pass on."

"You don't know that!"

"We're running out of time! Let me perform the last rite!"

Oliver finished the circle. The Abandoned One gave Leah a sharp fragment of the wall. She pressed it against her open palm. Jade pushed her down before she could pierce the skin.

"No! We're getting him to a doctor!"

Trisha pulled her sister off of her. "Just let her do this!"

Jade shoved Trisha away. "How can you trust her?"

"He's going to die, but he doesn't belong here," Leah said. "There is a Brighter Morning that we all deserve. This isn't it, Jade. We call this the Perilous Night, and no one should be here. I need to send him to the Morning before it's too late."

"Shut up!" Jade backed away. "You don't know anything!"

Hari coughed once, then slipped out of his corpse as a ghost. Trisha watched with her hands clasped to her mouth. Jade collapsed to the ground and sobbed. Hari's ghost opened empty eyes and made no expression of emotion as it regarded them.

Nearby, a portion of the wall collapsed. The ghost turned towards the new opening. "I hear your call."

"Leah?" Mark asked. "What's happening now?"

"Hari's a ghost and he's being lured somewhere."

"Come back!" Jade leapt up and ran after her father's ghost.

"Jade!" Trisha ran after her, and the others followed. Beyond the wall was a sharp slope, falling away to a village within a large swamp. Hari was at the bottom of the slope, Jade close behind. An arch stood above the swamp, half covered in fog.

Into her phone, Leah said, "We've found a Dominion."

"Leah, I'm almost at the house, don't go in."

"Jade, stop!" Trish ran down the slope. Oliver followed.

Leah cursed. "They went in."

"They're not our concern, we…damn it. What's it look like?"

"Wetlands with a village in it. The Reaper mentioned an Arched Shelter, this might be it. Mark, I have to go before I lose them."

"Good luck, Leah." She hung up.

Interlude II

The Patel house, which Mark had walked through only yesterday, was completely gone. In its place was a large hole shaped like a perfect circle, as if someone had taken a knife and carefully carved the property from existence. This was not too far from the truth.

Mark had seen the aftermath of Reaper attacks before, but he had never seen one leave such a dramatic mark so close to other homes in the neighborhood. Shattered glass and twisted metal spread around parts of the hole's circumference, the remnants of the cars that had parked around the house. A crowd was forming, talking and snapping pictures.

"Saint," Mark said, "We've got to split this crowd."

Mark patted his chest. The Open-Throated Saint pressed her hands on it and climbed into his body. Once she was fully inside him, Mark stepped out of his car. He violently coughed, expelling a thick cloud of mist around him. When the cloud dissipated, he was gone, at least in a physical sense. His body shifted into an invisible and intangible state, like the ghost he would have become if not for the Saint's intervention. He was one with her now, and his mind buzzed with her feelings. She couldn't get the image of the Tycoon's geist out of her mind and could barely contain the desire to make him pay.

"Easy, easy," Mark said. He looked around. The lights from the phones of the crowd were harsher and wider spread. It illuminated the congregation, who were hiding in what remained of the backyard, underneath a partially uprooted tree. It would only be a matter of time until the crowd noticed them.

Mark moved into the crowd. "Let's make a scene."

Walking through people was more difficult than ghosts made it seem. Maintaining the integrity of a ghostly body as it moves through living flesh needs a strong sense of self and a keen focus on the task at hand. It took weeks of practice for Mark to master it.

For most of the crowd, having a ghostly being walk through them was enough. The sensation felt like being brushed by thin threads of viscous jelly, and the human mind was momentarily exposed to the tempest of heightened emotions that lay within its mind. Withstanding that kind of sensory overload needed a mental fortitude that

the usual bystander couldn't muster. For the rest, it was simply a matter of tossing the metal and glass around the hole into the air and then into the hole once people started running.

Once they dispersed, the Open-Throated Saint tore herself out of Mark's chest. He gasped, taking in air for the first time since he became a ghost. He knelt down and grasped the dirt as he became solid again.

He looked up to see that the congregation was in bad shape. Some of them, like Yennifer and Walter, were badly cut. Scott, one of the newest members, made his robe into a makeshift sling to hold his broken arm. Kamala, heavily bruised herself, distributed medical supplies from a half-torn emergency bag.

The Golden Tycoon's words swam in Mark's mind: *Do you know how many medical bills you made us pay?*

He frowned. "What happened to the Patels? Where's Leah?"

For a moment, the congregation said nothing. Then, Kamala spoke up. "They're gone. The Reaper dragged them down. It took the ghost, too."

Mark shut his eyes. "Oh."

The Open-Throated Saint flew into a rage, swiping at empty air. In his mind's eye, Mark saw a woman in a religious habit sobbing alone in a field. She tore her coif off her head and beat it against her breast.

He opened his eyes. The members of the congregation were pulling themselves up.

"I felt it coming," Scott said as he adjusted his sling, "But before I could even say anything it attacked."

"We weren't ready." Kamala's voice hitched. "We tried to fight back but…"

"It's okay," Mark said. His geist calmed at his words. "You did what you could. You're here, and that's what matters."

"But…" Kamala started to protest but Mark shook his head.

"Don't beat yourselves up." Mark pulled Yennifer to her feet. "It knew it wasn't going to win a fair fight, so it had to hope for an ambush."

Just like Fifth Street. That's what Mark wanted to say, even though he knew it wasn't true.

"Remember, when we put our own to rest, they think that we're spitting in their eyes. That's because we are. When we tell them that there's more to all this than just sadness and decay and fighting over little bits of trinkets, they say we're tearing their world apart. That's because we are."

His speech was improvised but the words weren't exactly his. Leah had said something like that to him before he joined the church, back when he was just a vengeful young man trying to get back at the business partner who poisoned him.

"So, we're going to pull through this." He took a moment to look every member of the congregation in the eye. "And we're going to come back stronger than ever. Leah knows what she's doing. I've seen her pull through worse. She's going to save them, she's going to come back, and we're going to have our Brighter Morning."

His gut churned with doubt, but he didn't care. They believed him. For now, that was good enough.

"Come on," he said, "let's get back to the car. It's gonna be a tight squeeze, but I think it'll fit everyone. Scott, you ride shotgun with me. I don't want that arm getting any more messed up than it already is. Anyone need help walking?"

"I think we'll be fine," Kamala said. "Someone needs to tell Oumil."

"Once I'm sure you're all getting seen to, I'll let her know." Mark flashed his phone light into the hole, and saw a dirt bottom several feet deep. "Looks like it won't leave a Gate."

"Thank God for that," Scott said. "I don't want to see another one these for as long as I live."

In the distance, Mark heard the sound of sirens. "Aw, hell."

"So, what are we going to say to them?" Kamala asked. "We need an alibi, right?"

"It's not like we can blame it on ghosts." Scott chuckled.

"You sure about that?" Mark stretched his back.

Scott raised an eyebrow. "What?"

Mark waved the congregation away.

"Stand back," he said. "If I do this right, we're not going to need to say anything 'til we're at the hospital. Watch and learn."

He patted his chest. "Saint?"

Part V

Leah and the Abandoned One wandered the empty village. The shadow of a jagged arch hung above them, dotted by the sharp red glow of candles melted against the swamp's petrified trees. The huts around them were made from whatever materials the ghosts upstream had not consumed: brick, stucco, and logs kept upright by careful placement and hope. The streets they walked were just as slapdash, formed from smashed-together cobblestone and asphalt.

The ghosts that lived here moved in single file through the brackish water of the swamp and kept their eyes cast to the ground. Some of them held their hands at their brows, as if Leah's presence were as bright as the sun itself. They quickened their pace around the Sin-Eater, and especially the Abandoned One. The dead didn't speak to them, and Leah hadn't expected them to. Whatever archaic laws ran this place were almost certainly broken by their arrival. No sense in talking to people who were about to be punished by whatever enforced those laws.

Instead, Leah kept watch on where they went. Oliver and the others didn't choose to come here, and the guardian of this land hadn't swooped in to attack them upon their entrance. There was a greater plan at work. Leah tried to call Mark again, but whatever signal trickled down to make the call possible had long vanished.

The Abandoned One tugged at her arm and pointed. One of the ghosts had torn herself away from the others. The ghost ahead of her turned his head long enough for Leah to see his pained expression. He turned away and the ghost behind him closed the gap. The Abandoned One pursued the lone ghost. Leah followed.

The ghost's destination was in the center of the village. A large bomb shelter lay there, torn directly from whatever building had once housed it. Locks clicked apart as the ghost approached. The blast door opened and closed, slowly enough for the Sin-Eater and geist to slip inside after her. The ghost found her place as part of a

large, standing, square formation of the dead, stepping into a single absent spot in the back. She stood at attention and the others followed suit.

Leah heard a moan of despair from the center of the formation. It came from Jade, her skin now completely gray with deep black veins running through it. She shook her father with decreasing vigor. He stood with the formation, at full attention and with no acknowledgement of his daughter in front of him. Leah saw Trisha and Oliver leaning from a pile of burlap sacks in another corner of the shelter. She heard a shuffling of wings and leaped behind a stack of wooden crates.

She peeked around the stack and saw a pillar of wings folded into each other emerge from the shadows, at the very front of the formation. The ghosts showed no surprise or fear. Jade turned toward the pillar. She fell to the ground. The pillar rose into the air and its wings unfurled. It descended upon Jade as a perfect circle of wings, connected to a beating heart at the center. The ghosts, including Hari, stepped away from her in perfect synchronicity.

Parts of the heart's muscles pulled away to form a simulacrum of a mouth. "The draft is complete. You were not selected."

The Cage of Wings swept Jade's body into itself, becoming a pillar again. The ear-piercing shrieks that followed sent a wave of nausea through Leah's body. Her chest felt tight. A burning heat swept through her muscles, a manifestation of the Abandoned One's growing rage.

"We can't kill it," Leah whispered. "We have to get the others out of here."

The Abandoned One grabbed her arm. His long nails dug into her skin as he tried to drag her forward.

"We can't kill it alone!" Leah grabbed her geist's wrist. "We need to go over to the other two, tell them to stay put. We'll get out and come back with help."

The Abandoned One tilted his head. Leah opened her mouth to say something, but images flashed in her mind.

It's snowing. He's running barefoot through the snow for what feels like ages. The burning ache of the cold is gone now. They're in the forest, shots firing everywhere…

The Cage of Wings snapped itself back open, spraying blood and dust into the air. It turned to the stack of crates. The formation of ghosts turned with it. Leah tried to keep focused, but her thoughts were drowned out by the flood of memories.

"Stay here. We'll be back soon, promise!"

He hears them but he doesn't believe them. The kisses his family gives him are the first time he feels warm in days. There's nothing to eat, the blanket he has is too wet, and the soldiers are all around him. Darkness creeps into his vision, and he begs it to leave…

"The draft is complete," The Cage of Wings said. "Outsiders are not permitted."

He's blind now. He can't move. He wishes that one of the bullets had just hit him. He remembers his grandfather crumbling to the ground after just one shot. He envies him. It hurts so much to die alone, to know that he'll always be alone…

As the Cage of Wings and its army tore through the boxes, Leah reached out to touch the Abandoned One's face. "You're not alone."

The memories faded. The ghosts fell upon them with blow after blow, but it did not break the sense of peace the two felt in that moment, or the assurance of what

to do next. Leah's fingers dug into the Abandoned One's face as he melted into a liquid that crawled into every pore of her body. Leah's flesh bubbled and swelled. She swept out her arm, stretching it into a rock-solid wall. The ghosts flew to the sides of the shelter.

Behind them, the blast door came apart with a groan. The Open-Throated Saint bolted through the new opening, brandishing her claws. Mark, Oumil, and Tempest-Bloated were right behind her.

"Run!" Leah shouted to Oliver and Trisha. Her voice was a mix of her own and the voice of a child.

The two ran for the door as the army of ghosts gave chase. Mark pulled out a flare gun from his suit pocket and fired it at them. The ghosts stared at the flying red light in awe. Oumil swept Trisha into her arms.

The Cage of Wings grappled Leah as she turned to run. "Outsiders will be punished!"

She shifted her arms to sharp blades, but they only made sparks on the being's wings. It pulled her in close and brushed its mouth against her arm. It felt like a long vine with sharp thorns dragged against her skin.

Leah shut her eyes as the mouth reared back to bite her face. Then, she heard something smash into its back and she fell out of its grip. She saw the remains of a wooden crate on the floor, and Oliver behind the Cage of Wings. He held his shaking arms to the ceiling, and every loose object in the bunker hung in the air above him.

"Come on," he said to the Cage of Wings. "Come and get me!"

He hurled the pile of junk at it. The Cage of Wings flew towards him, knocking crates and sacks out of its path, and soon he was within its wings.

"Leah! Go!"

She turned and ran, up from the Arched Shelter to where the streams flowed. Oliver's screams were finally out of earshot. From there, they went up, into the sewers, and back into the light of day.

Epilogue

Trisha Patel knocked on the community center door and relished the sensation. Two weeks had passed since she lost both her sister and father to a world that lay beneath her feet, and her sense of touch was slowly returning. When her mother found her sobbing in the hotel shower, she had told her that she was still in grief. This was only partially true. The real reason she started crying was that she could finally feel the heat of the water.

The official reports had said that it was a freak foundation collapse. The house was too old to be on the market, too fragile to be in anyone's care. An insurance investigator told her that the house should have been demolished years ago. When she asked him why no one had, he told her it was a matter of red tape. He didn't elaborate, and from the pained look on his face as he answered, hoped she wouldn't make him do so.

Despite her mother's concerns, Trisha visited where the house had been as soon as the city would allow her. According to civic records, the hole that her entire life sank into was 20 feet deep. Not a single brick of the building remained. The family lamented that there were no bodies to recover and nothing they could use as a

memorial. Watching them mourn and not being able to tell the truth never stopped hurting. The world below had numbed her body, but not once did it numb her heart.

Her mother was adamant on what would come next: Trisha would have to come back with her to Wisconsin, somewhere far away in a new, more stable house. She set down Trisha's future while they were waiting for their meals at a fast-food place, as if it was just another errand to be done. While her mother assured her that she could easily pick up a school's curriculum in the middle of the year, the ghost of an old man wandered through the restaurant's kitchen, running a projector that did not exist.

She could see the ghosts clearly now. She had always been sensitive to shadows where there should not have been or movement just out of eyesight, but now the lingering dead mingled with the world around her like line art on projector paper, placed on top of the world. It reminded her that she had not yet gotten closure. So, after a clandestine phone call, Trisha found herself at the door of the Church of the Brighter Morning.

Leah, the woman who saved her life, opened the door. The creature with the gray eyes stood beside her.

"Hi." Trisha leaned to look inside. The Church of the Brighter Morning held their service in a classroom with dimmed lights and computer-printed esoteric symbols taped to the walls. The desks were arranged into tight rows, and most of the people who filled them wore bandages and casts. The non-injured ones carried instruments. Ghosts stood in the empty space, in various states of injury and illness.

Mark, the man who had given her first aid, walked past carrying a large chocolate cake. A creature with a gaping throat wound bounded behind him. "As you can see, we're in a bit of a…transitional period."

"We work with what we have," Leah added.

Trisha took a seat at one of the empty desks in the back. A ghost missing the right side of her body gave her a polite smile. Trisha returned it with a half-smile of her own.

Oumil, the woman who had carried her to safety, came in with a photo album. A naked, waterlogged woman floated ahead of her. "I'm glad you could make it, Trisha. Do you have the photos?"

"Yeah." Trisha pulled out two pictures from her purse. Like the symbols on the walls, they too were printed from a computer. One was a picture of her family on a trip to the zoo last year, taken from a social media page. The other was harder to find: She lost her phone in the chaos, and she had only sent the picture of Oliver's handprint to two friends. Only one still had the picture with them.

"Good, good." Oumil pulled a purple robe over her clothes. "Then we're all set. I'll let you know when we need them."

Mark and Leah donned black robes, and the service began. Mark led a litany that switched between English and a language that Trisha could not place. From what she could gather, they were all blessing the cake he had brought. The ghosts, to her surprise, ate the cake. All at once, they became as solid and alive as any one of the living.

One of the churchgoers strummed a tune on his guitar. A woman with a fiddle played to his melody. Another man played a low bass harmony on a trumpet. Some of the injured members kept time by clapping their hands. Leah led a call and response in

the Church's language. From the exuberance of the crowd, Trisha felt that she was the only one unfamiliar with it.

When the music reached a fever pitch, Leah and her cloaked friends danced with their spectral counterparts. It was a kind of square dance, each member occasionally swapping with their partner. The rest of the living and the dead stood and joined the dance. The bisected woman, now whole, offered Trisha a dance. She turned her down. Jade had always been more of the dancing type. The woman gave a curt nod and found another dancing partner.

When the dance ended, the living came up to the classroom desk in groups of two. They placed photographs they carried into the album on the desk. Oumil gestured for Trisha to come forward. She came up to the desk, paired with Leah. Trisha looked over at the single glossy photo she had, a picture of Leah with her arm wrapped around an olive-skinned man with a radiant smile. Behind them, the man with the large gray eyes and a woman with a hole in her head where her face should be watched.

Leah slipped her picture into the album with shaking fingers. Trisha's pictures were too big, so she tucked them in between the pages. Oumil shut the book. With her right hand, she drew a hexagram over it.

"Leah?"

"Yes, Trisha?"

"My father's still down there."

"I know."

Oumil addressed the Church. She placed her hand on the album. "These are the Remembered." She gestured to the crowd. "You are the Remembered. We will not spend our eternity in the Perilous Night. The Brighter Morning will touch us all, as it will for everyone."

"Everyone." Trisha crossed her arms. "Hmm."

"That includes your father," Leah said. "We will find him and we will set him free."

Trisha pressed her hands together, taking in a sensation she once took for granted. For a brief moment, she thought about Wisconsin. She cast it away.

"You will," she said, "Because when you do, I'll be there."

Lauren Roy

Caroline hates the damp.

She trails her fingers along clammy walls and slides her feet cautiously, lest she slip on the slick stone floor. Wet air fills her lungs. She counts her steps to distract herself from the pressure building in her chest. Fifty steps, sixty. The telltale burn builds below her breastbone, but she pretends it's not there, pretends her throat isn't tightening. It's mind over goddamned matter, and she's *not* going to cough, she's *not*, she *refuses*.

But the cough explodes out of her anyway, bending her double with its force. She can't draw a full breath before another spate begins, and that's when the old panic clamors its way up her spine.

The Unadorned Bride takes her time catching up. The geist has seen this a dozen times before and maintains her slow, processional pace even as Caroline turns purple. They both know she's not going to die, after all. She's already done that once, and it didn't take. The Bride waits beside her, straight-backed and solemn like she's standing at the altar. Her plain veil hides her face. She plucks a bedraggled flower from a crevice and adds it to her tussy-mussy.

Elizabeth used to hover nearby when Caroline started coughing, pretending not to worry. Elizabeth used to bring a glass of water, or her inhaler. Elizabeth used to watch for Caroline's thumbs up or thumbs down, when she couldn't gauge how serious an attack really was.

Elizabeth doesn't do any of those things anymore, because Elizabeth's dead, which is the entire reason Caroline's making the onerous, dank crawl to the River City in the first place. *This coughing fit brought to you by my dead sister,* Caroline thinks, but she has no breath to laugh. The panic abates, though, and that's something. The coughing subsides as her lungs acclimate to the Upper Reaches.

Caroline's scored an appointment down below. She's traded favor after favor to get it. The Answer Man's a busy ghost, and he only meets with people he's deemed

worth his while. His lackeys vetted her first, each testing her mettle before passing her up the ladder to the next. She suspects at least half their missions were bullshit time wasters, designed to make her balk. But she gritted her teeth and did the jobs, and now the Answer Man has offered a few minutes of his precious time.

The ever-present drips become a constant trickle, which becomes a stream the deeper they descend. Sometimes, there's not enough room to walk alongside it, and Caroline's glad she donned Elizabeth's old galoshes before setting out this morning. The Bride merely holds her skirts up out of the water, and Caroline gets a glimpse of tennis shoes beneath her dress. They never squelch or squish.

The stream joins a river, and soon enough they find the city. It's a hodgepodge of barges and shanties built on scavenged planks. Caroline marvels that it doesn't all fall down, held together with twine and a prayer as it is. The jumble of the River City's streets used to confuse her. More than once, she ended up in dead ends or following alleys that doubled back on themselves. Resident ghosts gave her poor directions or demanded payment before showing her the proper path.

Now, though, she's got the trick of it. She makes her way to the center of the city, where the Dark Market sprawls. On its outskirts, ghosts sell trinkets from behind rickety card tables or stacked milk crates, bartering what they've dredged out of the riverbank's mud. They call out as Caroline passes, guessing what might entice her. None of them have what she's looking for. Only the Answer Man does.

The Unadorned Bride peers at a cracked bowl brimming with wedding rings, though she doesn't touch a single one. She twists at her left ring finger as though fiddling with a band, though the finger's bare. Caroline's breath catches at the longing writ in every line of the Bride's stance. She lost someone, but doesn't remember who, or how.

Closer to the market's heart, the merchant king's lackeys peel off of walls, and abandon card games to follow Caroline and the Bride. She's not sure if they're acting as escorts or prison guards. They stay a couple paces back, ambling as though they're all heading in the same direction by sheer coincidence. But she sees the rust-coated knives at their sides. They box Caroline and the Bride in, and by the time their odd procession approaches the Answer Man's makeshift mansion, she couldn't turn around and flee even if she wanted to.

This place is a fortress of found objects: a round-bellied wooden boat with its anchor permanently dropped; a battered oak desk with a high-backed chair on one side and two folding metal ones on the other. A dented teakettle sits steaming atop a camp stove. The market's other merchants store their wares in their shacks, set them out on display for passersby to see. The Answer Man's product is *himself*, and he makes sure his customers know it.

The mismatch of it all reminds Caroline of the hideaway she and Elizabeth made when they were kids, dragging old furniture into the crumbling shed at the back of their parents' property. They called the broken wicker chairs their dad kept "forgetting" to take to the dump their thrones. They drank orange soda from chipped teacups and dubbed themselves queens of the castle.

Elizabeth kept the teacups, even after they outgrew their games of make-believe. She brought them to her first apartment and packed them carefully every time she moved. Caroline had long forgotten them, had nearly forgotten their secret throne

room in the shed, but her older sister never had. Caroline found one of the cups beside Elizabeth's cooling body the day she died, shattered to bits on the hardwood floor.

The other, she'd traded for a meeting with the Answer Man.

Give away one little piece of Elizabeth, gain so very much more in return. That was the plan.

Still, her heart wrenches when he emerges from the boat's cabin, cradling the teacup in his massive palm. She knows he'll never give it back; she's already written it off as lost. But would he be so cruel as to destroy it as a show of power? Her throat tightens at the thought; she can't get her breath. *Not now,* she thinks, *not here.* The Bride — who's become solid for this event — touches her shoulder. The reassurance helps. A little. Enough.

A lackey pushes her forward. They prevent the Bride from approaching at Caroline's side. "Just her," one of them says in a voice as dry as grave dust. The Bride snarls but doesn't fight. The Answer Man considers Caroline and her geist separate entities, and they've only bought a meeting for one.

Timbers creak beneath his heavy steps as he approaches the desk. He sets the teacup down gently, almost reverently, and gestures to one of his minions as the teakettle's whistle fills the air. "Bring a second cup."

Caroline accepts the mug the minion offers her. A photo collage of two small boys adorns it. They smile out in a year's worth of shutter snaps: on a sled in winter, on beach towels in summer, peeking out of leaf piles in the fall. She wonders if their parents' ghosts will arrive here and pay whatever price the Answer Man asks, for this memory of their sons. Or if they've already been and traded it away.

He drinks from Elizabeth's cup, and Caroline almost — *almost* — wishes he'd smash it instead. It's hers, and her sister's, and he mocks Lizzie's memory with his indelicate slurps. But that's the game, isn't it? He wins if she balks.

She keeps her cool. The tea almost tastes real as it burns her tongue, which speaks to the influence this merchant king wields.

"Caroline Womrath," he says, drawing her name out like he's weighing it. "I understand I have something you want." He taps the teacup, but they both know her eyes are on a bigger prize.

"My sister, Elizabeth. She died about a year ago, and I hear you might have information about her." The krewe says Elizabeth is gone, that Caroline should concentrate on preserving the things she left behind rather than waste time chasing her shade. As if she can't do both. Up above, she's amassed an archive of Elizabeth's art. Collected her canvasses, sought out her sketchbooks. But her sister wasn't done making things, damn it, and Caroline wasn't ready to let her go. Will never be.

She knows Lizzie's not *here,* ekeing out an existence in this floating maze of shacks and shipwrecks. But her sister passed *through* on her way to some other, deeper part of the Underworld. You can spend lifetimes learning one Domain's laws. Even a Sin-Eater's lifespan has a cap, and Caroline's not willing to waste a second on false trails and failed hunches.

The Answer Man stares at her, at the Unadorned Bride behind her. He slugs down the last of his tea and makes a show of pulling a key ring from his waist, selecting a specific one. He unlocks the desk's top drawer and produces a file folder. The mer-

chant king is no fool: He flips it open outside of Caroline's reach. The lackey who fetched the tea inches closer. Ready to act in case Caroline lunges.

In the folder lies a sketch, charcoal on a square of brown paper grocery bag. Caroline's staring herself in the eye, the portrait rendered in Elizabeth's unmistakable style. Her gaze flicks to the lower right corner, and there's the artist's signature: "E.W." incorporated into swirls of Caroline's hair.

"She was here," Caroline breathes. Now she knows it deep down, into her bones. Confirmation. Vindication. All those favors, all that lost sleep and frantic searching, paying off in a drawing done on scrap. She imagines her sister's ghostly fingers smudged with scavenged charcoal. Her own itch to touch it, to hold this post-mortem evidence close to her heart, but the Answer Man hasn't let go. Caroline remains as poker-faced as she can.

"She was here," he agrees. "And I know where she went, after."

"What's your price?" She cringes as the eagerness in her voice betrays her, at the slight wheeze in her words, but they both know she wouldn't be here if she weren't desperate.

"You've proven yourself capable," he says, not quite answering. Not all the test jobs she did were useless errands. Caroline's hands are bloody with the Answer Man's tasks. She's told herself the things she did were ultimately for the good. That she's helped the ghosts by shielding them from his cruel whims, or those of his brutes. At least she acted with compassion, when she could.

Besides, anything that gets her closer to her reunion with Elizabeth makes it all worthwhile. Lizzie will understand. She'll forgive her, and that's all that matters. "What do you need me to do?"

"Straight to it," he says. "I like you. There's a man cutting into my business. I caught the poor jackass who was shuttling wares to him in the living world. Poor ghost spilled her guts before I handed her to a Reaper. Got a pretty good trade for her.

"Now I want you to deal with this interloper, however you have to. Do that, and I'll tell you where your sister went." He slaps the folder shut and returns it to the drawer. He doesn't have to tell her what failure means. "Shall we discuss the details?"

• • •

Turns out, the Answer Man's info only provides Caroline with more questions. She and the Bride return to the living world empty-handed, or nearly so. All the merchant king could *(would?)* tell them was the sorts of things his competition is selling, and that he operates from somewhere in town. The guy's a memento broker. He deals in Essence-imbued trinkets for the dead, and the Answer Man heavily implied he's doing business with Reapers, too.

They cross back through the Avernian Gate into a sun-dappled churchyard. It's a warm day, and Caroline sucks in a few deep breaths.

The Bride, visibly annoyed, plucks a rose from a basket left atop a tombstone and jabs it into her bouquet. "Is it worth all this?" she asks. The Bride never speaks above a Church-service murmur. In the Underworld, she never speaks at all.

"You know it is. This is for you as much as it is for me." It's the heart of their bargain: The Unadorned Bride helps her find Elizabeth, and together they can explore the deeper parts of the Underworld. The geist doesn't know what she hopes to find,

there. Answers, of course, but right now the questions are hazy. "We find Lizzie, and that frees us up to concentrate on *you*."

The Bride stares at her for a long time, as though she doesn't quite believe it. The church bells toll the hour, and she waits for the last chime to fade away before she says, "Where to, then?"

"Here's as good a place as any." Disapproval again. Perhaps the Bride thought she'd go to her krewe, enlist her friend Jaxon's help at last.

But she's spent the last of her krewe's goodwill, and anyway, if you want something done right, you ought to do it yourself. Caroline settles onto the grass, stretches out on a grave. Elizabeth took a series of photos of her like this, once, in a cemetery on a crisp autumn day. Then, she'd worn a gauzy gown and blood-red lipstick. Today, she's wearing jeans and T-shirt. Sweat breaks out on her face as the summer sun bears down.

The Bride draws closer. She'll have to ask the questions.

Much as she acts aloof, Caroline knows her geist hates watching her die. Again. Just because it's part of who they are doesn't make it any easier. She knows, too, how much the Bride hates feeling helpless, how not having the situation totally in hand makes her itch. Of all the ways a person can feel powerless, bearing witness to a companion's death has to be in the top three. Even surrounded by death and dying as the Bound are, that stays high on the list.

Caroline takes the Bride's hand. This close up, Caroline gets a rare glimpse beneath the veil, sees how her features blur like an out-of-focus photograph. Once she found it frightening; now it's mostly sad. The Bride's cold fingers press into her own.

She closes her eyes and breathes slowly, in and out and in again. It'd be serene, if she were concentrating on her breathing as a calming exercise, rather than willing it to stop altogether. Then it does, and her whole body goes rigid with panic as Caroline's throat closes up. She shakes off the Bride's grip to claw at her airway. It's like someone's sitting on her chest, and it burns, her lungs burn with the need for air. Black spots dance across her vision and everything shrinks down to a pinprick. The last thing she sees is the Bride leaning over her, and for a heartbeat she thinks it's her sister. "I'm sorry," she says, "Lizzie, I'm—"

It's hazy here, like the clouds have rolled in and forced the sun to hide. Colder, too, though she doesn't know how she feels it. She doesn't feel much of anything right now. The Bride leans over her body, and Caroline watches from outside of it. She's gone still now, at least there's that. When she comes back to herself, everything's going to ache something fierce.

The Bride gives it a few more seconds, then asks, "How can we find the memento seller?"

The question washes over Caroline like a wave, and impressions bombard her: the sound of metal gates rattling closed, a red-haired woman who trails the summer breeze in her wake, a dried-up water fountain.

On the ground, her body — with its vacant eyes staring past the Bride and into the empty sky — mutters the descriptions of what her shade sees.

Then she's pulled back toward herself, the Twilit-world streaking past, and —

She hauls in one, long, ragged breath, and immediately sets to coughing. For the second time today, she's bent double with it, but this time her lungs figure it out faster. She's left, gasping, her throat raw, as the Bride sits back on her heels. The image of the red-haired woman flashes on her lids every time Caroline closes her eyes.

"Well, fuck," she says. "We have to go seek an audience with the Summer Queen."

• • •

The Lost make Caroline nervous, though she can't put her finger on why. If anything, she ought to feel a kinship with them. They deal in bargains, and where would any Sin-Eater be without the bargain she's made with her geist? They traverse their otherworldly Hedge the way she visits the Underworld. They've *seen some shit,* and though she doesn't pretend to understand the stories she's heard about the Lost spending decades as living sculptures or being transformed into a hawk for some strange being's hunts, the point is they've come back from something unknowable. Like, say, death.

Regardless, she doesn't like them, maybe because they brim with life in a way she doesn't, not anymore.

Doesn't matter what she *likes,* though. Her vision showed her the Summer Queen, and now she's waiting at a coffee shop to chat with Patty Foley, the head of the Seventh Turn Freehold. Ten minutes later, the changeling woman stalks in. She heads for the table so quickly, Caroline suspects she's been scouting the place.

Patty drops heavily into the chair across from her and repositions herself so she can see the entire coffee shop. "Just you?" she asks. "Where's the rest of your krewe?"

"They're busy." Caroline's ordered tea for her aching throat and added far too much honey to soothe it. She takes a sip, and discovers it's gotten even sweeter. Her tongue feels like she's been licking dandelions. "Do you need us all here to call in the favor?"

This is where it could go sideways. If Patty decides to call Jaxon or someone else in the krewe, Caroline's fucked. The favor belongs to all of them, for services rendered; it's not Caroline's to cash in. But the deal they made never said the whole krewe had to be present when the debt came due. And Patty has no particular loyalties to any of the others, though Jaxon sure tried to form some. The Angel Hill Krewe's territory simply overlaps with the freehold's, making them neighbors of a sort.

Neighbors, but not *friends.* The Seventh Turn's afraid that too much association with the krewe will draw unwanted attention, but from where, Caroline's not sure.

Patty shrugs. Even though she's clearly suspicious of the lone Sin-Eater, it's ultimately not her problem. "What do you want?"

Later, maybe, Caroline will feel bad for using up the favor, but right now she only feels relief. "There's a person selling contraband from the Underworld up here. Some of it's pretty dangerous stuff." Maybe that's the way to pitch this to the krewe, when they inevitably find her out: Sure, she's trying to get a lead on Lizzie's whereabouts, but this guy's selling Deathmasks. Isn't it a good thing, if she gets rid of someone who's facilitating Reaper activity? Two birds, one Sin-Eater.

"And you need me because...?"

"I swear this isn't a pickup line. Because I saw you in a vision." Simpler than saying "I died this afternoon, and my ghost told me to come see you."

Patty's lips don't even twitch. Instead, she looks murderous. Caroline suddenly understands why the word in town is, you don't fuck with the Seventh Turn. "Are you saying one of ours is the seller?"

Caroline jostles her tea as she holds her hands up. The scent of honey is cloying. "No, no. I don't think he's yours *or* ours. The visions, most of the time they're images and impressions, and I have to piece them back together. I saw you, clear as anything, and a fountain covered in tiles. I heard a gate rattling, like a store closing in a mall."

"The Goblin Market," Patty says. She looks less likely to tear a bystander's head off, but only a smidgen. "If I show you where it is, we're even?"

"Even-Steven."

• • •

The Spring Hill Mall's not dead, but it ought to be.

Maybe one in five stores is actually open, the rest hidden behind shuttered metal gates. Bored-looking associates barely perk up as Caroline and Patty pass by. Silver-haired mall walkers stride briskly past, no interest in shopping, only in getting their steps in. Tinny soft rock echoes off shuttered storefronts. The bookstore, at least, is putting on a valiant effort: *Story Hour Tuesdays and Thursdays at 10! Book Club meets this Wednesday!* But right now, no one's browsing the new releases.

"My sister and I used to hang out here every weekend," says Caroline. There's the piercing kiosk where they got their ears done, squeezing each other's hands as the studs punched through their lobes. Now it's covered in a shroud of black canvas and zip ties. There's the food court where they people-watched while they ate greasy pizza that had been sitting under hot lamps for hours. What she wouldn't give for a slice right now, but the hot lamps went dark long ago. "What happened to this place?"

Patty shrugs. "Internet shopping. Poor management. Shitty economy."

They reach the fountain at the center. The water used to climb as high as the third story, sometimes. Caroline and Lizzie would stand at the railing and watch. Or they'd go down to the first floor and perch on its edge, making wishes on tossed pennies. Now it's gone dry. Many of the mosaic tiles are cracked or missing altogether. The pennies have long since been swept away. Patty leads her past without sparing it a glance.

They head down a wing consisting of closed store after closed store. Very few mall walkers venture down this way, the sense of abandonment is so pervasive. The Unadorned Bride appears up ahead, staring at a display of wedding dresses ten years out of date. The bridal shop itself went out of business a while ago, and apparently never reclaimed its inventory.

The department store that used to dominate the end of this wing went bankrupt at the start of the decade, but its gates are wide open. A vinyl banner strung across the top proclaims it as *The Spring Hill Indoor Flea Market.* Inside, local merchants have taken over the perfume and jewelry counters, selling handmade wares, baked goods, and collectibles. Several merchants have set up mini boutiques among the clothing racks. The shoe department is now an amateur art gallery, showcasing paintings of landmarks around the county.

It's busier in here, warmer. Patty leads her to the back of the store, to the fitting rooms by where the formalwear used to be. Caroline remembers being here with Elizabeth come prom season, their arms loaded full of satin and chiffon. They laughed

as they zipped each other into dresses and tried on gowns they could never afford on their parents' salaries.

Patty rests a hand on the second stall's door handle and hums a tune Caroline almost recognizes. She's about to ask if the changeling woman is fucking with her, but then the handle turns and she shuts her damned mouth.

The other side doesn't lead to a cramped, poorly lit dressing room. Instead, Caroline follows Patty into an open-air market, with stalls and carts jumbled in uneven rows. They're not three steps in before Patty turns to her. "All right. Debt's paid. I've got my own business to conduct here. When you're ready to go home, come back here, you'll see the door. If you get lost, well. Not my problem."

"But...how do I find him?"

"Also not my problem. Unless you and your krewe want to owe me?"

Bad enough she's burned away the favor the Summer Queen owed them. No, this she has to finish on her own. "I'll pass, thanks."

"Fine by me. Oh, and hey. You probably don't want to eat the goblin fruit. That one's free." Then she's gone, disappearing into the swirl of the crowd.

The Bride wanders the aisles and alleys at Caroline's side, keeping her stately pace. Caroline almost feels at home here; in many ways the Goblin Market and the Dark Market are cousins. Sellers holler for her attention, hawking their strange wares. Few of them accept cold hard cash. They deal in weirder currencies. The merchants and their customers aren't ghosts, though some of them Caroline is fairly sure aren't human. Where death and its accoutrements permeate the Dark Market, this one radiates life.

Which is how she finds the graverobber.

It's not that the market's other patrons are avoiding him, exactly. He doesn't stand out. Dark hair cut short. Jeans and a button-down shirt. His goods, spread out on a folding table, fit in with some of the other jumbled piles at neighboring stalls. It's like an unruly rummage sale here. Caroline doesn't know if the Essence that draws ghosts calls to the market's patrons in the same way, but some of them start heading for the table with interest, until they get close and veer suddenly aside.

It's the Deathmasks repelling them.

Three of them, propped up to peer out at the crowd. Maybe the marketgoers don't know exactly what they are, but Caroline does. They're heavy with death, the last remnants of geists who've met their final ends. Her skin crawls as she looks them over. One is a face, frozen in a scream. Writing covers the second, in a scrawl so frantic Caroline averts her eyes. The last, a woman's face with mirrors for eyes, looks uncannily like Lizzie. It's not her sister's face, but the resemblance is there. She's not sure if that's a good omen or a bad one.

The man (*graverobber,* she thinks) ambles around the table and gives her a bright, salesman-like smile. "Are you interested in one of these?"

"No," says Caroline, "but the Answer Man is."

That thousand-watt smile fades. Panic makes him clumsy; as he tries to put the table between them once more, he bumps it and sends several of his artifacts tumbling. One goes over the side. That ought to be the end of it, but the Bride's hand snakes out and catches it before it hits the packed dirt. She lifts it up so Caroline can see.

It's a teacup, once shattered but pieced back together. Golden lacquer makes the cracks beautiful rather than harsh. One chip still remains on the inside rim, but it's been there since Caroline was little. It's why their mother relegated it to the shed, along with its twin.

The last time she saw it was the day her sister died. All this time, she'd assumed some family member swept up the pieces and threw them away.

"Where the fuck did you get this?"

He glances at the Bride, who sets the cup carefully on the table close to Caroline. Away from the edge. "I don't know. I got it from my supplier, is all."

He's lying. She sees it in the way his eyes shift, the way his shoulders tense.

The Bride wraps her arms around Caroline, but it's not to comfort her. A shudder thrills through her as her geist adds her own sorrow and grief to the Sin-Eater's. They scream their rage with one voice as they rush him. He's too stunned to flee, and flails weakly as they lift him into the air. His trachea feels so fragile beneath their fingers.

"Don't lie to me!" they roar. It feels good when he flinches. They tighten their grip and he scrabbles at their hands.

"Please!" he rasps. "Okay!"

They loosen their hold, just enough to give him some air, and his words tumble out in a rush.

"I was waiting for my supplier just inside the Avernian Gate. This woman was there. She looked like you, but I know a ghost when I see one. She seemed like she was waiting for someone, too. She traded the pieces to me for one of my other items. I felt bad for her. I think... I think she was hungry. I'm the one who glued the cup back together, after. I haven't seen her since, I swear!"

Caroline glances toward the table, intending to pick up the teacup and make him talk. He has to know more. He *has* to. But it's not the teacup she sees. In the mirrored eyes of the not-Lizzie deathmask, Caroline sees herself. Sees her face contorted with rage, and the terror of the man in her grasp. Lizzie would forgive her for a lot of things — *will* forgive her for them, when Caroline finds her at last — but not for this. Not for murder.

Not in my name, she'd say. Caroline can almost hear it.

Ashamed, she releases him. The Bride departs from her reluctantly. Caroline picks up the teacup as the graverobber bends and gasps for air. *I know how that feels.* Her lead from the Answer Man's as good as gone if she lets him go, but what good does it do her to gain the information if she loses her sister in the process?

If the shards had been memory-laden, Elizabeth stripped them out to survive. They were worthless to him, and he'd traded with her anyway. *He did her a kindness.* The least Caroline can do is grant him one in return.

Just one.

"Your supplier's dead," she says. "Or as good as, anyway. The Answer Man traded him to a Reaper as a bribe and now he's gone. Carried off somewhere deep in the Underworld." She picks up the Deathmasks gingerly and tucks them under one arm. "I'm taking these. You've got a couple of hours to clear out before I come back with my krewe and we see what other things you shouldn't have in your possession. You don't want to be here when that happens."

For a second, she thinks he's going to argue. Instead, he nods and backs away, hands raised so she can see them, and slinks off down the rows. Caroline's no fool; she'll see him again. No one walks away that easily unless they've got better stuff stashed somewhere else.

She picks up the teacup and turns it over in her hands. There's nothing to it, Essence-wise. It's not a memento. But she can hand it to someone in the krewe and ask what it shows them, and maybe get some answers about Elizabeth's whereabouts after all.

She realizes, as she heads back for the door to the dressing room, that she knows how to leave this place, but not how to get the krewe back in. *I guess we're not done with the Summer Queen after all.*

They're all going to be pissed at her anyway. Better to confess her whole pile of sins all at once. At least she's got the Deathmasks to prove she's been doing a bit of good. She keeps an eye out for Patty Foley as she walks through the market. For the first time in a long time, she's breathing easier.

Meredith Gerber

Fifteen.

The air in the elevator tightened around Marci, grasping at the fabric of her black skirt and wrapping itself around the base of her neck. Each floor she passed gave a satisfying "ding" that kept her focused and attentive. The day started normally, following Marci's rigorous schedule and never giving time the upper hand. She tapped her fingers wildly against the cool leather of her purse with an unusual rhythm.

Thirteen.

The stars were not in Marci's favor that day. From dropping her bagel on the breakroom floor to forgetting her notes for her presentation to the wind playing a game with her hair's tight curls. Something changed, and she couldn't figure out why. Marci never strayed from her perfect program, organized from top to bottom and tested so many times she believed it was flawless.

Eleven.

The feeling of anxiety washed over her, and she felt her breath caught in her throat. Her chest ached like it would cave in at any moment. Sweat droplets collected at the top of her forehead and slowly slid down her cheeks. She knew this feeling well and silently prayed the miracle drug in her purse would put a complete stop to it. The orange bottle with a worn label shook in her hands before she fished out a small pill from the bottom. The white dust stained her fingers, but she didn't stop to care.

Five.

The pill would take another fifteen minutes before she could relax her shoulders and unclench her jaw. Fifteen more minutes meant she would feel normal again. The voice mocking her inside her head would drop to a whisper. Marci needed her medicine to kick in to survive.

Three.

Her heart beat against her chest and in her throat like a pinball. Back and forth it went against the column of her neck and the familiar feeling of panic started to set in. Eyes fluttered closed while she took a deep breath in through her nose, held it for a few seconds, and released slowly.

Lobby.

The elevator doors opening gave her relief paired with the feeling of fresh air that wasn't confined to a small box. Her small feet moved quickly across the marble-floored lobby, heels clicking loudly. The woman at the front desk attempted to greet her but Marci didn't respond. She heard the young woman and could see her bright smile in the corner of her eye, but the door to the outside was too close for her to acknowledge anything else. With a forceful push on the golden handle, the loud city welcomed her back. Cars flew by, horns blaring to speed up traffic, and people carried on mundane conversations with one another.

The night sky above her looked like a backlit canopy with tiny star shapes punched in it. The fear that grappled her started to disappear but clung desperately to her in the process. Her back found the side of her work building. The bricks traced their way through the back of her blazer, pressing into her skin. Their rough shape helped Marci ground herself while waiting for the rest of her anxiety to float away. Her breathing slowed down, and her heart graciously slid back into her chest, beating quietly underneath her skin. She wiped her face with the back of her sleeve to collect the sweat that cascaded all the way down into her chest.

When she felt her body relax again, she took in one more deep breath before heading toward the train. In a matter of minutes, she blended right in with the crowds that shuffled through the city streets. She looked normal to everyone else, even though she just battled against herself again. The monster that lived inside of her hid away and made itself invisible, but it promised to return when she least expected it.

The train's rocking back and forth brought a sense of tranquility to Marci. Marci paid close attention to the buildings she passed. She had taken the trip hundreds of times before, but now her eyes traced all the lines that stretched up to the sky. On any other workday, she buried herself in her laptop from the moment she could and ignored the world around her. Today, she spent the time looking out the window and enjoying the scenery as it moved by. The train moved along the tracks, lulling Marci as she continued to paint cityscapes in her mind.

After almost missing her stop, Marci stepped on the platform and headed down the stairs to a suburban street. The walk home wasn't far, but in a pair of heels, it sometimes felt like miles. The streetlights had already flickered on together in unison, illuminating the trail home. In the middle of the street stood a few bright-orange construction cones, each positioned in haste, surrounding a small hole in the ground. The season of potholes had finally ended in Chicago, so construction workers were ready to patch up the city streets. It would take most of the warmer months to finish and Marci knew better than to expect it sooner.

A low rumble echoed across the empty street. Marci wrote it off as thunder and quickened her pace to beat the oncoming storm. The forecast didn't predict anything close to rain, but she didn't want to take her chances. Another rumble came from behind her but this time, it sounded much closer. She turned around instinctively, eyes narrowing at the street behind her. There was no sign of a storm in the sky, not

even a tiny rain cloud to hold the electric wave she anticipated. The third rumble came but this time, the ground below her feet shook slightly. Quickly, Marci found the phone in her purse and tapped the bright screen to search for some sort of answer. Another rumble came with the ground shaking, even more this time, to the point where she almost lost her balance. When it stopped, the universe didn't allow time for her to turn around to rush home.

The void in the middle of the street began to open wider. The concrete crumbled and fell down into the Earth, stretching the opening to at least four times its initial size. It was about the width of a semi-truck and growing by the second. Marci wanted to run. She wanted to make it home as quickly as she could. But her black heels were frozen on the sidewalk as her mouth parted slowly. The more she stood there, the more the Earth swallowed the road into its core. As quickly as it happened, it came to a sudden stop. The opening taunted her, tugging on her curiosity and beckoning for her to look. If she wasn't careful, she could easily fall in, but she was willing to take her chances to quench her interest.

Her heels clicking against the pavement was the only sound she could hear. The rumble and sway of the Earth below her feet had stopped but there was no certainty it was over.

Before she reached the edge, what sounded like a child's scream shot out of the yawning maw. She frantically scrambled toward the edge until she could kneel to look inside. The road ripped through her tights and rubbed against her bare knees as she shifted to get a better view.

Below, sand poured from under the street onto a distorted stone platform. The sand ran over each stone beautifully, washing the road asphalt down into a chasm of nothing. The walls, also made of stone, held lit lanterns surrounded by tarnished metal vines on either side of their glass. The lanterns' flickering cast strange shadows across the floor, each moving to its own song. Chilling wind swirled up from below in a howl, gliding over Marci's skin. The wind felt like icicles slicing her cheeks and trying to pull her into the pit. With both hands, she gripped the side of the opening and held tightly for her life until the gusts stopped. The opening beneath her went eerily quiet except for sand rushing down onto the stone platform.

The hairs on her neck stood at full attention as two people stormed toward the platform from underneath her. One wore a hooded cloak: tattered, worn, and dancing in a gust of wind that traveled behind him. The other was a little girl, no older than eight, thrashing about behind the cryptic figure and wailing for someone to help her.

Marci's eyes shifted to the cloaked figure, its attention focused on gripping the screaming girl's wrist. The girl had two perfectly tied ponytails on either side of her head, each decorated neatly with a pink ribbon. Her pink dress, stained with what looked like dirt, matched patches of bruises spread violently across her porcelain skin. Slowly, the mysterious figure's body split down the middle, purple liquid sputtering out from top to bottom. Once the liquid hit the stone floor, it burned like acid that smelled of death. The two pieces of its body opened wider, revealing tooth-shaped bones protecting a thick purple tongue. The little girl screamed again when the tongue fell on the floor with a loud thud.

"Hey! Pick a different target!" Marci screamed, her voice shaking through her words. Normally, she would have kept to herself, but the fear from the little girl called out to Marci as if the emotion was her own.

The beast and the girl stopped what they were doing and turned to look up at her. The little girl turned around quickly, tears pricking the corners of her eyes. Her screaming stopped instantly. Her quivering lip broke Marci's heart as tears traced down over her cherubic face. When Marci could see her better, she the girl's skin seemed almost transparent, and Marci could see the wall behind her. Marci rubbed her eyes furiously before looking back at the pair. The beast loosened its grip on the girl's wrist as deafening silence surrounded them.

The sound of cracking bones rang out as the fiend moved its head to look up at her. The hood clung to its face, but Marci could make out deep purple veins that crept up from underneath its neck and up to its jaw. It smirked as it raised its hand from its side to face Marci. They were too far down for Marci to make an attempt to save the little girl and calling the police seemed ridiculous. Instead, she just froze and waited to see what the demon planned to do. A small chuckle escaped from its lips before the ground shook again.

She could hear footsteps running toward her and voices that echoed through her ears. A mixture of fear, anger, and depression fell over her so fast she couldn't even begin to parse through it. Her skin felt like it exploded into fire, consuming every inch of her as she started to move slowly toward the void.

She opened her mouth to scream, but nothing came out.

• • •

The sun crept into her bedroom through the open window. The birds sang in harmony, and Marci's eyes flashed open. Before she could start to piece together her morning routine, she suddenly stopped and remembered the night before. She shoved the comforter off and ran her hands frantically across her exposed skin. When she looked down, there were no marks on her arms or legs. But the fear she felt the night before still lived in her chest.

"Just a bad dream, Marci. Chill out," she muttered to herself before digging through the items on her nightstand.

She placed another pill on her tongue and pushed it down her throat.

Fifteen minutes.

Its smirk.

The girl.

Her skin, engulfed in flames.

Over and over, the scene played in her head. It might have been a dream, but the details were too realistic to ignore. Normally, she would have blamed her anti-anxiety medication but this time, something was different, and she wasn't sure what that was.

Admitting defeat and realizing she couldn't do anything about it, Marci pushed through her morning. She forced herself to follow her rigorous schedule to combat the monster creeping inside of her. If she followed the steps carefully, the bad dream would be a faded memory in due time. The anxiety-manifested monster wouldn't be able to hold on again. She couldn't risk feeling out of control, especially while she slept.

When she stood on the platform to wait for the northbound train, the sun had stretched a bit further across the city around her. The buildings in the distance re-

flected the rays and warmed the city with their golden glow. As much as Marci tried to force the nightmare out of her head, she couldn't stop thinking about it. Even if it was a simple nightmare, what were her dreams trying to tell her?

The Metra southbound train approached quickly like a silver bullet rocketing down the tracks toward her. The morning crowd huddled together to make as much room as possible for the next travelers, their faces buried in a variety of devices. Marci looked up to watch the people inside but when she looked up, the thing in the black cloak from her dreams appeared on the other side of the platform. Its hood-covered eyes weren't visible, but its smirk couldn't be mistaken. Marci stared through the windows of the moving train, watching for the creature's next movements. Its chin moved down toward its chest as the last train car moved across Marci's vision. When she blinked, the train was gone, and the demon had disappeared. She turned circles, eyes darting desperately across every corner of the platform, but there wasn't a single trace left of the figure.

It didn't help her anxiety when she entered the coffee shop, wild eyes still scanning the shadows for signs of the demon. As she waited in line behind the stuffy businessmen, she couldn't help but feel as if that thing was still there, watching her, waiting to pounce when she wasn't looking. It was a beautiful day outside of the coffee shop's stained windows, and people were moving about like nothing had happened. Inch by inch, she moved forward in the line with her briefcase clenched tightly to her chest. Her knuckles were white against the brown leather as she tried to focus on the menu above the baristas.

A college-aged boy stood behind the register with a huge grin, ready to help her with her order. Marci swallowed hard before releasing a breath.

"A medium coffee, please."

"Of course, ma'am. The name on the order?"

"Marci," she said with a smile, looking down to dig through the purse pressed against her hip.

The barista moved effortlessly, pouring her coffee into a paper cup, securing a black lid on it and placing it on the counter. Marci pulled out her wallet and counted out the bills. He didn't need to say the cost, as this was part of her morning routine. When she looked up, her eyes met the hooded figure again who stood behind the cash register with that same smirk across its lips. The veins on its neck pulsated in thick purple lines as it breathed. The creature's head tilted slowly to one side, bones cracking.

"Marci," the low voice repeated back, rough and unwelcoming. Its onyx-tarnished fingers wrapped around the register one by one, clenching the machinery tightly.

Her wallet fell to the floor unceremoniously as Marci closed her eyes and screamed at the top of her lungs. The coffee shop's patrons went momentarily silent before their normal conversations switched to hushed assumptions. When Marci opened her eyes, the young barista's shoulders were pressed against his ears and his arms were crossed over his chest. In a panic, Marci threw a fistful of money at the boy before snatching the coffee off the counter and her wallet off the floor in one swift movement. She kept her head down as she walked toward the exit, feeling the eyes of other patrons staring at her.

• • •

"My name is Marci Anderson. I am here because my anxiety has manifested itself and created a physical monster that has stalked me for the past month."

After a few failed attempts to talk to her therapist, Marci gave up chasing answers inside the thin walls of strip malls. Her therapist continued to raise her dosage for her medicine while urging her to contact the authorities about the monster that stalked her if it was as real as she said. Marci felt like she was slipping away from reality every time she told her story.

The police didn't believe her.

Her therapist didn't believe her.

Her friends didn't believe her.

Except for Sabine. While they weren't friends, Sabine overheard Marci drunkenly confess about her stalker and the strange dream she had to a friend outside of a dive bar one Friday evening. Sabine slipped into the conversation with ease and urgently handed a card to Marci. She mentioned a "focus group" that would be perfect for her situation, with promises of trust and honesty. Marci held on to the linen card in her coat pocket, twirling it between her fingers when her mind started to wander.

It took Marci two weeks to find the courage to go. The whole thing sounded completely ridiculous. She spent days convincing herself that it was the lack of sleep or her anxiety or just a side effect of various medications. The card stayed in her pocket and became something to fidget with when she waited for the train. The raised letters started to wear down from the amount of time Marci played with it.

When the being that haunted her manifested as her boss during her performance review, Marci couldn't take it anymore. It might have ended up being a room filled with weird people who believed in monsters, but it was her last chance to figure out her situation. Maybe there was more to it than she thought, and it was worth the risk to find out.

The group exchanged warm welcomes, bright smiles and eager eyes looking her over. She felt out of place but pushed forward in hopes of finding new possibilities. There were only about five people of various ages, sitting in a circle of too many poorly made folding chairs. The lights were dim in the back of a tobacco shop, a small room that the group rented once a week.

"Hello, Marci. The name's Coz," chirped the man a few seats to her left. He wore a navy V-neck shirt and dark jeans that stopped at his black biker boots. He ran his hand through his dark brown locks before looking up to meet her eyes. "Welcome. Could you tell us a bit more about your situation?

Marci twiddled her thumbs nervously. "Um, well. I had a dream. I was walking home one night and there was a pothole or something that couldn't have been bigger than an entrance into a sewer. There was this weird..." Marci trailed off, closing her eyes to remember all the details. "...earthquake. I think. It shook the ground and then the hole expanded, taking most of the street with it."

"What happened next?" A woman with curly blond hair asked, leaning toward Marci, eyes filled with curiosity.

"The street opened up..." Marci stopped again, opening her eyes and looking around the room. "This is ridiculous sounding, I know. I feel like every time I tell this story people look at me like I grew two extra heads."

Sabine chimed in from across the room, "Please, Marci. There is nothing we haven't heard before, I assure you."

"We believe you," Coz added.

With a deep breath, Marci continued, "The pit opened up and there was a stone platform. Sand everywhere. Just floating in a sea of black. Two people came forward, a girl and a man, I think. The man's body opened like a mouth. I think he was going to eat her."

The room fell completely still with all eyes on Marci. She took a moment to look around the room, capturing their reaction to her story. They clung to every word, on the edge of their seats waiting for the next piece of information.

Coz cleared his throat. "Did he eat her?"

"No. I told him to pick on someone his own size."

Murmurs fell around the circle. People spoke in low, confident voices. She heard the word "Reaper" whispered a few times in the sea of noises. After a few moments of discussion, they turned their attention back to Marci. Her hands shook, nervous from the mystery of their discussion and secrets she couldn't parse. The lump in her throat felt like a thousand needles, scraping hard against her muscles.

Sabine raised her hand again, and everyone directed their attention back to Marci. The room fell silent and they all turned to face her in unison. Marci didn't continue and looked back down at the floor, feeling her skin heating up as beads of sweat formed on her hairline.

"Marci," Coz spoke in a soft voice, his hands folded between his thighs. "We all have had similar experiences. There's nothing to be afraid of here. Nothing can get you inside these walls. We promise that."

With a deep breath, Marci looked at Coz and found genuine care in his eyes, something no one had given her in the past month. Her shoulders relaxed and she gave a quick nod.

"I don't remember all of it, but that thing put its hand up in the air and my body felt like it was burning. The pain was so intense that I passed out. I woke up in my bed the next day and I didn't have any burns or anything that looked different. But, that morning, I started seeing that monster. Everywhere I went."

"What does it look like?" The girl with blond curls asked.

"Like a human, I think. Black hooded cloak, black boots. It has purple veins on its neck and it smirks at me all the damn time. It wouldn't make sense for it to be human because I only see it manifest into other people and then he disappears."

"It's not human," Sabine corrected her, shaking her head.

"A ghost, then? Ghosts aren't real."

A smirk curved on Coz' lips. "Oh, Ms. Anderson. They are quite real, whether you want to believe it or not."

Sabine shot a glare at Coz, eyes wide and lips forming a thin line.

Marci shrugged. "Even if they are real, I don't think that's the source of my problem."

With a clap of her hands, Sabine's eyes lit up and moved back towards Marci. "This street you mentioned, is it a real street?"

Marci nodded.

"Would you be willing to take us there? We can go together as a group."

"Why? I don't see how this will help me," Marci said, confused.

"A man came to us a few months ago. He said that he saw apparitions of his wife haunting his home. We tried what therapists call exposure therapy. It's going to the source of your fears and facing them to rationalize them. When your brain starts to give you visions of this creature, you can remember what was real and what wasn't."

Marci pondered for a few moments, pursing her lips. There was nothing to lose. The people who surrounded her were the first to believe her. They watched her intently, noting her responses.

"What happened to the man you did this with?"

"He never saw his wife again. She never came back. We went with him and stayed the night at his home. The next night, he slept like a rock. Pretty simple, if you ask me. What else are you going to try, Marci?"

"Okay, you're right," Marci paused, picking up her purse. "Are we going to go now? Or should we wait until the end of the focus session?"

Coz laughed, warranting another scowl from across the room.

"What are you most comfortable with?" Sabine asked, her eyebrow raised inquisitively.

"The sooner I can walk the streets without seeing that demon, the better."

• • •

114.

The heartrate monitor on her watch vibrated violently against her wrist. The pill she slipped between her cracked lips painted a chalky white streak down her throat. Just a few more minutes.

116.

The group stood in a circle behind the once-gaping hole now surrounded by construction cones. Chilling wind filled the center, gusting up into the midnight air. Marci looked around and noted everyone's stern faces as they studied with darting eyes. The group's silence only broke a few times through mumbles and whispers.

118.

"Come on," Marci whispered to herself, looking at her watch. Her whole body felt aflame and her breathing quickened.

"This hole?" Coz asked, eyes fixated on the platform below. "Looks like they're getting ready to fill it in with cement. You positive it's this one?"

"Yes, I am positive."

With a nod, everyone except Coz took a step back. Sabine encouraged Marci to do the same with a gentle tug on her sweater. Coz snapped his wrist to the side and blue translucent fluid cascaded down his fingers. In a swift motion, Coz moved his fingers like a puppeteer across the air and the mysterious liquid braided itself into a ladder within seconds. When it reached a few inches above the platform below, Coz formed hooks with his hands and pushed the ends into the concrete to secure it.

135.

"Marci, we need you to come help identify the Reaper. Will you join us?"

132.

"Join you?"

120.

"We don't mean to trick you. We just don't usually tell mortals who we really are."

110.

"Which is?"

"We are very in touch with the other side of the world. We all suffered a terrible brush with death but managed to make it out alive. We were given a second chance and now our eyes are open to the world of the dead. We can speak, breathe, and see what you see. We call ourselves Sin-Eaters."

99.

The medicine made her throat dry. "I don't even understand what that means."

85.

Coz smirked. "Will you allow us to show you, then? We believe you and won't allow anything to touch you."

73.

They believed her. Finally, someone believed her.

Marci took a deep breath before tasting her words. At this point, she had no reason to not accept his proposal. To turn around and leave would mean she would live in constant fear, never knowing what was around the corner waiting for her. The lack of knowledge would slowly kill her and the creature that stalked her wouldn't give up. Even if Coz didn't make an ounce of sense, she had to risk it. She needed to understand what the Reaper wanted and had to see it for herself to quell her anxiety, even for a moment. She needed others to confirm it was as real as the breath she felt across her neck when she was followed or the dark laughter that escaped from the demon's lips.

All her life, she turned into a complete mess because of her brain. It wouldn't stop until she faced the monster. Armed with a bottle of her pills and confidence spurred by her new friends, Marci looked back up at Coz.

68.

Without missing another second, she nodded, her words so quiet only Coz could hear.

"Anything to stop the Reaper."

An Understanding

Danielle Lauzon

The call came in early that morning, or late, depending on which side of sleep you were on. For Janelle, it was late, as she spent a sleepless night going over the specifics of the case for the thousandth time that week.

When she answered the phone, she could hear an elderly woman's creaking voice on the line. "Hello. Detective Williams? I think he got my neighbor. I heard screaming and I think you should get here right away." The woman's voice was confident and unwavering.

"Why didn't you call the police?" Janelle asked the woman, even as she was pulling on her coat and heading out the door.

"Ain't you the police?" the woman asked incredulously.

"Yes," Janelle murmured. No sense arguing with the woman when she knew she was glad she would be the first on scene. No forensic analyst to disrupt the flow, and maybe this time there would be a ghost. Maybe.

She was already in her car and pulling out of her driveway when she got the address from the lady and hung up. The woman's final words were trapped in Janelle's mind: "I think he's still in there."

Janelle had been working this case for weeks, and all of homicide was chomping at the bit to steal it away from her. Her chief was breathing down her neck for results, and every half-baked detective was crawling out of the woodwork to tell her how to do her job. They certainly had a serial killer on their hands, but none of the specifics added up. The only connection was the method, but the victims were so out of sync that predicting a target or creating a profile was difficult. Janelle had made a reputation for cracking hard cases, clearing up cold cases, and figuring out patterns where no one could see them.

Of course, she had the advantage of being able to talk to the victims, but no one in her office needed to know that. The only ones who knew what she really was were

the other members of her krewe, and while they had their own feelings about her pursuit of a career in law enforcement, they didn't try to stop her from fulfilling this goal, her burden. The legacy she always wanted, the name she needed to make for herself, but was unable to in life.

But this time was different. The victims weren't around. She started at the first one, a woman murdered over a year ago, and no matter how hard she searched, she couldn't find the victim's ghost. Maybe she had already passed, but that seemed unlikely for a violent murder. Then the next, a man in his late fifties, no ghost. The theme here seemed to be that whatever her murderer was doing, there was no ghost. And he was doing something. Each crime scene involved an elaborate circle filled with items belonging to the victim: candles lit at intervals surrounded journals, books, and the contents of the victim's pockets. The victim was always naked, cleaned, and killed by poison. The deaths felt vicious, personal, and violent. And yet, with all those hallmarks, she couldn't find ghosts.

Never a ghost.

It shouldn't be possible, but here it was. As a Mourner, it stung her pride that these people were passing without sharing their stories with her. That whatever happened to them, their history and life stories were lost with their fleshy remains. And at the same time, it made it all the more thrilling. Her investigation had caught national attention. This kind of case was big; everyone wanted a piece of it. Some of them wanted the limelight — Janelle was in it for the chase. But having her name splashed on headlines across the nation wouldn't hurt her career or her desire for a legacy.

• • •

Paul was a good-looking man. Not just good looking, but strong, fit, with a runner's body. Manny Garcia considered the man sitting across the dinner table from him again. He wasn't perfect, far from it, but he was handsome. The kind of handsome that knew it and strutted it. Manny considered they were quite the pair, with his shaggy black hair, wire-framed glasses, and rounded belly. Sure, Manny had heard plenty of times that he was attractive. And he wasn't down on the way he looked. He wasn't quite in the bear category, but was close enough, and hairy enough, that most men would overlook a few pounds.

"Do you want to go to the bar after this?" Paul asked Manny.

They were finished with dinner, the check already come and gone with both their credit cards. Manny considered the offer. Have a few drinks, then retire to one home or another, sex, then breakfast the next morning — or not; it was a work night, after all. The thought seemed appealing to him.

"Sure," he replied, trying to keep his cool, which meant looking anywhere but at Paul. At a nearby table he caught sight of a black woman with honey-colored eyes staring at him. She was fit but not thin; his ma would call her healthy. Her thick, black hair was permed straight into a bob and he could see reddish highlights that accented her eyes. The moment he caught sight of her, his world shifted. She felt more real than the restaurant, than Paul, even than his own body, which felt faded and translucent under her gaze.

"Focus." The woman's voice sounded like it was whispered into his ear instead of coming from several feet away. Manny puzzled over her, lost in the feeling.

"Or we could skip the bar and go straight to your place." The playful tone in Paul's voice brought Manny's eyes to him. Wasn't he just thinking that before the woman distracted him? Manny could feel his face flush hot with blood. He tried to laugh it off, but Paul saw his blush and his eyes crinkled in a genuine smile.

"I have a nice bourbon I haven't broken into yet," Manny responded, trying to work the flush out of his cheeks.

"That sounds divine," Paul purred.

• • •

A scoffing sound broke her from her reverie. The Miser, a fat, round geist with soft edges and a permanent sneer sat beside her in the car.

"What?" she shot at them.

"You think you are on to something." It wasn't mockery, far from it, but it felt that way.

"I do. We might catch him in the act," she told them with satisfaction.

"And if not?" they asked. They, too, were musing over the strangeness of this murderer. They clearly had thoughts on the matter they weren't sharing with her, but she was used to that.

"Then we work the case and we hope he screwed up this time," she retorted.

"Why did that old lady call you directly?" they asked, bemused.

Janelle thought of how to explain community to this creature. She suspected that once, long ago, they also belonged to a community. Someone might have trusted them implicitly, or they put their faith in a community leader. But all that was gone now, only spite and regret left behind.

"Trust, Miser," she said simply. She knew they wouldn't really understand, but her tone brokered no argument.

Speaking of trust, she remembered she should call her partner. She dialed his number just as she was pulling up to the address. She could see a dark, wrinkled figure in the window next door, shining eyes staring at her. Janelle was relieved to see her caller alive and well. The woman pointed a gnarled finger at the neighboring two-story townhouse in front of Janelle. As if the act of pointing confirmed the woman's own suspicion about who Janelle was.

She glanced down the street at the shabby townhomes all cramped together in a row. No wonder the old lady could hear her neighbor's scream. She likely heard everything that went on in the building to either side of her. The buildings weren't unkempt, just worn down from the passage of time and lack of funds for serious repairs. Roofs were missing shingles, window screens were absent behind iron bars keeping the world out, and faded paint lacquered the doors set into soot-darkened brickwork.

• • •

Manny didn't feel like going out. Paul wouldn't beg him to, either. Paul was too kind a man to push Manny into anything he didn't want to do. Manny wondered how he felt about that. Did he want Paul to be pushier, to drag him out when he was in a foul mood to try to make him feel better? Or was he happier that the man respected his boundaries?

Manny fingered a silver bracelet Paul had given him the day before. Their third date and already a gift? Manny didn't know what to make of Paul. He was a bright spot in his life. He felt like he had been drowning in fear and anxiety his entire life, but when he thought of Paul his whole world lit up. He couldn't remember life before Paul, not really, and if he tried to think of losing him, the only thing that filled him was fear.

Someone was watching him. Stalking him. Waiting for him to mess up. But not when Paul was around. Never when Paul was around. And so, nights like tonight were hard. Manny knew the fear was in him and the pain wasn't real. Or was it? He shook his head in frustration. Once again, he could feel it as hairs raised on the back of his neck. Someone was there, just outside his periphery, watching and waiting. Sometimes, he could hear their voice, faint on the wind, like a distant woman pleading for something. He shook his head, breaking the thought process. Nothing was out there.

His thoughts wandered once more to Paul, but instead of making up excuses, he pushed the bracelet onto his wrist and gave the man a call. Paul was pleased to hear he had reconsidered going out. He would be there in an hour to pick him up.

• • •

"Williams?" her partner's voice came through the phone in her hand, half-forgotten as she took in the quiet row.

"Parker. I've got a lead. Meet me at 215 W. Maple," was all she said before hanging up. She could hear his sleep-addled "wha—" coming out of the speaker before it clicked off. She thumbed it to silent mode and pocketed it. He would figure it out.

James Parker had been Janelle's partner for the ripe old time of this case's duration. He was originally assigned the case as the precinct's top homicide detective. When they called in Janelle, they paired her with him. He was a good detective, but not anything she would have considered top. He was hardworking, but sloppy. He didn't have an eye for detail and too much slipped past him. He relied too much on analysis and images and not enough on his own senses. This case was a good example; he always showed up late to the scene and let forensics do his work for him. And she couldn't blame him too much that he couldn't read a crime scene the way she could. She wasn't sure she would wish that ability and how she got it on anyone else. But it made her biased.

The home felt empty as Janelle cautiously approached the faded blue door. She listened, but only silence answered, and the low buzz of traffic on the highway a few streets over. The streetlamp overhead was out, casting the stoop into a deep shadow. She held her breath as she listened and let it out slowly as she reached for the door.

It was open just a crack. She could tell before she touched it. It swung in a hair's breadth at her touch, gliding smooth along oiled hinges. She could sense something, someone, inside. Just one, not two. Was he here?

• • •

Their night's conversation had been light and airy. They talked about the city, sports, favorite vacation spots, favorite alcohols, and not much of anything with any substance. Manny talked about his new car that his ma helped him purchase, and Paul talked about his new apartment. Manny didn't think it would go anywhere — a one-night stand between two consenting adults — so he was shocked when Paul called him a week later for another date.

Manny wasn't opposed. It had been a long time since he had seen anyone on a regular basis and Paul was pleasant-enough company. This date started at the bar and ended once more at his house. Paul didn't notice the car following their cab, but Manny did, and it filled him with dread. Paul didn't notice the car drive by slowly as Manny kissed him goodbye the next morning. But Manny couldn't keep the fear of that car from gripping his heart.

That was when it started. The watching, the fear, and the pain. Or was that always there? Paul was a bulwark against it. Hours after he left that morning, Manny was on the phone setting up another date with him. Paul was pleased to hear his voice, happy to go out again. And if he heard the note of desperation in Manny's voice, he didn't let on.

• • •

Janelle saw the candlelight as soon as the door crested the threshold. Inside a circle painted in blood on the shabby carpet sat the naked body of a man, surrounded by personal effects like always. This time, a half-finished bottle of bourbon, a set of new car keys, and a silver bracelet.

And a ghost.

Not a fresh ghost. This one was ancient, with its corpus tattered and hanging from its form making it nearly unrecognizable. It must have been in this home for ages, unseen and unconcerned with its occupants. A ghost this old would know things.

"Excuse me," Janelle ventured towards the ghost's slight frame.

It turned to her slowly and she could see that it seemed disoriented and weak. In its eyes was the pain of a violent death, a horror that begged her to learn, to hear this ghost's story. But that wasn't why she was here. It didn't speak to her, only watched her from its place in the corner of the room.

"Did you see what happened here?" she asked.

"What happened where?" a voice broke in from behind Janelle. She jumped and put her hand to her gun as she rapidly turned on the intruder.

"Parker!" she exclaimed, as she slid the gun back into its holster.

"You told me to come. Shit Williams, another one," he said looking past her at the dead man lying in the circle.

"Don't sneak up on me like that," she said, silently damning him for being so fast. "I just got inside, go check upstairs, but I don't think he's here," she told him.

He nodded once and moved past her, further into the house. He wouldn't be long, so her conversation with the ghost would have to be quick.

• • •

Manny sat in his mother's kitchen staring the stern woman in the eye. He had spent the last three days trying to convince her to co-sign on a new car. Not brand-new, mind, but new to him. She had asked him all the questions, given him the guilt trip of "Manny, what if you default? You know I can't afford to pay for a car," and now it was just a waiting game of how many times he had to make her say no before she would say yes. She always said yes, but every favor required three to four no's before she would admit that he was serious about it.

This time was more frustrating than normal. He had his first date with a new man, Paul, next week and he couldn't show up driving that old beater he was borrowing from cousin Louisa. This guy was cool, probably way outside his league, but for some reason he took notice of Manny. And he wasn't going to blow it by showing up in a car that smelled like three-day-old fish and weed.

"No one cares what kind of car you drive, Manny," his mother said in response to his complaint.

"I do, Ma," he told her, trying to keep frustration out of his voice.

"It isn't like you're picking him up or anything. Nobody picks people up these days." She shook her head as in mourning for more civil times.

"The car smells bad. I drive in the car, I smell bad. I don't want to smell like I don't shower on my date, Ma." He pulled his shirt to his nose and sniffed in demonstration. "I haven't smelled clean in weeks."

"Focus!" The word seemed to come from out of nowhere, snapping him out of his conversation with his mother, dragging him down into himself. Did his ma just yell at him? No, it wasn't her, not her voice. What then? Fear threatened to overwhelm him. What was he so afraid of?

"You don't smell bad," his ma said with a sniff of her own. Her words dragged him back to the moment. The cloud of fear gathering at the edges of his vision subsided and instead he saw the grinning round face of the woman he knew and loved all his life. She was picking on him; she would sign.

"Ma, you can't smell anything. You know that," he said. "I can't keep driving Louisa's car around anyway, she'll need it back in a few weeks. I need to buy my own." They had hashed out this part of the argument once already tonight. But it circled back, as it always did.

"And in a couple of weeks, maybe I'll sign," she said. Her grin and tone told Manny the discussion was over. She has something in mind, even if she wouldn't tell him. It was always this way with her. A favor required a bargain, but a gift required nothing of the sort. Was she planning on buying him the car? His heart leapt with joy at the sudden realization.

"Thanks, Ma!" A grin spread across his face and he and gave her a quick kiss as he dashed out the door, which slammed behind him. He could hear her shouting "don't slam the door," but he was already halfway to Louisa's car.

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The ghost spoke so slowly that Janelle was about ready to strangle him.

"Do you know that man?" she asked, once more gesturing to the body.

"Manny," the ghost finally got out in a breathy whisper.

"Did he live here?" she asked. It was a no brainer, of course he lived here. But she needed to know how much this ghost paid attention to the home's inhabitants. Ghosts sometimes got caught up in their own cycle, replaying again and again their own life and death without much care or concern for the living world passing them by. She worried this ghost was like that, as it barely seemed to register her presence.

The ghost nodded slowly, laboriously. Then it started to speak. At first its words came labored, and Janelle patiently hung on each and every one. But as it spoke, it built up momentum, and the story came out in a flood.

Each time it faltered, each time it seemed to lose sight of the story, she gave it a gentle urging, "Focus."

• • •

Manny sat huddled in the middle of his living room surrounded by candles. The man was there, just beyond his reach in the kitchen. He wanted to run, to scream, to do anything, but fear gripped his heart and his body felt heavy and useless. This man was here to eat him, and if he didn't run, he'd chop him up into tiny bits and suck them down one by one. He had said as much to Manny before he went into the kitchen. Here was the stalker, the watcher, and the one who would always be there waiting for him.

Manny mustered what bravery he could and stood. He carefully stepped between the candles, trying not to get burned. He thought he knocked one over, but it remained upright, though the flame burned him as he passed. He gasped in pain but kept moving, but the sound drew the watcher's attention.

He was there in the blink of an eye. He didn't have a knife, but Manny could imagine him carving away at his flesh. He backed away and the watcher advanced. Manny tried to think of Paul to banish the man from his mind, but it didn't work. The watcher was here and ready to eat, and no amount of positive thinking would banish him.

The watcher leaned in close — so close Manny could imagine his breath on his face — and took a bite. Pain seared through Manny's body as the watcher seemed to inhale him. Fear pumped through him as he felt his life draining away.

• • •

Janelle listened to the story, but the ghost was ragged, and nearly lost. The timeline was disjointed, pieces were missing, and she couldn't tell if the story was about the ghost or the young man lying dead on the floor. She listened though, committing the whole story to memory even if she couldn't understand it now. Was the boy on the floor Manny? Was this Manny? And who was Paul?

She was so engrossed she didn't hear when Parker came back down the stairs.

"Nothing upstairs," he reported. And maybe she registered it on some level, but the ghost's story was too engrossing to disengage. She must have looked weird, staring into the corner of the room like that. But he had to be used to her long pauses and distant stares by now. He would get over it.

• • •

Manny screamed and dropped the glass on the floor. The liquid he drank was like a fire in his belly, and not the welcome, warm fire of alcohol, but the burning of acid and death. The scream choked off quickly as his throat closed and he struggled to bring in air. He was dying, and he knew it, and the fear coursed through his veins with every fluttering heartbeat as he struggled against his own demise.

The watcher lit the candles and carefully placed his possessions around him. Each one anchoring him to the spot and grounding him. They didn't reduce the pain or relax the fire of slow suffocation. Instead, they held him here like railway spikes driven through his soul.

And when he knew he was dead, they sat before him like shining beacons of memory, possessed of everything he cared for and loved, attached to his strongest moments. The memory of his ma's smile when he kissed her and took the car keys she presented, the memory of Paul's laugh as he poured the first glass of bourbon, the sheepish look Paul gave him as he tried on the silver bracelet. There they were, all lined up in front of him, taunting him. At least, that's how it felt. And the watcher was standing over him.

"Oh Manny," he said, in low dulcet tones. "I'm going to eat you. Do you understand that?"

No. Manny didn't understand anything. He shook his head back and forth slowly.

"Your soul. Freshly harvested, which gives it that full-bodied flavor. Of course, what's a meal without spice? I like a hint of fear and desperation. That's why I'm telling you this, and that's why you're going to sit there in that circle and think about it. When I come back, we'll give it a little spritz of hope and see how the marinade turned out." With that, the man disappeared into the kitchen.

"Why," Manny managed to squeak out through the fear holding his chest tight.

• • •

"Why?" The word echoed through Janelle and it broke her heart. She didn't know why, and until she had the whole story, she couldn't answer. She was never about why anyway. Always what, who, when, how, but never really why. Motive was an important part of her job, but that's not what this ghost was asking. Not necessarily *why kill*, but instead, *why me*? And the answer was almost invariably no real reason. But maybe understanding the motive would be enough.

• • •

The doorbell rang. It must be Paul come to pick him up, though he was several hours late, and the night was almost over. Manny hurried to the door as he grabbed his coat off the back of the couch. Imagine his surprise at the short, brown-haired, white man who stood in front of him instead of Paul.

"May I help you, officer?" Manny asked, seeing a badge hanging around his neck and peeking from under his coat.

"Manny Garcia?" the officer asked, his voice carrying the tone of authority.

"Yes, is there a problem?" Manny's thoughts shot to his ma first; had something happened? Then stuck on Paul, maybe he had been in an accident?

"Can I come in?" It wasn't really a question, because the officer was pushing past him into the house before Manny could answer.

The officer had authority, dominion, and Manny let him in without a thought. He pushed the door closed behind him and waited for him to speak. But it was too late. Manny only now realized that this man, this officer, was his stalker. He'd never seen him before now, but the feeling of watching, waiting, and fear all came crashing down. The officer's eyes spiked him in place, and as much as Manny didn't want to, he continued with the motions.

"Can I get you something, officer…" Manny walked to the sideboard and pulled out his bottle of good bourbon.

"Parker, Detective Parker. And yes, a drink would be nice." The man stepped up beside Manny with a pair of glasses already in his gloved hand.

Manny accepted them, poured two fingers into each, and passed one to the detective. Out of the corner of his eye he caught sight of the woman he had seen once before. Only once? Maybe, but the black woman in the restaurant was here, in his home wearing that same concerned look on her face. Her presence was the most real thing in the room. She was standing right in front of him, her voice one he had heard a million times, or maybe just a dozen, forever, and once.

"Focus."

He looked down at his own glass, and knew that death waited at the bottom, but he couldn't stop himself. This had already happened before, and it would happen again.

• • •

Janelle's mind worked as the pieces fell into place. A ghost eater. But not any ordinary ghost eater. This one wanted them fresh, so fresh he was willing to kill to get them.

She looked at the ghost in front of her. She knew now this was Manny, his corpus nearly devoured by the man standing directly behind her. She didn't have to look to know Parker was there, that Parker knew that she knew, and that he hadn't run. It explained how he got to the house so quickly, something she didn't exactly miss, but didn't register until now. Explained why he didn't suggest calling it in. And why the look on his face when he saw the murder was not disgust or concern, but of frustration. All the small things that she saw but didn't think about were also now falling into place.

"Why?" Janelle asked out loud. The word broke the deathly silence in the small townhouse, followed by an echo of the ghost asking the same question.

"I can't help myself," Parker said, without much in the way of care. "But you probably know why better than anyone else, Williams."

"No, why him?" she turned to look at her partner, seeing him for what he was for the first time.

This made Parker pause and think for a moment. "Don't you know? He doesn't fit any of the other victims. His location is far enough away to keep you guessing. His lifestyle is different enough that it would be hard to make a positive connection. But there is one. He had hope. Like they all do, something was finally going right in his life, he had something to live for. And those ghosts, they hold on to that something when they die. And it makes them all the sweeter."

"You know what we look for, you know how to clean a scene, you have access to files to change anything in case you left something behind," she said out loud. But not for the sake of Parker, or even herself, but for Manny who was listening intently.

"But what I don't understand is you," Parker says bemused. "You were supposed to be my dupe, my legitimacy in all this. Your investigations led away from me, not toward me. So how did you figure it out?"

Behind them, Janelle could feel Manny disengaging from the conversation. He had his answer and had told his story. He was passing on and there was nothing either of them could do. Parker's face screwed up in frustration as he watched his meal disappear before his eyes.

"You want to understand me?" Janelle asked, a smile spreading across her face. The Miser, no matter their flaws, was right on cue. They rose up as though from below the building to hover between Janelle and James Parker, off to one side. The color drained from his face when he saw the ancient geist.

"I'm sure by the end of it, we'll all come to some understanding," she said, as she closed in on her former partner.

Feasting on Twilight After Dark

Monica Valentinelli

Allison sat cross-legged on the manicured lawn near Science Hall at the bottom of Bascom Hill. She could feel the thick blades of grass pressing against her skin and, just for a moment, didn't care about the humidity or the rumbling skies overhead. The lake air was thick and reeked of fertilizer and dead fish, but it wasn't unbearable. Not yet, anyway. The temperature and the threat of thunderstorms were the least of her worries. What frustrated her was how nervous she felt. This was the first time her friends — her krewe — allowed her to take charge of an investigation. Yikes.

If she was being honest with herself, Allison wasn't feeling anxious about breaking into Science Hall and confronting a clueless ghost hunter. But she couldn't be truthful. It was always easier to lie whenever she had to do something scary or weird or gross. Lying made her feel as if she hadn't starved herself to death. Except, Allison was still alive because a ghost — her geist — had stuffed her soul back into her formerly dead body in exchange for helping other ghosts.

"Goddammit, Red. Where are you?" Allison checked her watch for the second time in ten minutes. It was three o'clock in the morning on a weeknight in July with barely any cars on the road. How hard could it be to make sure no cops were nearby? The mouth of State Street was well-lit despite the dark, billowing clouds that blotted out the stars and suffocated the full moon's glow. On this part of UW-Madison's campus, there were more electric lights than people, and there were no crickets, birds, rabbits of any kind. There was only Allison, Science Hall looming behind her, an empty sidewalk, and the geist that rested inside her prison of flesh.

"Boo!" Someone yelled in her ear.

"Ahhh!" Alison rolled over onto the ground into a fetal position. "Knock it off, Red!"

"Whatever, loser."

Red was her best friend and confidant. He was also shorter than she was, had shock-red hair, tan skin, and more tattoos and piercings than she'd ever thought possible. Red was also a pain in her ass most nights. Most days, too, if she had to think about it. Unlike Allison, Red loved being a Sin-Eater, and was eager to help ghosts. Red often yammered on and on about how the contract was a gift — who wouldn't want a second chance at life?

Allison never told him she wasn't sure if she made the right choice, because she could predict every word he'd say in response. All emotion, no logic.

"So, are we clear?"

"Yeah, I didn't see any bacon rolling through. No other Sin-Eaters around, either."

"Disappointed?"

"Do you have to ask? I figured at least one or two would drive down from the Dells, but something has them spooked. It's just us. That's not enough for a party." If Allison was the careful and methodical thinker of their krewe, Red was the heart. Not only did he bring their krewe together, he helped plan logistics and facilitated connections with other krewes, too. He was unique in a way that other Sin-Eaters weren't because he never lost hope. Red was good with people, and Allison hated him for that. She could never describe herself that way. She remembered how she died, but she barely remembered how she lived — even as a student who attended this university. Was her old life that boring? Or worse, terrible?

"Well, what do you think? Are we going in or what?" Red leaned over Allison and pointed at their planned break-in point: a gate that led to the labyrinthine tunnels that zig-zagged beneath campus for several miles. "The AC would be nice. It's hotter than ghost-pepper salsa out here."

"The building's old and holds the heat well. It'll be cooler inside, but still warm." Allison could sense the heat in her marrow and beads of sweat forming on her flesh, but she had no idea how stifling temperatures compared to hot peppers. "It's quiet, no one's around, but without Goody and Champ we don't have enough Sin-Eaters to safely investigate. Hey, where are they, anyway?"

"Parking the car like you told them to. Hanging back for a few minutes. Then at 3:15 A.M. they'll follow in after us to make sure campus police don't start sniffing around. You know, even though I did that already. Shit, Allison. We've been over this a thousand times. I know this is your first time, but can you not be so paranoid?" Red ran his fingers through his thick hair. Allison always wondered how he kept his fire-colored hair in such good condition. Did he use fancy shampoo? Or that dry crap? "I suppose we gotta wait for you to finish brooding before we go in. What's up with you, anyway? It's not like we're facing some ancient kerberos who's surfaced from the Underworld. It's just some jerk who thinks they know more about ghosts than we do."

"Hey! That jerk has managed to cause enough panic that it's all the Twilight Network can talk about these days," Allison protested. She pretended not to acknowledge his taunt. Brooding? Sure, she dressed a little more goth than the others did — black, short-sleeve shirt, plaid cropped pants, dark eyeliner — but she didn't *brood*. She wasn't some lovesick teenager. Until recently, she was a heartbroken college student who —

"Yep, brooding. Look, Allie," Red started. He only called her by that name when he was trying to tell her something important. "I know this campus holds a lot of memories for you, but now is not the time to wander. The past has to stay there. It's not a ghost. It's just...history. You can always come back and visit it later when it's safe. For now? Let's just stick to the plan. Okay?"

Allison bit down on her tongue hard. It didn't hurt that much, but it *did* stop her from arguing. She was the youngest Sin-Eater in their krewe and until she knew for sure what she was supposed to do? She had to listen to Red even when she didn't want to. Red was really their leader. Goody was older, sure, but not necessarily wiser. Goody claimed she was a Puritan — a midwife from Boston — who was caught up in the witch-hunting hysteria back in the 1690s. According to her, Goody was a relic from an era that didn't have underwire bras, running toilets, cars, or the Internet. Allison didn't believe her. Not for a second. The story sounded cool, but she guessed the Sin-Eater was just as inexperienced as she was. And Champ? According to him, he was Goody's bodyguard. Mostly, Allison thought Champ was either lazy as fuck or scared out of his mind. His last krewe had been kidnapped and then... eaten. Allison didn't know ghosts could *eat other ghosts* — but now that she knew? The thought terrified her.

"Hey, Allie!" Red snapped his fingers. "Remember: Goody and Champ are counting on us, so we don't need to wait anymore. All we gotta do is get inside before they do. Tick tock."

"Ugh, fine! Let's do this!" Allison didn't want to let down the whole team. And, truthfully, didn't want to admit Red was right. Instead, she and Red ran across the grass and down the stairs. They stopped in front of a tall, stone grate facing the street. The grate was one of Science Hall's unusual features that Allison wanted to use to her advantage. Built in 1884, the red-bricked building was so well-preserved it was listed on the National Registry of Historic Places. Allison wasn't sure how she knew that but didn't have time to...brood. Okay, maybe she was feeling out of it. Maybe, Red was right. Again.

"Brood—" Red started.

"Don't," she hissed and shook her head. "Just don't. You have the lockpicking tools?"

"Right here, ma'am." Red grinned, reached inside his cargo shorts, and pulled a small case from his front pocket. Allison didn't like his smile, because his teeth weren't white or yellow. They were brown and spotted. Red often chewed wads of tobacco like it was expensive chocolate. Something he never tried before, Red told her. He had a list called "Things to Do Before I Die Again" and she didn't. Allison didn't have something or someone to look forward to. She was just...there. She felt stuck, like she was in between. Not dead, not alive. Just there.

Allison balled her hands into fists, took a step back, and punched the grate. Her fists took a chunk out of the stone, but it was still too small to climb through. Frustrated, she readied her stance and prepared to strike it again and again. Being a Sin-eater did have some perks. She had inhuman strength and wasn't weak. Not like before. Never like before.

"I'm in!" Allison half-shouted, half-whispered back to him. "See you on the other side."

Red watched her from the sidewalk. His head was tilted, and his forehead was all scrunched up. “I know I’m not the kind of Sin-Eater who normally changes their mind, but are you sure confronting this ghost hunter alone is a good idea, Allie? The fact the entire Twilight Network knows about this guy is bad. Epic levels of bad.”

“Stop brooding.” It was her turn to smile. “Like you said, we’ve been over this plan a thousand times. We’re just here to scope him out and report back. I’ll confront this ghost hunter in his hideaway, grab whatever books he’s using, scare him a little. It’s just one dude. Besides, I’ve got one exit covered if he decides to bolt. You, Goody, and Champ take the other two. Easy as—”

“Lying?” Red finished. “Yeah, you’re right. A thousand times. Okay, I’ll be seeing you.”

“Promise? I don’t know what I’d do without—” Allison didn’t get the chance to say something kind. Red was already gone.

Allison crawled in through the hole and crouched down by the door that led into the bowels of Science Hall. She made quick work of the lock — without having to rely on her geist, thank you very much — and wandered to the top of a dimly lit stairwell. Peering down the stairs into darkness, Allison began to remember the last time she had stepped foot inside the geology building. Her ex-boyfriend, the microbrew-loving frat boy who never stopped telling her she’d be prettier if she lost ten pounds, broke off their engagement right before midterms their senior year. The details of how she felt in that moment were sharp thorns that pierced her heart: the designer sundress that made her feel like an Instagram celebrity, the comfortable-but-stylish gold sandals that lasted longer than her relationship, the hot tears welling up in her mascara-stained eyes, and the hole in her chest.

Her memories still hurt, but the hole wasn’t there anymore. She filled it with her best friend, Red; her other krewe mates, Goody and Champ; Sin-Eater gatherings; and a chance to help someone other than herself. She’d be a fool not to take advantage of her new-to-her life, no matter how hard it was to adjust.

“It was a hole,” she whispered. “A goddamn hole. That’s why I died.” When that asshole broke up with her, he didn’t just break her heart. He ripped it out of her chest, stomped on it, and walked away as if they’d never met. Deep down, Allison knew her ex was a jerk, but she couldn’t break free from the fat-shaming taunts that had already burrowed deep in her brain. After he humiliated her in front of her classmates, she tried to make sense of why he didn’t think she was marriage material, until all she could think about was her weight — right up until she died. Then, she didn’t have to worry about how he’d ghosted her or her anorexia or her obsession with not being fat anymore.

Then, she only had to worry about fulfilling the promise she’d made to her geist. That was a lot harder than she’d ever suspected. Death was supposed to be this great equalizer, right? Everyone was supposed to be treated the same after you died. Only, when it came to ghosts that wasn’t true. Some ghosts passed on. Some ghosts stayed behind. Some ghosts ate other ghosts — she still had so much to learn.

“I don’t want to do this, Mother. Is Red right? Or should I go on?” Allison asked her geist. It was the first time she’d noticed her all evening. The ectoplasmic being wasn’t her mother and didn’t have a name as far as she knew, but Allison couldn’t help but think of her geist as a parent: sometimes gentle, sometimes needlessly harsh.

Mother was perfect because though she never used words to respond; her intent was always clear. Alison felt a slight pressure inside her rail-thin body, a reassuring nudge. Allison didn't come back to UW-Madison to heal an old hurt; she returned to deal with a threat, the kind that could permanently send her back to the Underworld across the gauntlet separating the worlds of the living and the dead. But Allison couldn't worry about her painful past or get anxious about the unknowable future. She didn't know who (or what) had taken up residence in the labyrinthine tunnels that zig-zagged beneath most University of Wisconsin-Madison campus buildings, she just knew that's where she had to go. Why? Because Mother told her to. And Mother was always right.

Allison shook herself free from the haze of her memories, vowed to stop moping, and concentrated on the task at hand. It was difficult to creep down the stairs; after each step she took Mother pressed nervously against her corpse-flesh, warning her danger was nearby. Allison tried to ignore the screams of her intuition but couldn't. Someone was watching her from the great beyond known as Twilight.

Just as Allison stepped foot into the hallway at the bottom of the stairs a ceiling light flickered, bathing her in a sickly yellow glow. Before Allison had a chance to respond, Mother panicked. Her ectoplasmic body shook so hard, Allison lost her balance, forcing her to fall down in a crumpled heap.

Before she could rise, Allison heard two sounds overlapping in a cacophony of anxious noise: a low, eerie cackle that echoed down the hallway and a man's voice shouting, "You shouldn't be here!"

Mother pressed against her flesh hard, urging Allison to get up, prepare for battle. Allison, on the other hand, was slow to react. It took her a few moments to gather her wits — which surprised her. She wasn't in shock and she wasn't anxious, either, which was strange. If she had to describe what she was feeling? She was simply confused. Two jerks? That wasn't part of the plan. Surely, she could overpower one ghost hunter. But two?

"Who's there?" Allison bellowed. One of the voices seemed human but the other didn't — which didn't make any sense. Was the person shouting at a ghost? Her? Or her geist? "Answer me!"

When she didn't hear a response, Allison got up from the floor and walked confidently down the hall, looking for the man who was clearly in distress. She'd dealt with curious humans and amateur paranormal investigators before in Milwaukee. Most humans believed ghosts weren't real — right up until their first, frightening encounter with one. After that, they were usually too scared to be a real threat. Their rituals to exorcise ghosts were drawn from television shows and movies like The Exorcist; they were works of fiction designed to spook a superstitious audience.

This time, Mother disagreed. Allison could feel her ectoplasm shifting uncomfortably as she headed for the first sharp turn; curiously, Mother wanted her to be vigilant, but instead? Allison ignored her. What harm could one, maybe two ghost hunters possibly cause? Sure, Sin-Eaters had their fair share of enemies. Red warned her about kerberoi, but there were others, too. She hoped she'd never have to meet them.

"YOU SHOULDN'T BE HERE."

This time, both voices shouted in unison — but it was clear to Allison neither party was referring to her. That didn't stop Mother's anxiety. Allison wanted to stand still

and wait to see who emerged into the hallway. Mother, on the other hand, pressed all her ectoplasmic weight against her feet. The geist urged her to run.

"Mother," Allison hissed. "I don't want to be fool—"

"Aiee!" Someone else, someone familiar, screamed. "Allison, run! It's a Reaper!"

"No, no, no, no, no. Not Red. Please, anyone but him. Please!" Allison ran toward the sound of clamoring voices. As soon as she turned the corner and saw what was happening, she jumped backward from shock. The ghost hunter was chanting an incantation from a book while a ghost — a Reaper! — was shredding Red's geist from his corpse, flinging black blood and sticky ectoplasm in all directions.

Allison heard herself scream, then sprinted into action. She wasn't thinking before she acted — a historic first for her. That ghost hunter must die. First, she lunged for the book and shredded its pages. Then, she leapt in between the ghost hunter and Red's body just after—

—the Reaper opened its giant maw and bit down hard on Red's geist.

"Nooo!" Allison screamed, watching the Reaper yank Red's geist out of his body and swallowing it whole in one, loud gulp.

Allison crumpled to the floor. She could feel her body shaking with grief and confusion and rage. She was angry — so angry — with herself. Why hadn't she listened to Red? If she'd have jumped in just a minute earlier, he'd still be alive. Now? Red was gone. Just…gone. And the Reaper? Vanished. Disappeared. Nowhere to be found. She assumed that once the Reaper had its fill of the tattered geist, it faded into Twilight, sensing a threat was nearby.

Sensing her.

Allison was furious. She could feel her cheeks flush with rage, her muscles tightening, her short breaths. The Reaper was gone, but she still had to deal with the ghost hunter who dared to stick around and glare at her. Confronting him, Allison spat out two questions. "A Reaper? Working...with a human?"

"What, pray tell, is a Reaper? And why is it a problem I'm human? Are you one of them?" The man pointed to the mauled, bloodied corpse lying in her arms. Allison winced. Red wasn't supposed to meet his final death. Not like this. Not ever. "You knew him, didn't you?"

Allison gritted her teeth. She wanted to tell him — this total stranger — how he'd just killed her best friend, but she didn't want to give him the satisfaction. The Twilight Network had warned them the man loved to write down useless bits of information. She'd have time to mourn Red, and for now she'd have to push aside her grief, no matter how much she wanted to lunge for the ghost hunter's throat. She was desperate for answers. Why kill Red? Why work with a Reaper? Why attack Sin-Eaters who were just trying to help ghosts?

"Maybe." It was the only word she could say.

The man tilted his head. It was hard to guess his age due to the poor lighting, but from what Allison could tell he was more of a scholar than a hunter. He had a full head of dark hair so he couldn't be that old. Still, he wore a professor's tweed jacket — the kind she used to make fun of as a student — that hid a pale, button-down shirt and (what she assumed to be) a soft belly. He must be some middle-aged asshole, Allison guessed, the kind that got caught cheating on his wife and had to get a divorce.

Utterly predictable and totally uninteresting. Red had more honor than this asshole. Probably. Then: "Shit, what am I going to tell Goody and Champ?"

"Did you know him before or after he became a zombie?"

The word "zombie" released all of Mother's tension. The pressure Allison felt from Mother's ectoplasmic touch now felt more like bubbles than heavy stone. It was a sensation she hadn't felt before. Was Mother amused? Waiting? What?

"Before," Allison lied, fighting back tears. "I, uh...I'm sorry I'm having trouble with… All of this. I've never seen a dead body before. There's so much blood."

"Hmm...that's a data point he did not know." The man fidgeted, pulled a small notebook and a pen from his jacket, and scribbled down a few notes. Who was "he," Allison wondered. The Reaper was using a human persona? "I'm sorry for being rude," the man continued. "I'm sure this must be strange to you, Miss, uh..."

"Becky Thompson." Allison gave the man one of her aliases — which he also wrote down in his notebook. She didn't need instincts to know this man was both clueless and dangerous. Why didn't she listen to Red? Goddamnit. She just wanted to cry and cry until she used up every drop of water in her body. Where the fuck were Goody and Champ? "And you are?"

"Uh, Professor Kelley. I, uh... Well, we should return to my office. For an interview, of course."

Mother pinched the back of her neck. It was the same gesture Mother used whenever the geist wanted Allison to attack. This time, instead of ignoring her geist, Allison sighed and stood up. She wasn't angry or sad. It was right to kill this man and take his life. "There will be no interview."

"Of course, of course." Professor Kelley seemed concerned, but Allison wasn't buying it. There was something off about him. She couldn't smell anything wrong, but she could hear the careful, practiced tone of his voice and noticed how his fingers trembled. "It's just that, well, I can't let you leave."

Mother "stood" upright and at attention, filling every bone, sinew, and cell in Allison's body with ectoplasm. Allison knew the geist wanted to be unleashed, to teach Professor Kelley a lesson, but too many questions burned in her mind — especially after watching Red die.

Allison folded her arms across her chest as if to say: "Is that so?"

Then, the professor said something she did not expect. "You're not telling me everything, are you, Allison?"

Before the word "how" could fall from her lips, Mother coiled her ectoplasmic body into a ball, then used her sheer will to push against Allison's chest so hard she felt her sternum crack. Allison howled — a mixture of deep anguish for the loss of her friend and a cry for vengeance.

The professor was not impressed. "I knew it! Jackson was right! Zombies are real! Hoo hoo!"

Allison took one, hard look at the man who killed her best friend and growled at him. She was about to unleash a flurry of attacks when she noticed something small and glowing attached to his foot.

"What...what is that?" Mother didn't care. Mother heaved her ectoplasmic body forward, urging her to kill him, but Allison managed to keep her in check. One

professor working with a Reaper was unthinkable, but she'd seen that mark before on an occultist from Ohio. That mark could only be seen by someone who could peer into Twilight.

That — the ability to see into Twilight — was probably the reason he thought Red was a zombie. This ghost hunter could see their geists. Whatever powers this professor had, he wasn't born with them. Someone gave him those gifts. Wait. Could he see Mother? Fuck! What if the professor wasn't working alone? Whoever he was, she had to stop this now or more Sin-Eaters were going to die. No wonder the Twilight Network wouldn't go near this asshole.

The professor wasn't willing to give up any answers. Instead, his mouth opened a little. Then, he said: "There are more of you?"

Allison turned. She was half-relieved, and half-embarrassed, to see Goody and Champ standing in the hallway. She wanted to ask them a million questions — why they were late, why the Twilight Network never mentioned Reapers, why she was too weak to save Red — but she didn't. She couldn't.

Goody didn't say a word. She just nodded. Champ, on the other hand, was more than happy to supply a colorful string of swear words followed by five, frightening words: "We have to warn them."

Allison frowned. Then, she turned to the professor who was frantically collecting the torn pages of his damaged book. She quickly realized keeping the professor alive was one of two options. With the Reaper gone — even temporarily — she could kill him. If she was fortunate, he would become a ghost and she could set the professor straight. If she was very, very lucky, he would make a pact with a geist. Then he would become like her, a Sin-Eater.

"They will come for me, you know. Even if you kill me. They always know where to look for the dead. I don't blame you. I killed your friend, you kill me. The eternal cycle. Love, loss, betrayal—"

"Shut up," Allison snapped and carefully shifted Red's body to the side. The professor knew what Allison was going to do before she did. He just didn't know why he had to die and why she had to be the one to kill him.

Champ rubbed his bald head, then folded his arms across his chest. "Hunters are supposed to be our friends. What you're doing threatens all of us. You're playing with shadows that are controlling you, dumbass."

The professor faltered. "I — I don't understand."

"You will," Champ spat, flexing his muscles. "Hopefully."

"Lock his ankles, Champ. Goody, you grab his head." Allison waited until her friends were in position. Then, she leaned over the professor's chest and ripped his shirt open. She ran her fingers down his bare chest. It was hairless and soft, just as she expected it to be.

"Maybe your friends will kill me," Allison told him, her words fat and full of remorse. She guessed the professor's eyes were wide with fear, but she couldn't look at them. She didn't want to know what color they were. Instead, she concentrated on his soft, baby-smooth skin, hairless nipples, and the bones underneath that could crack like raw eggs. "Or, maybe once you're dead, you'll help us get to the bottom of this fuckery once and for all."

"No, don't! Wait! I don't want to die!"

"Too bad. Red didn't either," Allison said. Then, she punched twin holes in his chest. Hard. One, right where the professor's heart was supposed to be. The other in his lung, because she needed something to hit.

"What now?" Goody didn't like to chit-chat, but she hated watching people die — even if they deserved it.

"I don't think the professor's friends are far behind," Allison said. "They're not going to wait a whole day before tracking him down."

"So," Goody grinned, showing off her dentures and a face full of wrinkles. In that moment, Allison wondered if she was as old as she'd claimed. "A fight, then?"

"Don't know. Maybe the professor'll ask around or visit his friends or…" Allison glanced at Red's body. She didn't want to leave him lying there, but she didn't want to hand his body over to the coroner, either. "...or maybe he's moved on. Hard to tell."

"I miss him, too," Champ said. "But we can't just sit here."

Allison gritted her teeth. "If you want to leave? That's fine by me. There is a Reaper who's joined up with the living, and that puts all of us at risk."

Goody walked over to Champ and whispered something in his ear. Wordlessly, the Sin-Eater left.

"What'd you do?"

Goody shrugged. "Champ wants to keep us safe. The gate is broken and it's nearing dawn. We still have to deal with Red's body, and it won't be long before—"

"—someone comes sniffing around? I told you, Allison, I have friends."

Allison looked up. Professor Kelley wasn't a Sin-Eater, but he was a ghost. Thank god! His faint outline was as clear as a painting. True to his word, the professor wasn't alone. A cluster of scholars, some still in their pajamas, carried books, relics, and strange jars in their arms. They ignored her, and quickly went to work drawing elaborate sigils on the linoleum.

"I'm embarrassed to say you were right."

For the first time, Allison started to understand why Red was so insistent she plan a little less and trust her gut a lot more. If she had, he'd still be alive — and that was something she'd have to learn to live with in time. But not yet. "No one else needs to die, professor. What do you plan to do?"

"This was my mistake, Allison. I didn't know what I was dealing with. It's my responsibility to make it right. I have to."

Allison didn't say a word. If the scholars wanted to bring down the Reaper, that was one thing. If the academics continued to work with ghosts? And not abandon their spooky, arrogant ways? That was another. "What does that mean. Exactly."

"We will prepare your friend's body, deal with the police, and pay for any funerary expenses. It is the least our organization can do." The professor floated toward her, disappeared, then reappeared once more. "I have so much to teach them. Thank you."

"Save it," Allison barked back. "Does 'making it right' mean you'll deal with that fucking Reaper?"

Goody put her hand on Allison's arm. "We have to leave. Now."

"But we need answers! And Red's body? Can we trust—"

Then: a familiar cackle. Low and grating. The Reaper.

"Murderer!" Allison lifted her arms and prepared to unleash her geist, when she heard a quiet gasp followed by a series of grunts.

"Allison, help!" Goody's geist was being pulled toward the summoning circle. Gently, at first, but the longer the Sin-Eater lingered, the stronger its call was. If the scholars' ritual worked, both Goody and the Reaper would die.

One of the scholars noticed what was happening and yelled out: "We'll chant more softly for a few seconds to weaken the circle's pull, but you must go. Let us fix this."

"Damn it all." Allison grabbed Goody's arm and wrenched her free from the summoning circle's grip. Then, she scooped Goody up in her arms and hurled her body forward down the long hallway. Just as they reached the exit, Allison heard a faint, arcane chant growing louder and more insistent with every spoken syllable. The howl of a rage-filled Reaper who was doomed to die wouldn't be far behind; her only regret was that she wouldn't be there to see it happen.

Champ was waiting for them outside on the sidewalk. "Got the car, just like Goody said. But, um, one of them hunters. They handed me this note and a check for ten-thousand dollars. The note is for you, Allie. Said you had to read it here."

Allison wanted to say, "Save it." The ghost hunters should stick to dealing with the living; Sin-Eaters were the only beings equipped to deal with ghosts. Still, her curiosity got the better of her. She opened the note only to see it was blank. "They said at this spot?"

"Yeah, I uh..." Champ started. "Look, Allie. These hunters are assholes, but I'm pretty sure they're gonna do the right thing. We can plan Red's funeral later. First, we gotta get home and make sure we're safe. Red wouldn't want you to be in danger."

Allison nodded, shut her eyes, and concentrated. When she opened them again, she read a phrase scrawled in Twilight. It wasn't the kind of message a mortal could leave. It was written by one of her fellow geists. "They are the Council of Bones."

Allison stared up into the dark summer sky. The threat of rain had passed, and a thin sliver of the moon's light shone brightly. Then, an uncomfortable truth: Red didn't die because he confronted the ghost hunter. He died protecting her. Well, shit. Maybe her new life was worth living after all. Isn't that what Red would say?

"What does that mean?" Goody asked. She sounded scared. "I've never heard of them before, Allison."

"Call me Allie," she said. Then, she grabbed Goody's hand and pulled her into a hug. "Let's hope we never have to again."

Lost at Sea

Renee Ritchie

The Black Beach easily earned its name. The grains of sand, like tiny shards of obsidian, caught whatever passed for light this far down. The faint glow of the cities of the dead lingered far behind, too far to illuminate this darkest of places, the last bastion of certainty in all the Underworld.

Kip removed their shoes, baring their feet to wiggle their toes in the sand, much as they did in life. The shoes themselves did not, could not truly exist on their own; they were simply a part of Kip, much like their own hand or their hair. Separated from Kip, the had already begun to fade as the waves of the Ocean of Fragments, watery and yet not, washed over them, and left a few shards and a phantom bit of lacing sticking out of the black sand in their wake. Kip looked down at their feet, and nothing felt amiss, then at where they placed the... well, whatever they had taken off a moment ago. That might have been a shoe? Kip could no longer recall ever wearing shoes, or even wanting to.

Kip took a deep breath out of habit, letting it out as a sigh. So, this was how it worked, then. The ferryman who had brought Kip here, a woman pushing a raft built from shipping pallets, had said as much. “No acid bath in the material world could strip you so clean, sugar,” she warned, “as acid only dissolves matter. The Ocean of Fragments will break you down, stripping more away from you piece by piece, until you may as well have never existed at all. What’s a pretty girl like you want with that?”

Kip hadn’t bothered to correct her at the time. Kip had uttered so many corrections during their life that it had left them exhausted to even try when, even in death, no one could get their pronouns right. They simply seethed through the whole ride, fists clenched or gripping the sides of the boat in an attempt to not fling the well-meaning ferryman off her own vessel. When she asked Kip for the third time if they were sure they wanted to go there, they nodded that much more fervently, jaw clenched to grinding. Kip had much of themselves to destroy.

Now, finally at this fateful beach, Kip stared out into the vast expanse. It resembled the beaches from their own life so closely, right at the moment where the color of the sky and the color of the sea blurred at the horizon, either the near-black of the night sky or the blaze of sunset as the sun submerged itself in the waves. Here, it was a matte charcoal gray, and Kip had to squint to discern the line between sea and open space. At the end of Kip's life, the world had felt this gray, and Kip had hoped to escape it into an oblivion that sounded sweet. However, even now, that lifeless gray was all they could see, was all that was.

Kip took one step forward, then another, and the phantom tingling at the base of their spine began, the same anticipation they felt the moment they put the razor to their wrist and pressed down to split skin and pierce the gray of their life with the red of their blood. A few steps more, and the ocean would take away everything; the shape they carried too much like the body that tormented them, the constant little fiberglass cuts from every judgmental gaze, the weights of tragedy after tragedy that made living not worth the price of admission. This is what they wanted when they died in the first place.

The ocean's waters felt warm as they kept moving forward to submerge themselves, tingling at the outermost reaches of Kip's form, what may have once been called skin. It tingled at first, a million little pinpricks perforating them. Kip felt little holes tearing into them and, as they waded in up to their knees, they felt the waters seep into them, coursing upward.

Kip felt weights fall from them: first the memory of finding Aiden's body broken and mashed into the pavement, blood pooling under him and trailing in tire tracks. Kip saw a suicide note float away from them, the writing disappearing before the paper itself sank beneath the waves. Kip felt their shoulders slump. They had seen a glimpse of Aiden in one of the many ghostly metropolises along the Rivers of the Dead, but Aiden could not even turn his head when Kip called out for him through the throng of the dead gathered there. Kip could not recall how long they had been stuck there, or even why they left, or why they could not remember why they left.

A bloated finger with a wedding ring stuck tight on it floated before Kip as the ocean reached waist height. Kip furrowed their brow in confusion. They didn't recognize it as theirs, but they reached out for it anyway. A flash of a memory filled their mind; a warm spring day, a well-fitted suit, and a beautiful man waiting at the end of the aisle. Kip felt a tugging at their heart, like a loose string unraveling whatever kept the organ knit together. As that man turned around, his face disappeared.

Kip shook their head and turned back to the moment, looking down at their own left hand as an afterthought. The gap where their ring finger had been revealed the gray of the waters around them. Kip turned their gaze frantically out to the water again, only to see the finger and the ring slip underneath the waves.

Kip did not immediately recognize the scream as their own as they dove into the water to reach for the wedding band again. The viscous fluid sucked them down, enveloping them, and Kip felt their chest cave in, crushed by the weight. They opened their eyes and saw only that gray, with a tendril of chestnut brown drifting away and swirling in the liquid. With a twist of their head, they saw the ribbon of color coming from their own hair, the Ocean leeching it out. The pain of their crushed chest began to fade, and more memories floated before Kip's eyes.

First, they were looking up at a ring of malicious faces, the names attached to them disintegrating along with their features, but the barrage of kicks and punches and the sound of cracking bones echoed in Kip's ears. That pain clung stubbornly, bleeding into another scene, where a once-beautiful woman, worn down by time, concealed her rage in balled-up fists, the red acrylic nails cutting into her own palms as she demanded Kip tell her what happened to her daughter, and who Kip was. She did not hide her disgust at what she saw when she looked at Kip. The word "mom" tried to form on Kip's lips, but the fluid rushed past the parting lips, reaching inside for more of those memories to obliterate them and only leave pain behind.

Kip panicked, flailing their limbs against the weight of the water grown thick with little pieces of the countless souls it had devoured. Kip pushed upward hard, and after what felt like an eternity, their head breached the surface. The cry they emitted could not have sounded like any word, at least no word that they knew. They did not even know why they were crying out now. Wasn't this what they wanted? To no longer exist, with no form on any plane? To be free? Yes, but this wasn't freedom. They had nothing but pain left, and pain thrived here.

A glittering net sailed over their head, spreading out to envelop Kip, and they reached out to grab at it and hold on. Weights along the edges sank quickly, even in the thickened waters, and Kip felt themselves pulled upward into a giant ship, much like the cargo freighters that pulled into the Port of Oakland. Kip could not recall where Oakland was, or why they thought of it now, but even as they coughed up gray sludge, their pale hands reached out to catch the sludge in the hopes that it might hold that answer. The net, with Kip in it, swung around and loosened, depositing Kip with a hard thud against the deck of the ship, which felt much more solid than it should have. Another ring of faces filled Kip's vision as they rolled onto their back, and they spat out their own name before everything went black.

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Kip opened their eyes and saw a ceiling of rotted wood papered with peeling posters of scantily clad women. They sat up sharply and looked around, only to be overwhelmed by pain, which sank them right back down into the makeshift bunk they were lying in. Kip groaned, clutching their chest, only to feel coarse stitching there, and the ridges of ribs where soft roundness lay before. Their eyes widened, and they tried to look down to see. What was once round, and what Kip wore tight clothes to squash flat, was now flat on its own.

Panicked breathing, like an old animal habit, strained their chest once more, and they looked at their hands and arms, still intact. The left ring finger, however, looked dark and gnarled compared to the paler, smoother skin of the rest of their hand. They turned their hands over, their eyes following the long, thin, bloodied lines down the inside of their forearms, now familiar to them after what seemed like an eternity.

"You lost a lot, Kip." The rumbling baritone came from somewhere to Kip's right, and they turned their head to find its source. A strong ghost, nearly corporeal in his might, sat on a rickety stool at the side of the bunk. His form was solidly built, patched together with a mishmash of fragments to make him appear as a burly man with a seafarer's cap, bushy eyebrows, a bulbous nose, and a beard that hung down to his chest. He appeared to wear a thick sweater, trousers, and boots.

Kip opened their mouth to reply, but the apparition held up their hand to silence them. "No need to thank me," he said. "I seriously considered letting the ocean do the rest of the work and pulling up the scrap you'd leave behind, but then you yelled. I'd never heard anything like it."

Kip looked up at the apparition, perplexed, but the apparition continued.

"It takes a lot to keep yourself together this far out at sea. I could use someone like you aboard. I'm the Admiral, and this is the Freighter. You're now a part of my crew, and you'll work to earn your keep. It's hard work, but it's always there."

Kip's brow furrowed in confusion, and the Admiral's smile widened into something more cheerful.

"Little wisps of folk who once were are always in demand," he said, answering the question he read on Kip's face. "And don't worry if you have no knowledge of sailing. We always have some of that available, either learning from the crew or salvaged in the fragments. You can add these things to yourself as you go." He gestured to Kip's hand, and the mismatched ring finger.

Kip clutched their left hand to their chest in a flutter of panic, like a butterfly beating its wings in terror in the hollow of Kip's chest. These fragments were parts of people. People who had lives, and then didn't. They had simply dissolved in the waters of the Underworld, and Kip had very nearly joined them, grist for the mill. Disposable. Kip flexed their left hand, stretching and curling their fingers. The ring finger felt only a little different from the others, but responded just as quickly, and did as Kip wished. Still, the connection was there, a thread between the finger and that fluttering in Kip's chest.

The Admiral laughed mirthfully, a booming sound that filled the small cabin. "I know, it's a lot to think about. You don't have to lose yourself completely. We can let some things stay behind. You're not the first to ask for that. But think of it this way: taking these things into yourself is like getting the know-how without all of the work you'd need to get it. We can fill the gaps and have you on deck, and all that pain that led you to throwing yourself into the ocean in the first place will simply cease to exist. This will give you purpose, perhaps more than you ever had in life."

The Admiral rose from his seat.

"Rest now, though. The ocean takes a lot from us, but it can give us that much more. You'll see for yourself soon enough." And with that, he headed back up toward the decks.

"Kip."

The Admiral stopped as Kip finally spoke, turning halfway to look at them. Kip struggled to sit up, then looked up at the Admiral.

"My name is Kip. They/them, please."

Kip thought the smile on his face, obscured by that massive beard, looked fatherly. Not their own father, surely; their father was… Kip strained to remember their father, but they could only remember that they had one.

"Welcome aboard, Kip," the Admiral said, repeating their name, then turned to walk out again.

Once alone again, Kip laid back and looked up at the ceiling, a smile forming on their face in oncoming sleep, even as the phantom pain of kicks and punches constricted their ribcage and the sound of cracking ribs echoed in their ears.

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Kip did not sleep after that. As many times as they tried, hot swapping a narrow, cramped bunk in an even narrower and more cramped cabin shared with most of the crew, the familiar temporary oblivion of sleep never materialized. Kip could close their eyes and rest, but the time did not slow to a crawl or pass without thought. Even behind their eyelids, they were aware of every moment they spent in that bunk. Kip could hear every shift in another crewmember's body as they at least pretended to sleep. Personal belongings, few and far between, hung in honored places, and other crew members wailed in unbidden anguish or sobbed themselves to exhaustion, clutching some locket or scrap of clothing. Still others filled the time with hushed conversations, kept quiet to not disturb the others out of courtesy or discretion. Kip absorbed all of it, cradled by the sounds that constituted life in this place, and when rising from their bunk for the next shift, they felt refreshed, as if they had slept for days.

The absence of day or night turned each cycle of tasks, each shift, each job into the clock that ticked away time instead of arbitrary hours or minutes. Several crew members marked off their cycles one by one in old journals, knots on stolen bits of rope, marks on their clothes, or even carved tick marks onto their own limbs.

Kip shared their bunk with Lee, a girlish-looking spirit with a hastily stitched-on jaw where her own was ripped from her face. Kip tried their best to not look away from Lee when she spoke, but the mismatched jaw, the ruffled dress with vicious rends and blackened stains combined with bruises that never seemed to fade made something in the back of Kip's mind scream in rage. When Kip asked her what happened to her, she simply shook her head with a sad smile. The replacement jaw did not quite obey, twisting its half of the expression to a vicious leer.

The Freighter's main cargo came from the Ocean of Fragments itself, the bounty that Kip remembered every time they looked at their own hand. The first haul they helped pull up, Kip callously snatched up a soiled child's toy that had slipped from the net, ready to toss it overboard. The screams of a baby in distress and the shouts of a man and a woman flooded their senses for a moment, making them drop the toy and sending them staggering back a few steps. Kip ventured to pick it up once more, more gingerly, and this time, the sounds and memories of base, innocent distress only brought tears to their eyes. Lee took the toy gently from them and murmured, "A memory of a lost child," then slipped it back into the net.

The memories were less valuable to the crew themselves, but more abstract pieces got more attention. A few crew members fought over a lump of angry red flesh so viciously that the Admiral had to step in. The lucky sailor who received the lump tossed the heavy nets about the deck like they were gossamer bedsheets, belting out sea shanties with a broad brogue they did not have before.

"That was part of the life of a true sailor," Lee had explained later, between shifts. "Many of us cobble together what we can from what we get from the ocean itself, some bit of skill or knowledge we may not have had before. Actual, true seafaring knowledge is rare, and so we snatch it up fast as we can. Sometimes, we get a fragment of a captain or even an admiral. The Admiral takes them for himself, naturally. He doesn't use them all at once, though. He saves them."

"Saves them?" Kip asked. "For what?"

"You'll see," Lee replied cryptically and would say no more.

Naturally, cargo and catch needed to leave the ship somehow. The Freighter drifted close to the shores of the Black Beach. Kip strained their eyes to see any indications of exactly where they were along the obsidian shores, but no recollections stirred their memories of their own brief sojourn there. Scraggly trees of bone and the occasional specks of light from ferrymen sailing the Rivers of the Dead broke up the monotony. Some of these ferrymen hailed the Freighter, bearing their own passengers: traders from the Cities of the Underworld, looking for bits and pieces of broken lives that had somehow been spared from total dissolution. Memories and identifiers fetched what Kip could only assume was a handsome sum, as the Admiral himself took charge in all the negotiations.

Once, a trader brought another ghost with her, a criminal perhaps, bound and gagged. The Admiral took the prisoner, paying with a handful of passable musical skills harvested from the depths. Kip could not hear the specifics of the conversation over the noise of the bustle of the deck and the creak of the Freighter's hull, but they saw enough to put the pieces together. The Admiral argued hard with the trader, but she held firm, pointing out that the Admiral was getting this prisoner for a song, quite literally. Even when the Admiral grew angry, nearly screaming in her face, she held firm. With sad eyes, the Admiral acquiesced, and Kip could clearly hear him tell the trader "Get the fuck off my boat." Everyone else on deck had heard it, too, judging by the way they all looked up like meerkats striving for a better view.

When the trader was gone, the Admiral bellowed loudly that it was time for a keelhaul. The entire crew spilled forth onto the deck in record time, some whooping and hollering in excitement, others with barely enough energy to summon up a forced smile. The crew, Kip included, ran a length of rope long enough to slip under the Freighter from bow to stern. Kip followed along, confused but obedient all the same. All watched, without fail, as the Admiral latched the prisoner's bonds to a single point in the rope and ordered the whole crew to pull the rope. The gag swallowed most of the doomed soul's screams, but the ocean itself did the rest.

At first, the rope snagged and struggled, resisting every effort to keep it moving, but the Admiral bellowed "Heave!" and the whole crew moved as one. Kip closed their eyes and imagined what the poor soul was seeing on the underbelly of the Freighter, which, Lee had told them, never put into drydock. Kip imagined how some of the flotsam that used to be people might cling to the ship like barnacles, shredding whatever scraped across it. They shuddered hard enough to lose their grip on the rope right when the Admiral called the rhythm once more and scrambled to take hold of the rope again. They stole glances at the Admiral when they heard his voice go raw. and had to squint to be sure, but they gasped softly as they saw tears in the old sailor's eyes.

Mercifully, when the spot in the rope where the prisoner was bound came through on the other side, it was empty. Kip felt their shoulders slump in relief before they realized they were doing it. Some of the other sailors around him grumbled that the fun was over so soon, but the Admiral cut them off. "Back to stations," he ordered.

Kip began to coil the rope used for the keelhaul, but the Admiral approached and laid his hand gently over Kip's. "Leave the rope," he ordered in a low but firm voice.

"Sir?" Kip replied, unable to catch the wavering in their voice before they spoke.

The Admiral did not reply, but simply retreated to his quarters once more.

After their next shift, Kip spotted the Admiral slipping that rope around his own ankle. The Admiral looked around furtively and, upon seeing Kip watching, he sighed.

"You're going to need to pull the rope for me this time, Kip," the Admiral intoned, his face grave. Kip shook their head in horror, but the Admiral's gaze held firm. And with that, the Admiral jumped overboard.

Kip watched the Admiral sink, the big, fluffy beard fading away under the opaque waves. Kip panicked and moved to grab the rope and pull the Admiral up instead of through. As they turned to pull the rope, Lee was there, a mere inch from Kip's face.

"You heard him," Lee commanded in a low voice that Kip had never heard from her before. "Pull. I'll help you."

Kip swallowed hard, and Lee took hold of the rope with them. Together, they pulled the rope just the same as they did before. Lee called the rhythm of their work, each "heave" emerging from her lips striking Kip's ears like a sledgehammer to a railroad spike. With only two instead of the whole crew, the work was slow, grueling, and each moment dragged on for what seemed like eternity. Around the Freighter, the water took on an oil-slick sheen that swirled and eddied in time with each pull.

Kip lost count of the number of eternities it took before the Admiral emerged from the waters, climbing the short length of rope remaining to haul himself back onto the deck. He flopped onto his back, panting and coughing up gray sludge. He looked leaner, clean-shaven, colder somehow. Parts of him were missing entirely. Kip offered him a hand up, but the Admiral, only barely recognizable as the Admiral, shoved their hand away and pushed himself to his feet. He scowled at them both, then walked with a deadly gait toward the bow without a second look.

Kip opened their mouth to speak, but Lee shook her head, smiling that half-sad, half-malicious smile. "He does this sometimes when he feels he needs to change, when time has worn away something important to him." She then turned her gaze out to the gray sea. "He has more jagged edges now, but they will wear smooth. This is the passing of the tide, nothing more."

"What did the Admiral want to lose?" Kip wondered aloud.

Lee shrugged. "He has scrubbed away much over time. Best not to think about it."

Kip looked in the direction the Admiral had stalked off. Even as the ache in their chest throbbed angrily like a warning, they did not dare voice any disagreement.

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The tide had, indeed, shifted. The Admiral looked leaner and harder when he emerged from the Ocean of Fragments, and that hardness extended beyond the surface. His moods grew sharper, as well as his mood swings. Every smile had more teeth, every joke a bitter edge. When he lost his temper, he grew violent, taking out his aggression on the nearest member of the crew. Kip noticed that Lee kept her distance from the Admiral since his keelhaul, and Kip unconsciously followed suit. This distance made the violence and shouting all the more jarring; it pierced the relative stillness around Lee, who simply kept her head down and worked like nothing had changed. However, when the latest hapless sailor hobbled by with a third of his torso gouged out of his side, or simply stopped responding to his own name, the Admiral's transformation became harder to ignore.

The entire crew noticed the changes as well. Those who worked below decks got the least trouble; the Admiral only went below to visit his own quarters or to investigate when something had truly gone wrong. Lee had tried to swap shifts with another below decks, but the older, desiccated spirit shook his head vehemently and redoubled his labor on the engines.

Kip had come along for the conversation and tried not to look at the piles of discarded memories and pieces of people's lives, deemed unfit for trade, that stoked the fires keeping the ship running. However, the glow of the flames glinted off a piece of something shiny, and Kip snapped their head that direction. On top of the pile, ready to be shoveled in with the next bit of fuel, sat a ring finger that bore a striking resemblance to Kip's own fingers. That finger bore a gold wedding band.

Kip lunged forward and snatched it up, and almost immediately, the familiar images floated in their vision. A warm spring day, a well-fitted suit, and a beautiful man waiting at the end of the aisle. Kip felt an explosive warmth in their chest, like the remnants of their heart fusing together in a nuclear furnace. A single word burned into their thoughts: *mine*.

Kip popped the loose finger in their teeth, biting down on it as they pulled the gnarled finger the Admiral had replaced it with as hard as they could. Blinding pain followed, but Kip bit down harder, with a flicker of panic as they felt the finger in their teeth give under the pressure. Five whole seconds later that felt like centuries apiece, the old finger tore away with an all-too-wet ripping sound. Kip held their own finger to the stump left behind, willing it to reattach itself, but Lee abruptly grabbed Kip's arm and pulled them to the stairway. As Kip stumbled along, they caught only a small glimpse of the old sailor Lee had tried to bargain with, the radio microphone held to his face as he hurriedly spat panicked words into it that Kip could not comprehend.

"I have to stitch it back on," Lee explained tersely, dragging Kip along to their bunk. "Or you need to drink from one of the Rivers of the Dead to get it to reattach. But you could lose so much more than you ha-"

The words died on her lips. Or rather, they were torn from her as the thin, bony, but strong hand of the Admiral darted out in front of her and reached for her tongue. With a rough yank, he tore it away, and Lee fell to her knees on the deck, coughing. Kip scrambled backward in a panic until they felt the solid wall at the end of the hallway, but the Admiral followed. Kip flailed and screamed, but it did not stop the Admiral from grabbing them by the back of their shirt collar and dragging them up to the top deck.

"Sailors!" the Admiral bellowed. "Insubordination is afoot!"

As if to punctuate the words further, the Admiral tossed Kip to the deck. Kip rolled a bit with the motion of the ship as the rest of the crew on deck began to gather and watch, holding tight to the finger with no intention of letting go.

"This one," the Admiral continued, pointing a finger at Kip, "has cast aside the gifts I've given them, tearing off a limb I gave them to replace one they lost. One filled with sentiment." The Admiral spit out the word, his boot falling heavily onto the deck. "Feeling. Distraction from their duties to us, and to this ship."

The crew wailed in protest and outrage, and Kip felt a foot connect with their ribs when they rolled too close to the gathered crew. Kip could pick out "Throw 'em overboard!" and "Keelhaul!" and "String 'em up!" in the growing angry noises. A mass of hands rolled Kip onto their back and scrabbled for the finger Kip clutched in their hands. Kip flailed and roared, fighting off the greedy hands as best they could, but the sheer numbers made their efforts fruitless. The Admiral plucked it from Kip's

grasp, but Kip lunged forward, trying to take it back. Aiden's face began to fade. Yes, Aiden, that was his name. Kip could not lose him again.

"Oh, you want this one?" the Admiral taunted. "Is this what you want?"

"Yes!" Kip shouted. "Give it back!" They lunged again, but the crew reached out to restrain their arms and pull them back, cackling the whole way.

"But I thought you wanted to have nothing!" the Admiral countered. "Why else would you dive into the place where all the Rivers meet? And why do you care now, when I, out of the goodness of my heart, gave you a new purpose?"

"Because it's mine!"

The words surprised Kip, even as they came from their own lips. The Admiral was right about Kip's intentions, but now, knowing the true cost of losing everything, that scrap of memory the Admiral taunted them with was worth more than all the world, the Underworld, and everything between and beyond.

Surprise flickered across the Admiral's face, then rage, then finally settled into a bitter sneer. "Then go get it." He then flung the finger overboard.

Kip bolstered their strength to break free of the crew's grasp, but suddenly their hands pulled away, and Kip lurched forward awkwardly, stumbling to the guardrail at the edge of the deck and tumbling over it.

The crew's laughter only barely reached Kip's ears as the thick gray slurry of the Ocean of Fragments surrounded them once more. The finger floated in front of their gaze, and they reached out to snatch it, clinging to it even as the waters began to dissolve their clothes. They jammed it against the empty space, but it still did not stick. Their mouth opened, and the water rushed inside, abhorring the vacuum that was inside Kip.

The place that all the Rivers meet. That meant something, but Kip could not remember. They strained to recall it, even as they could see that knowledge swirling out of them into the gray waters. Something about drinking from the Rivers of the Dead. They swam forward and swallowed it again to hold onto it, then looked around with wide eyes, remembering again. This Ocean was were all those Rivers met. These waters were the same, but somehow more, and perhaps their only salvation.

They opened their mouth again, gulping down mouthfuls of the gray water. It made them gag, but they did not stop. They would drink the whole Ocean of Fragments dry, if only to hold onto that memory of Aiden on that spring day. That beautiful suit. That symbol of love. Their love.

Everyone should have that love.

The being that emerged from the ocean and trudged back up onto the Black Beach held onto that love. It glowed in their chest so brightly it could draw the Freighter to shore like a lighthouse. It did not know or care that the Admiral would try to kill them on sight. That was no longer important.

The name they had was no longer important. The lover's name, too, was lost to oblivion. The bite marks rent deep into the ring finger of their left hand remained, but not how they got there. But when the cry of another anguished lover about to lose everything came from the world of the living, All-Conquering Love could hear it. They could answer. They could find the love they lost once more, and they could destroy anything that got in the way.

Pete Woodworth

It's long been said that certain places have "character," personalities they've acquired over time as they soak up the lives and events that occur within them. A beloved grandmother's house hums with love and oven-warm nostalgia; loss and fury ripple across a battlefield like a summer breeze through tall grass. Sometimes these feelings ebb over time; a place that once blazed bright in history gradually burns down to embers, then goes out and is forgotten. Others, though, not only hold on to the feelings they contain, but magnify them, warping those who walk there into reflections of the past it cannot leave behind. Sometimes the restless dead help the process along, but in rare cases the place takes on a life of its own.

And Echo Hill is the rarest of places.

Though another institution would later steal the title on a technicality, Echo Hill Penitentiary was in fact the oldest facility of its kind in the country. A place designed not to punish the men — and much later, women — sentenced to its cells, but to encourage penitence and rehabilitation. To take broken people and make them whole and productive again through a combination of prayer, hard labor, and long slow hours of introspection. A place founded on fusing the most modern psychological theories of its time with the oldest sort of religious convictions regarding the power of salvation attained through suffering.

It didn't take long for that to fall apart. Soon bright ideals gave way to tarnished ones, then tarnished ones were discarded for pragmatic measures, and eventually pragmatism surrendered to simple, unceasing brutality. Echo Hill became a synonym for madness and torture, isolation and horror. When it was finally closed following the great fire of 1973, there were 141 official graves in its cemetery, and rumors of nearly half again as many more unofficial burials on the grounds. For years it sat by itself on its hill, burned and half-fallen, glaring at the city across from it, until a historical foundation raised money to repair it and re-open it as a museum of prison history.

These days, it's mostly quiet. There are ghosts, of course — some come close enough to the world for the staff and patrons to glimpse. Most, however, simply go about their days inside the high stone walls, clinging to their shadowy existence and doing their best to avoid trouble from both the living and the dead. Sure, people shiver and mutter to themselves about dark presences, but the truth is that if there are accidents, if there are disappearances, if anything at all goes wrong at Echo Hill Penitentiary, there is a perfectly mundane cause behind it.

Most of the time.

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"All I'm saying," Decker said, leaning forward across the diner table and into Becca's personal space, "is that we need to go in there and clean house. It's been left way too long, honestly." Behind him, his two krewe members nodded. They hadn't spoken at all the entire dinner, just exchanged glances with Decker and affirmed his positions with nods or small sounds of agreement. If it wasn't for the fact that her own Black Angel had acknowledged the geists attached to them, Becca would have wondered if Decker had just hired some actors to play the part of his entourage.

"You need to reconsider what getting pushy is gonna get you," Sam growled, leaning over the table to match Decker's aggression until the two were almost nose to nose.

"People are giving us looks," Becca said mildly. "Simmer down, both of you." The staredown continued for heartbeat, then another, before the two sat back. Sam slouched back and made an artful study of her nails, while Decker put an arm around the surly looking redheaded boy on his right. Becca repressed the urge to roll her eyes at the aggression on display and continued. "Now, let's be clear — nobody is saying that the disappearances at Echo Hill aren't a problem."

"Two people just vanish on the grounds, I call that the start of a spree." Decker chimed in.

"We all know there's been an active Gate there for a long time," Becca floated over the interruption, "but it's also never been a problem in the past. Aside from some minor outbursts now and then, the living and the dead haven't caused any problems for each other."

"Still think we should have done more than just scare off those kids and their damn spirit board," Sam added. She flashed her too-wide smile in response to Becca's exasperated *oh don't you start* look. "Just saying, a few months of nightmares goes a long way."

"That was you guys?" Decker actually looked impressed. "Nice work."

"Anyway," Becca continued, still glaring at the Beast she called her best friend, "I appreciate the offer, but I don't think we need the help. We know the place better, and we were already planning on checking it out ourselves tomorrow. Too many new faces running around will be too hard to hide, and besides, no offense, but I heard all about how your krewe settled that Black Road situation."

"It got handled, didn't it?" Decker smirked. His silent companions echoed the look a second later. "No more phantom hitchhiker problems."

Becca didn't anger easily, but she felt her temper stirring at Decker's nonchalance. "If you call 'handling it' leaving three people in the hospital and a half dozen harmless

local ghosts scattered to who knows where — or worse — then sure." She held him in her gaze for a long, measuring moment, until his smirk started to fall at the edges and uncertainty crept into his eyes. "I'd rather avoid that sort of casual violence and bodily harm, if it's all the same to you."

Decker's elaborate shrug nearly reached his ears. "Okay, *mom,*" he announced, voice dripping with sarcasm. Sam probably would have gone over the table right there if Becca hadn't reached out and grabbed her wrist, the cold bronze of the Black Angel flowing through her flesh and giving her just enough strength to hold back the seething Beast. "Look, the rest of the Happy Accidents probably won't be back from sweeping the Mansion Inn for a day or two, plus I gotta throw in another day of downtime and recovery." He ticked off the days on his fingers. "Add one more because I'm a nice guy and that's what, four days?"

"Four days until what?" Sam growled, not caring that others were staring again. Becca squeezed tight, cold metal warring with desert warmth. She could feel the Hunger pulsing off Sam in waves, and it only stirred the Black Angel more, shrieks of protesting metal sounding in her ears. "You and Barbie and Ken here find out what my fucking boots taste like?"

"Sam," Becca warned.

The two krewe members finally showed some life, leaning forward with serious frowns, but Decker held up his hands, palms out placatingly. "Hey, hey, no need for threats! We're all good here." As if to prove his point he took out his wallet and splashed too much cash onto the table, then ushered his krewe out of the booth with him, wrapping his scarf around his slightly crooked neck as he followed. "I'm just saying, we're going to roll past right around then, and if it's not handled?" His smirk returned. "We'll handle it."

"One last thing," Becca said. She pointed at his krewe mates. "Do they talk on their own, or do you need some sort of app for that?"

It wasn't the nicest move, but Sam snorted so hard she choked a bit and had to reach for her water, and that's what Becca needed most, for both their sakes. Decker just stomped off, krewe members trailing after him, while Sam got her breathing under control and Becca let the Black Angel's presence slide back. "I love it when you're a bitch," Sam said, eyes still watering with tears of laughter. "It's like watching a unicorn flip someone off."

"Thanks," Becca said, smiling back. "I may have shaved off his goodwill day with that one, though, so we'd better get moving soon. The Happy Accidents are no joke, and the last thing we want is them to go in smashing and stir up a place like Echo Hill."

"Do you really think it's an 'us' sort of problem?" Sam asked, sipping her water.

"Tom thinks so, and that's enough for me to go on." Becca said. Her ex-boyfriend's ghost had scouted the place out a bit the day before, with Becca safely nearby. He'd reported plasm splatters and emotional currents near the site where the couple was last seen, strong signs of ghost involvement. However, he'd seen no sign of the missing couple, neither their bodies nor their shades, so they might yet be alive. He'd wanted to continue investigating but the resident ghosts noticed him, and Becca felt it was best to pull back rather than draw too much attention.

Becca would have preferred more time to go back and investigate, either with her and Tom starting conversations with the resident ghosts or her and Sam poking

around as many mundane avenues as they could manage, but then Decker had texted her and she'd had no choice but to agree to a sit down. Echo Hill technically fell within her usual territory, even if she hated seeing it that way, and besides, he'd technically been polite by telling her his krewe was in town and talking to her rather than simply rushing in.

"I guess we're going back in tomorrow night, after hours." Becca started gathering her own things as Sam flagged down a waitress. "The last thing we need is to add more bodies to the problem, and if we don't beat them there, that's exactly what we'll get."

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It hadn't been hard to pick up the trail once they'd made it onto the grounds — achieved easily enough thanks to Sam opening a gateway through a sleeping watchman's mind, though Becca felt a twinge of guilt at the nightmares it would surely cause him — as only one building was still lit up. The old warden's house, now an administrative building, hunched in a corner of the yard like a kicked dog huddled against a fence.

No mundane lights were blazing in its windows, but both Tom and Becca caught the unmistakable glow of energized plasm from within. As ever, Sam was all for pulling the storm cellar doors off their hinges, lock be damned, and rushing inside, but Becca reminded her that was the exact outcome they were hoping to prevent, and so Tom slipped through the wall and unlocked the back door instead. Inside, the house was still and close, as though its age was a physical weight, the only sound a low keening from down below.

The stairs down into the basement seemed to go on for a hundred miles, somehow. Becca realized her progress slowed to a crawl as she went, the sound of her own breathing louder and frightening, her heartbeat finding the rhythm of a funeral march. Each step made her feel more like she was walking down into her own grave, that at the bottom she wouldn't find a room but a small box lined with cheap satin, where she could lie down and pull the lid closed and be alone in the darkness forever. And as much as part of her screamed to flee from it, another part of her wanted it. Her hands ached and trembled with the need to grip the lid, slam it shut, and block out the pain and fear and loss and hope of living.

The image was so powerful that Becca shook her head to clear it. Behind her, Sam was growling low under her breath, evidently struggling with similar demons. Becca reached out behind her and Sam took her hand, squeezed it hard, and whatever rite of deterrence had been worked over this place faded away, though Becca would have nightmares of that casket every year on the anniversary of their visit until the day she died.

"Oh my god," Becca whispered, her stomach turning to ice as she took in the sight of the old stone basement. A ring of ghosts surrounded an older man in a once fine, but now threadbare, three-piece gray suit. The air was smoky and the room lit only by old iron lanterns placed at each corner, their glass cloudy with age and layers of grime, lending an even orange glow to the room like the inside of a wood stove.

The man in the suit appeared to be bent over in examination of the ghost of a shirtless young man laid out on a battered, stainless-steel gurney, who had long, thin — but weeping — cuts across his exposed corpus. Becca's eyes immediately

caught the glint of metal from an array of surgical tools spread out over a few nearby tables. The tools were irregularly shaped and caught the light oddly, not like steel at all, but there was no mistaking the fresh plasm dripping from the one nearest the old man's hand.

"Get away from him!" Sam shouted, her fingers hooking like claws and her shadow lengthening into an inhuman shape as the Sphinx rose to the surface. The ring of ghosts fluttered back from her like leaves buffeted by a sudden gust of wind, expressions of shock and fear flickering across their faces. The old man winced as if pained at the interruption, but when he raised his eyes, they were calm, and his hands didn't so much as tremble. Nor did the ghost on the gurney move. If any of them felt rescued, they were keeping it to themselves.

"I'd leave quietly, if I were you," the old man said, not unpleasantly. "Just go back upstairs and forget about all this." Becca didn't doubt the deterrence rite would do exactly that if they did, but she held her ground. Sam cursed and started forward, but before she'd gone three strides something pushed her backward with tremendous force. Sam planted herself and managed not to tumble over, but even so her feet left little grooves in the floor.

"I apologize for the ward," the old man continued, one raised eyebrow the only sign that he was at all surprised or alarmed by what was happening, "but I do prefer privacy for our ceremonies."

"It's okay," Sam shot back with a feral grin. "I'm great with locks."

"What is this? What are you doing?" Becca tried to keep the anger and confusion out of her voice as she took everything in. Something was wrong here, deeply wrong, that much was plain, but even so she wasn't so sure it was the obvious candidate.

Up above them, out of sight, the lights in the prison museum blinked off and on in a pattern like eyes fluttering awake from a deep sleep. All across Echo Hill, wind rattled into air registers and heating vents, like an indrawn breath.

"Well, since it appears you are not likely to leave, can we talk for a moment?" The ghosts stirred behind the old man, but he quieted them with a gesture, not looking back. "I have no doubt you are fully capable of breaking through and doing as you will, but I'd greatly prefer to avoid that, for the sake of all involved and this magnificent old building, too. So, let us talk, and afterward if you are not satisfied, I give you my word I will lower the ward myself and you may do as you will."

"Awfully generous of you," Becca replied.

"More pleading than generous, considering your advantages," the old man said, the hint of a smile at the corners of his mouth. "But gracious of you to say so all the same." His manner of speaking would have been a laughably old-fashioned affectation on most anyone else, but it came so naturally to him that Becca found she was warming to him a bit, despite herself, and forced the feelings away.

"I'd prefer to keep things civil, if we can." She looked to her companions and got nods from both, if reluctantly from Sam.

"As would I, I assure you." The old man looked at Sam, no fear in his eyes, only a sort of weary resignation, as if he hoped for a pleasant outcome but fully expected the opposite. Now that she had a better look, there was something about his face that felt familiar to Becca, but she couldn't quite place it. "I can assure you that I will gladly explain myself, and I pose no threat to you or anyone else present. I only ask

that no matter what may befall me as a result of our chat, you leave my friends in peace." He swept his arm to encompass the waiting ghosts, their expressions a mix of fear, shame, and outrage.

"Why are you here?" Tom asked.

"A daunting opening question, but a fair one." He fished in a pocket, held up an employee badge on a lanyard. "I actually work here at the prison. I'm one of the caretakers."

"Oh, I'm fucking sure," Sam said, shaking her head. "Becca?" Sam's voice was tight with tension and simmering fury but, to her credit, she hadn't moved an inch. Becca had only to say the word and the Beast would rip the wards apart, shred the old man and ruin anyone who sided with him, but that was exactly the outcome they hoped to prevent.

"Let's start slowly and keep everything going smoothly, alright?" When nobody made any sudden moves, Becca breathed in and exhaled slowly. "I'm Becca, this is Sam and Tom. Tell us who you are, and why you're here. Please."

"Well then. Pleasure to meet you. My name is Henry Webster. Before I knew...all of this," the old man went on, gesturing to the surgical equipment arrayed around him, "I only knew I was born with a devil inside me. Even as a boy, I killed. Insects first, then animals, and finally — when I was sure I could make it appear no more than a harmless accident – a playmate of mine." His mouth twisted in a rueful smile under his bushy gray mustache. "I understand the progression of symptoms is well understood now, of course, but in my youth? Far beyond the science of the day. Sometimes I think I could have done real good by being studied, back then, but who would have studied me?"

"I appreciate the detail, but for everyone's sake I think you'd better get to the heart of your story." Becca inclined her head toward Sam, who had gradually lowered into an eerily feline stance and, while she was containing herself for the moment, Becca had no doubt Sam would pounce at the slightest provocation. "Quickly, please."

The old man bowed his head politely. "My apologies. I don't often get to discuss my circumstances. Let us be plain, then — a long time ago, I was a...collector." He worked his mouth, as if tasting something sour. "No, let's call it what it was. I was a killer. And while any brute can wield a blade, I made it into an art. I charmed, I built, I designed, all according to one vision — pure, efficient killing. I did not simply want to end lives. I wanted to make of that ending a profound statement, a celebration of death." The old man's smile showed too many teeth at the edges. "After all, aren't we all servants of death here, in our own ways?"

A pipe in the floor above them clanked and groaned like a death rattle, but if it was a message from Echo Hill, it went unrecognized by the two groups beneath it, so focused were they on each other. If this caused the prison offense, it did not show it.

"If you're trying for our trust, this is a fucked-up way to do it." Sam's eyes narrowed to fierce slits, her hands shaking with barely contained fury. Becca could almost taste the Beast's need to rip open the ward and savage the old man.

"She's got a point," Becca added. She gestured to the room and its ghosts, including the young man on the gurney, who had lifted his head to regard them but otherwise made no move to leave his position. "This doesn't exactly make me see why we should spare you before you do more of...whatever this is."

"Hey, he just—" the young man started to protest, eyes bright with a sudden rush of anger, but the old man shushed him with a raised palm.

"It's alright, Laurence. Were our roles reversed I don't know if I'd have listened, but simply broken the barrier and taken up my implements." He took a long breath and let it out slowly. "The reason I tell you this is because I long ago decided I must admit to my past if I am to make amends for it, and also because killing led me to where I am now, albeit indirectly.

"The phrase 'take a life' is truer than people suspect, you see. Or at least it always was for me. When I killed, there was an instant when it truly felt as though the life that left my victim was drawn into me. As I got better at it, it lasted longer, sometimes as much as a week. Once even two." His voice grew softer, distant. "But it faded. Always, it faded. So I experimented. I varied my methods, I built devices, I even constructed an entire building to serve as my laboratory. All to see if I could retain—" and he exhaled, then gestured as though catching his breath in his fist "—this, the stuff of life itself."

"Wait." Becca cocked her head, not wanting to believe but feeling terribly certain that she knew exactly who this man was, and that the whole country once had, too. "The Devil in the White City. Are … are you really saying that you're H.H.—"

The old man turned his head and held up his hand, as if warding off a name he was unable to face. "Once upon a time. But no longer. I carry that name, that life, as a yoke upon my shoulders." He stroked the thick mustache on his upper lip absently, then jerked his hand away as if caught in a bad habit. "As I said, I go by Henry Webster, these days. At least, I think so. I change it now and then, and even though I always use parts of my old life I confess sometimes I lose track of which ones. The wages of age, I suppose."

"Blah blah blah." Sam spat on the floor and Henry winced. "Okay, so you're some kind of super serial killer and you hide out in the prison, pretending to be a caretaker. You're, what, reformed? Supposedly? Except you fell off the wagon, hard."

Henry shook his head. "Those deaths are not on my conscience."

One of the ghosts near him, a young woman with bloodstains blooming like flowers across her sundress, nodded vigorously in agreement. "Henry's right! He didn't do it. He looks after us." A murmur of agreement from the other ghosts. The girl pointed a finger at the young man on the gurney, phantom drops of blood falling from the outstretched nail to vanish just before hitting the floor. "It was him."

"I did it," the young man confessed, face contorted with guilt and pain. "I couldn't help it. I saw that couple and I, I just, I just lost control. They reminded me of me and Shelley before I — before I—" The sobs erupted from him so suddenly and so loudly that Becca and Sam actually stepped back. He curled up in a tight ball on the gurney, clutching himself, sobbing and making a piteous sound between a word and a wail of anguish.

"Shh," Henry soothed the young man, leaning down like a doting grandfather tending a sick grandchild, cooing and speaking softly until the young man finally quieted.

"Are they still here? The couple?" Becca asked, when the sobbing ended.

"I am afraid not," Henry said sadly. "Their spirits did not linger. But there is an unused electrical room in the main building, basement level, if you wish to collect their bodies." He looked down at the young man. "I would have alerted the authorities earlier,

but the bodies were in a dreadful state and it was agitating Laurence. Since their spirits were not present, I figured there was little harm in letting the corpses keep a while." A hint of a smile played at his lips. "Corpses are the most patient of people, I find."

"This is fucked up," Sam murmured to Becca, but her hands had relaxed just a bit and her eyes lost some of their hard look. Becca understood — the scene was many things and disturbing certainly one of them, but it rang true as well. Whatever else was happening, there was truth at the core of it. The problem was, she didn't know if that made it better or far, far worse. "What do we do?"

"I—" Becca swallowed, not sure quite what to say.

As if in reply, a phantom dog let out a mournful howl somewhere across the grounds. Down in the basement, however, none of them heard it. In the houses nearby, though, children woke crying and ran to their parents afraid but unable to say why. Echo Hill watched their windows with its own, as it always did.

"I say let him finish," Tom said quietly. Sam looked doubtful but, when she saw Becca nod, she held her peace, moving forward just slightly to put herself between Becca and Henry and the ghosts. It was moments like that Becca loved her for, just as she loved Tom for moving to her shoulder as though he could reach across from death just to steady her a moment.

Having quieted the young man, Henry regarded the two women and their ghost with what seemed to be patient resignation. "So we come to the crux of it. I killed and I killed but I could not satisfy the need, could not contain the essence I sought. At least, not until I finally discovered the procedure." He gestured to the surgical implements. "The body was the distraction, you see. The spirit is what truly mattered, and by means of specially crafted instruments, I at last discovered how to capture the essence I sought."

"You're an Eater of the Dead," Becca breathed, though she'd suspected it since she saw the setup. The Black Angel stirred within her, roiling and angry, but she forced it back down with an effort of will. Eaters were notoriously unpredictable, and simply flying at him as Sam would prefer was an even worse option than it had been just minutes ago.

"Is that as fucked up as it sounds?" Sam asked.

"Pretty much," Tom said. "They consume souls to extend their own lives."

"And sometimes pick up some other powers, too," Becca finished. At an All Saint's party a few years back, Becca had talked to members of a krewe that claimed to have killed an Eater only to see them return days later as if nothing had happened. She didn't know if that was something all of them could do, but on the off chance it was, she needed another plan.

"You eat souls?" Sam asked, as if she couldn't quite believe what she was hearing, which was a high bar for a Beast who'd seen a longer life than most.

Henry frowned. "I don't 'eat' them in the sense you're implying, but the end result is similar. By means of an operation consisting of a rigid series of highly precise cuts made with specially prepared tools, I free their spiritual essence from its form and fuse it with my own."

"And you're all fine with this?!" Sam's eyes darted around at the ghosts in the room, most of whom dropped their gaze. None of them responded.

"Why?" Becca asked, her tone softer but no less urgent. "Please. Help us understand. Because I can't. They're *souls*." She pointed to the young man on the gurney. "He's a spirit, just like you. How can you justify that? How can you watch him cease to exist?"

At the top of the stairs, unnoticed, the door drew shut. It happened with such slow care that, had anyone been watching, they would have thought it was a parent trying not to wake a sleeping child. Or perhaps a killer, leaving the scene in the night.

"Because they come to me willingly," the old man answered her, as patient as a teacher with a slow pupil, a bit of anxious hand wringing the only sign of any nerves. "I don't take anything that isn't freely offered. I haven't since that first time."

"You've gotta be kidding me," Sam growled. "Who the *fuck* would *choose* to have their *soul* eaten?!"

Becca felt Tom stir nervously beside her and waited for him to speak but, in the end, he kept his silence. She couldn't read the look in his eyes, and when he caught her looking, he glanced down at the floor. "What do you mean?"

"I was apprehended scarcely a month after I finally perfected the procedure." His mustache twitched with old, nearly worn out aggravation. "One of the many ironies of my life, I assure you. But that first burst of vitality revived me after my execution and I have spent the years since refining the practices involved in the procedure. Beginning with atonement."

"How can you possibly atone for this?" Becca asked, at once dreading and anticipating the answer.

"Because the first time the procedure worked, and the vital essence infusion took place, I was confronted with the true enormity of what I had been doing for so long." Henry seemed to notice he was wringing his hands and made himself stop, though it took a visible effort to do so. "I saw the span of the life in the blink of an eye, and felt the terror at its loss, and the loss of all that was to follow it. I know you will likely think it a ploy for sympathy, but I do not exaggerate when I say it quite destroyed me for a time. I would even go so far as to say it contributed to my capture, and that part of me was glad of it. I had always believed I had a devil in me but, in that moment, I saw the true face of eternity, and realized I was nothing like the monster I fancied myself." His shoulders sagged. "And that I would go to any lengths to atone."

"How does this count?" Sam said, shaking her head.

"I think I know," Tom murmured. His expression was unreadable, but before Becca could ask what he meant, Henry continued.

"I decided I was little use to the living world, and so I dedicated myself to tending the souls of the unfortunate dead." Henry looked around at the assembled ghosts, with something close to pride in his eyes. "I traveled for a time, tending places where I could find the dead, but something always drew me back here, near the site of my greatest sin. And so, I've remained here at the prison ever since, aside from some brief departures now and then to maintain the illusion."

A faint touch of wind brushed past Becca, as if Echo Hill let out a long, tired sigh.

"I did not intend to ever repeat the procedure, truthfully, but several years into my vigil I was conversing with the spirit of a young woman when she expressed a desire to cease her existence. Her memory was fading, and she was losing her grip on this

world, you see, but was petrified to dwell in the endless halls below. When I told her that I knew of a way she might put an end to her existence, a true end, and help me in the bargain, well...we spoke of little else every night for weeks. I attempted to dissuade her, but I could recognize the honesty of her terror and, having felt the chill grasp of eternity myself, I knew only too well the terror of contemplating spending it in suffering."

"In the end, she was the second subject of the procedure. This time, however, the experience was so different I can scarcely describe it. There was fear, yes, but more than that there was relief. Acceptance. I waited for the shame to come, the guilt to wrack me, but it never did. Not this time. I was revitalized and she was beyond the fear and pain she dreaded so much. It is not a perfect solution, but what is? And so, as I tended the graveyard and saw the souls come and go, every once in a great while another would come to me for relief and, if they truly desired it, I would retrieve my implements.

"Murder," Sam almost spat the word.

"Suicide," Becca said, looking at Tom.

"Peace," he replied simply, his form flickering nervously, not quite meeting her eyes. "I'm not saying I'd choose it," he added plaintively, when Becca reflexively reached out for him, "but I can't judge it either. You're wonderful, and I love you, but you know as well as I do this isn't living. If you didn't have the Black Angel to help keep us connected, I'm...I'm not sure where I'd be."

"I know, love." Becca gave him a lingering look, then turned back to Henry and the ghosts. "How do we know any of this is true? I mean, what you do, you have to understand why we have trouble accepting it. Even voluntarily, it's hard to swallow."

"To put it fucking mildly," Sam added.

"You can ask these kind souls," Henry said, gesturing around him, "though I suppose it could be argued that they can't speak for the past, or could even be in league with me somehow." That sad, resigned smile again. "I wish I could provide some sort of ironclad reassurance, but in the end, it is only be a matter of trust." He took a deep breath and waved one hand. It was as if a storm broke, and Becca knew the barrier was gone.

"The moment of truth, then. I stand at your mercy, and I will abide by my word. As pledged, I shall offer you no resistance, whatever your decision." His eyes bored into hers. "I suppose the question is: Do you believe me?"

Becca looked into his eyes for a long moment, but there was nothing there she could see save sadness and the weight of more years than a human mind is well equipped to handle. Even if she had seen something that looked like truth, she wasn't sure she could have trusted such a notoriously deceptive individual anyway. Was he truly reformed and serving a different sort of sentence tending to the lost souls of Echo Hill? Or was this just another "murder castle" full of victims for him to prey upon?

Everyone was looking at her, waiting.

The ghosts, huddled close and plainly frightened. The young man, his eyes pleading, a believer even if she could not be so sure herself. Tom, his eyes unreadable. Sam, tense, her Hunger radiating from her like heat, waiting to be let off the leash. Henry, not challenging but not looking away, hands at his sides, waiting. Within her, the Black Angel shifting restlessly, metal grinding on stone, offering no insight beyond a need to act, and soon.

For its part, Echo Hill kept its long silence, though Becca felt almost as if the stones around them were shifting restlessly, like a sleeper turning over in the night, troubled by dreams. She wondered if Henry was the nightmare, or if she was. Or whether it was simply the living that worried it, feet tapping on its skin, peering into its eyes, voices echoing in its halls.

It wasn't fair, that it had to be her choice. It never was. Perhaps it was Henry's description of his procedure, but she felt her life and death rushing past her as if on review. She'd hadn't asked to keep the Gates, to make choices on souls, to weigh eternity in her hands and decide who was worthy of it. Lying on the road, watching her life float away with each cloud of breath and listening to her blood freeze on the blacktop, all Becca wanted was a chance to live just a bit more, to not have everything taken from her at 17.

To be with Tom a little longer.

That's what she'd Bound herself for, after all; that was the promise the Black Angel made when it floated out of the cemetery and stared down at the girl dying at its doorstep. To give her more time to do what she'd hadn't yet, and to keep Tom close in the bargain. But like most deals, the longer she was in it, the more she realized she hadn't understood exactly what she'd promised – and what was expected of her. What's done is done, however, and whether she liked it or not, the fates of Henry and the ghosts of Echo Hill were her responsibility. Becca closed her eyes, took a deep breath, let it out slowly.

She said a word.

• • •

When Decker and his reunited Happy Accidents came by Echo Hill three days later, the graveyard was empty, the Avernian Gate solidly shut. A few ghosts roamed the grounds, but they were hopeless sorts, locked in their last moments, heedless of anything beyond their pain. The krewe could see no sign of anything wrong, apart from the general lack of restless spirits for a place with such an old and bloody history.

Decker's krewe didn't spot the termination slip waiting in Henry Webster's employee mailbox (stamped "ABSENT WITHOUT NOTICE"), nor would they have thought it remarkable if they did. Becca wasn't answering his messages either, but Decker didn't think that was too strange — she obviously hadn't liked him much, and probably just didn't want another sit down. After a cursory and rather frustrated search, the Happy Accidents hit the road. After all, reports of a phantom ship spotted off the Jersey coast were far more interesting than poking around a dank old prison with nothing to fight.

Meanwhile, inside Echo Hill, life such as it was went on. Tours filed through the dark hallways. Employees joked and flirted and scrolled on their phones to shrug off the shiver they felt whenever they walked onto the grounds. And if anyone remained behind when all others left, to walk the halls and haunt the cells of Echo Hill, they had the darkness to themselves.

For a time.

Major Arcana

Vera Vartanian

The smoke detector was going off again. David groaned and rolled over, groping for his phone and blinking against the harsh light as he checked the time. Three twenty-three, just like last night, and the night before.

"S'your turn," Clara mumbled, comfortably buried beneath the heavy blankets next to him.

"I'm going, I'm going." He threw back the covers, shivered, and stood. Stumbling through the dark room, he found the doorknob by instinct. In the hall, at least, he could see — a small night-light in the shape of a cartoon otter gave just enough light so he wouldn't trip over one of Angie's toys as he passed her room.

The smoke detector continued to shriek as David batted at it. When he found the reset switch, a blissful silence descended on the house. He let out a sigh of relief and turned to trudge back to his bed.

He came face to face with a *thing* shaped like a man. Backlit by the little otter-shaped light, the only detail David would remember later, when Clara came running and found him sprawled on the floor and staring at the place where the thing had been, were the eyes that glowed like hot coals. He didn't remember screaming, the memory obliterated not by pride but by shock.

• • •

Cookie-cutter houses lined the streets, faux-Victorians built by the lowest bidder during the housing bubble, with homeowner-association-immaculate lawns and luxury SUVs parked in their driveways. Each house was one of many pastel shades, light and airy, but the setting sun stained them all red.

"This is the place," Leonard said, glancing between his phone and the street. "Right there, 2471 Lydia Way."

"Looks normal enough," Sandy said as she pulled the sedan over. "You want to have a look around the outside?"

"Better than dealing with the living," Leonard grunted, opening the passenger door and stepping out. "Ugh. I can smell the disdain from here."

"You should talk," Sandy said, smiling. "Don't forget, the living become the dead."

"Yeah, yeah. Ounce of prevention, I know the drill."

"So get going. Come on, Antonia." The teenager in the backseat glanced up from her phone, rolled her eyes, stuffed it in her pocket, and got out of the car.

The door, freshly enameled with paint, opened after a few knocks — a man in his late 30s, dressed in 9-to-5 chic, answered. "Hello?"

"Major Arcana," Sandy said. "We spoke on the phone."

His eyes did a rapid up and down, focusing for a moment on the symbol tattooed on the back of Sandy's hand. She wasn't in full ritual regalia — not for a house call — but the tattoo and the necklace of keys were enough to make her look a little odd, even in jeans and a cheap shirt.

He spared Antonia a glance. She, at least, looked normal enough. "Didn't know you'd be bringing your — daughter?"

"Coworker," Antonia said, glaring at him. "Incredibly essential coworker."

"Trust me, if your friend's not so friendly, you'll be glad she's here," Sandy said. "May we?"

"Oh. Oh, right," David said, nodding and standing out of the way. "Sorry, I'm just a little on edge."

"Most people are by the time they call us," Sandy said, stepping inside and taking a look around the entryway. "Leave the door unlocked, would you? We've got someone checking the exterior."

"David? Who—" Clara paused on the staircase, a few steps from the ground floor. "Who are these people, and why are they in our house?" she said, narrowing her eyes and looking Sandy and Antonia over.

"They're here about the you know what," David said quietly. "They're the specialists."

"Right, the specialists," Clara said, rolling her eyes. "I still can't believe you called *ghost hunters* because you were sleepwalking."

"I wasn't sleepwalking," David replied, clearly not for the first time.

"*Hunter* sounds very antagonistic," Sandy said, smiling. "Not really my style. Besides," she added, glancing up the stairs behind Clara, "it's not like it's hard."

Clara hesitated, but didn't turn around. "You've got a good routine, I'll give you that. I was honestly creeped out for a moment."

"Hm," Sandy said, still looking past Clara. "Is there anyone at home other than you two and your daughter?"

"No," David said. "Just us."

"Well then, I believe I've found your roommate," Sandy said, watching the woman in the red scarf at the top of the stairs turn and vanish behind the wall.

• • •

"Everyone dies," Sandy said, staring at a sooty handprint on the wall of the upstairs hallway. "And almost everyone leaves a ghost."

"That wasn't there when I walked by just now," Clara said. "Angie must have done it."

"Angie can't reach this high," David said.

"Oh, she's not a child. Very much an adult," Sandy said. "What do you think, Antonia, late twenties?"

Antonia shrugged, pulling out her cell phone and fiddling with it.

"Whatever," Clara said. "I'm going to go check on Angie."

"It didn't look like a young woman to me," David muttered.

"You'd be surprised what gets lost in translation," Sandy said. She reached up to touch the handprint — it flaked and turned to dust. "She runs hot. Maybe fire, but she doesn't look burned. Smoke inhalation, maybe. Anyone ever died in this house?"

"No, we moved in right when they built the subdivision."

"Any recent deaths in the family?" David shook his head. "Huh. Odd. Give me a moment." She pulled a small deck of well-worn tarot cards from her pocket, shuffling them idly before drawing three cards. "Oh. That's interesting."

"What? I don't know this stuff," David said, gesturing at the cards.

"Empress, Moon, Seven of Swords. *Someone* isn't being entirely honest." She tucked the cards back into the deck. "Let's go talk to your wife."

• • •

Angie's room looked heartbreakingly ordinary to Sandy, so like her own daughter's. The little girl sitting with her mother in the middle of a scattering of toys was clearly not expecting visitors, staring at Sandy as she hesitated in the doorway. A tablet sat neglected in her lap, making obnoxious noises as a game ran on without her.

"What are you doing in here?" Clara asked.

"Working," Sandy said, smiling pleasantly. "Nice room. I can see why she likes it."

Angie whispered something to her mother, and Clara replied, "No one, honey, just one of Daddy's friends. She'll be leaving pretty soon," she added, locking eyes with Sandy. "Won't she?"

"Depends," Sandy said, casually scanning the room. "Just having a look. What's down the hall?"

"Just a bathroom and a linen closet," David said from the doorway.

Sandy nodded. "Alright. Probably in here, then." She closed her eyes, sucked in a deep breath, and let it out slowly "I know you can hear me," she said quietly. "Come out. We won't hurt you." She felt a cold draft on the back of her neck, but held firm, not turning to look.

"What are you doing?" David whispered.

"Scaring Angie," Clara said, holding her tightly. "Would you *please* tell her to leave?"

"I'm not scared!"

Sandy felt the presence behind her shift, move around her — a woman, a little shorter than Sandy, in an open button-down shirt and jeans, with a scarf wrapped

around her neck and half of her face. The scarf was the red of dried blood, but bits of its original color still showed here and there, little dapples of cream holding out against the spreading stain. Her hair, cut short, was mussed and matted. She stopped, perfectly still, staring down at Clara and Angie.

"Okay," Sandy said. "No sudden moves." She took a few careful steps, placing herself between the ghost and the others. "Hi there. I'm Sandy. What's your name?"

"This is ridiculous, there's nothing there. Come on, honey, we're leaving." Clara hefted Angie with a grunt.

"No! I wanna stay!" For just the briefest instant, Sandy saw her eyes lock onto the ghost as her mother pulled her away. The ghost tracked the two as they moved, and Sandy could see the anger in her eyes turn to a deep and palpable rage. The lights flickered as the temperature in the room plummeted.

"What's going on? What are you doing?" Clara said, handing Angie off to David as she shivered in the cold. Her breath — everyone's breath — was plainly visible in the air, hanging in wispy fogbanks that slowly faded into nothingness.

"It's not me," Sandy said. "It's her." She took a step to the left to come between the ghost and the door. "Look at me, will you? What's your name?"

The ghost angrily clenched its fists, making eye contact with Sandy for the first time. It waved its hand in the air, motioning for Sandy to move.

"I'm not your enemy," Sandy said, holding out her hand. "I think you know what I am. I'm here to help you."

The ghost smacked Sandy's hand away, a moment of freezing cold and a brief sensation of damp. She curled in on herself in silent fury, eyes wrenched shut, before picking up a toy and flinging it at Clara, then another, and another.

Clara shrieked, cringing away from the assault and fleeing into the hallway. David followed, still holding Angie. Sandy backed out, never turning her back on the ghost, while Antonia dispassionately recorded the scene with her phone. The ghost flung a few more toys out the door after the others, then stood fuming in the doorway for a split second before seizing the door and slamming it shut with a thunderous bang.

"Well," Sandy said. "Not gonna lie, that could have gone better."

• • •

Clara sat at the kitchen table, clutching a steaming mug of tea and shivering despite the blanket wrapped around her shoulders. Sandy and Angie were in the other room — her parents were in no fit state to look after her. "I don't understand," Clara whimpered. "I don't understand any of it."

"I hate to say I told you so, but, well," David said, smiling weakly and shrugging. "At least we know what it is now, and we have people who can take care of it."

"Her, not it," Antonia said, sliding her phone across the table. The video it was displaying on the cracked screen, distorted but clear enough to show the woman in the scarf, framed by the doorway.

Clara's breath caught in her throat. "That's — she wasn't there!"

"She was. You just couldn't see her," Antonia said. "You know her?"

"No," David said. "Do you, hon?"

Clara looked at the video again, taking one hard look before quickly looking away and shaking her head, tears streaming down her cheeks again. "No, I don't know her." She took a long sip of her tea and shuddered.

"Well, she's tied to someone or something here," Antonia said, shrugging. "Not my job. Sandy and Leo will figure it out." She reached out and took her phone back, tapping away at it as though nothing unusual had happened.

"And then what?" Clara asked.

"I dunno, we figure out what she wants. People always want something."

"What she wants? What about what *we* want?" David protested. "It's our house!"

Antonia looked up, raising an eyebrow. "Dude, chill the fuck out. We're not here for you. We're here for *her*."

• • •

"How come Mommy's scared?" Angie said, huddled in a quilt on the overstuffed sofa. Sandy sat beside her, watching the entryway and stairs across from them.

"Grown-ups tend to be bad at handling situations like that. That's why I'm here," Sandy said, smiling. "Don't be too hard on her. I've been where she is. It's not easy."

Angie nodded thoughtfully. "But how come Scarf Lady's mad at her?"

"Scarf Lady, huh?"

Angie nodded. "Mommy says she's not real."

"Well, I think Mommy's changed her mind about that," Sandy said. "Has Scarf Lady ever said anything to you?"

"No. She never talks." She looked around, then leaned in and whispered, "She cries sometimes."

"Yeah, I bet she does. Nothing to be ashamed of. I do too, every so often. If you see her again, be nice to her. Say hi from me. I bet she's lonely."

"Aren't we all?" Leonard said, stepping into the entryway and shutting the door behind him. "Nothing going on with the structure. Nothing etched in the foundations, nothing buried in the backyard, no Gates."

"Mmmm. We met someone upstairs," she replied. "Not the talkative sort. This is Leonard, he's a friend of mine," she added to Angie.

Leonard let out a grunt and sat down across from them, pulling off his rimless glasses and polishing them on the sleeve of his fleece jacket. "I suppose you'll want me to dig, then."

"If you wouldn't mind," Sandy said. "She got violent. I want to resolve this as quickly as we—" She trailed off, looking past Leonard at the top of the stairs, where an unfamiliar geist stood, its skin blackened and flaking, smoke rising in diaphanous wisps from the remains of its clothing.

The smoke detector went off.

• • •

"Everybody in the kitchen!" Sandy shouted, picking up Angie and making a break for it as the wild geist descended the stairs, plush carpet curling and blackening

beneath its feet. Leonard followed, shutting the door behind them, his fingers fumbling at the lock before snatching up a chair and jamming it beneath the doorknob.

Clara was on her feet, the blanket slipping off onto the floor. "What's going on?"

"You've got two ghosts," Sandy said, handing Angie off to her, "and this one looks a lot meaner. Just stay back and let us handle this. Antonia! Put down the phone and get ready!"

"I'm doin' it!" Antonia grumbled, pocketing the phone and popping her knuckles.

"Maybe it's just curious," Leonard said, backing up against the counters on the far side of the kitchen. "It hasn't *done* anything yet."

"That doesn't mean it's not dangerous, and you know it," Sandy said, pulling the necklace of keys from her neck and winding it around her hand. She took a steak knife from the butcher block on the counter and slid it across her palm, wincing at a familiar pain. Blood began to weep around the chain, dripping to the floor and boiling away into a thin mist of ectoplasm. "Let them see, Traveler. They'll need to know when to run." The Icebound Traveler, wrapped in threadbare winter gear, emerged in a fog of chill mist. An icy chill pervaded the room, rimes of frost standing out on the windowpanes. A series of creaks resounded throughout the house, the sound of timber chafing against timber.

Something struck the kitchen door hard, rattling the door in its frame.

"Yeah, gonna go with not friendly," Sandy said. She shook out her hands, dappling the floor in front of her with blood — her fingertips were steadily dripping now, without a single wound to show for it.

"Oh *shit*," David hissed, staring into the far corner of the room, "look!" The woman in the scarf was huddled in the far corner, trying to make herself as small as possible as she stared up at the door in terror. It shook with another fierce blow, accompanied by the sound of something in the door cracking.

"Watch the door," Sandy said to Antonia. She turned, hunkering down to look the ghost in the eye. "Is it here for you?" The ghost nodded, shuddering. "Alright. We'll protect you. I promise." She put a hand on the ghost's shoulder — she jumped at the touch but nodded again.

The door splintered, a burned and smoking hand protruding through. It scrabbled and groped at the inside of the door, leaving soot and scratches behind, then withdrew and struck again. The door came apart, and the burned man stepped forward, a dry, hacking cough the only sound he made.

• • •

Antonia's face screamed in agony, her ribs ground painfully, but it all paled beneath the full-body ache. She stared up at the Skinless Beauty, red-raw save for the skin around her eyes, standing vigil over her in the broken remains of the kitchen. She glanced at the splinters of the door, the broken cabinets along the wall.

The door, cracking open. The wild geist, on fire. Coming right for the ghost, not slowing down. That's when I hit him.

At the cans littering the floor, burst at the seams, the contents half boiled.

Pulled it all down. Needed time.

At the broken sink, still spurting water — feeling the ache in her back where she was sure one of her ribs was cracked.

Threw me like I was nothing.

She reached up, gingerly testing the burns on her face.

Wanted me to burn like he did.

She remembered screaming for Beauty, and Beauty came to her rescue. Antonia couldn't remember what happened next, but she could see the results. The refrigerator, one door smashed in, the other torn loose and hurled across the room. The dishwasher crushed in its mount. The scratches along the floor, walls, ceiling. The blood, spattered on practically every surface, congealing into wisps of ectoplasm. Groaning, Antonia got first to her knees, then to her feet — walking hurt, but so did everything else.

"Hey," she said, limping over to the family. "You all okay?"

"What *is* that thing?" Clara hissed, staring up at the tall, flayed figure behind Antonia.

"She's not a thing," Antonia growled, letting her pain leak into her voice as anger. "She's my best friend." Clara winced.

"Christ, you look like shit," Leonard said, picking his way through the mess of cans on the floor.

"Yeah, but at least I'll get better," Antonia said. "He's gone?"

"For now," Leonard said. "Beauty gave him a good thrashing, dispersed him. But he'll be back eventually."

Antonia nodded, casting a glance to the ghost huddled in the corner. "What's her story?"

"Hasn't said a word." He let out a long, unhappy sigh. "I'm still going to have to do it, aren't I?"

• • •

"What exactly *are* you doing?" Clara had hesitantly gotten to her feet when Antonia started tying Leonard to one of the surviving chairs. She still wouldn't look at the ghost in the corner.

"Getting answers," Leonard said. "The hard way, unfortunately. Christ, I hate this part. Scholar, you know what to do." The Wilting Scholar appeared, his eyeless face covered in faded morning glories, and wrapped his hands around Leonard's neck, squeezing tightly. Clara screamed, and David covered Angie's eyes as Leonard began to shudder and convulse, the chair scraping and thumping against the linoleum.

"It's killing him!" David shouted.

"Only a little," Sandy assured him. "We need better answers than the cards can provide." She and Antonia waited, impassively, until Leonard gave one final jerk and went horribly still.

"Alright, he's ready," Antonia said. "Leonard, why's the geist after her?"

Leonard spasmed, his head lolling back to stare unseeing at the ceiling. From somewhere deep in his throat, he croaked, "*Chains, rattling in the dark. Cold iron, strangling. A bit and bridle of rusty iron, cutting and digging*."

"Wh-what does that mean?!" Clara whimpered. "Isn't he—?"

"Dead? Sure. We all are," Antonia said, shrugging.

"*A place for everything*," Leonard mumbled, "*and everything in its place*."

"Fuck," Antonia whispered. "Reaper." Sandy nodded.

"What's a *reaper?*" David demanded. "And why is it in our house?"

"It's not. It's making the geist do its dirty work," Sandy said.

"One more," Antonia said. "Leonard, who is the ghost? Why is she here?"

Leonard shuddered. "*She knows*."

"Well, obviously," Antonia said. "But she's not talking. Come on, spill." She shook Leonard's shoulder, but he gave no sign of noticing.

"Empress. Moon. Seven of Swords. Clara," Sandy said, looking past Leonard at the shocked and frightened woman, "is there something you'd like to share?"

"This is ridiculous," David said, taking Clara's hand. She flinched at his touch and looked away. "If Clara knew something—"

"She's Lucy," Clara whispered. "She's my wife."

• • •

"What do you mean, your *wife*?" David said, staring at Clara. Antonia was untying a coughing and groaning Leonard, and Sandy was watching the ghost in the corner — Lucy — carefully. When Clara had said her name, she'd looked up for a heartbeat, her eyes wet and full of frustration.

"We got married right out of college," Clara said quietly. "She died in a car crash a few months after that."

"You recognized her, didn't you?" Sandy said. "On the video." Clara nodded.

"Why didn't you say anything?" David asked.

"Because I didn't want you to know!" Clara moaned. "I — after she died, my family — they were never okay with her to begin with, and I didn't have anyone else, and they said—" She choked on her words, her eyes brimming over. "I do love you, I really do, I promise. But I loved her, too."

"Lucy," Sandy said, crouching down next to the ghost and holding out her hand. "If you want to talk, we'll all listen. I promise." Lucy shut her eyes tight and shook her head.

"Scarf Lady knows Mom?" Angie had wandered away from David and was looking over Sandy's shoulder. Lucy looked up at her and burst into silent tears.

"Maybe give her a little space, alright, kiddo?" Angie nodded, but as she began to back away, Lucy shot out a hand and wrapped it around Angie's wrist, shaking her head vigorously. "No? Alright, stay put," Sandy said, patting Angie on the shoulder.

"She's cold," Angie whispered.

"She won't hurt you, honey," Sandy said. "Clara, Angie's important to her, isn't she?"

Clara sniffled, nodded, and through her tears said, "We were going to have kids. She died before we could find a sperm donor, but I still had her eggs, so—" She buried her face in David's shoulder, and he hesitantly wrapped his arms around her.

"I get the picture," Sandy said. "Lucy — Angie's your daughter, isn't she? She's why you're here."

Lucy nodded, gently taking Angie's hand in both of hers and looking into her eyes. Angie shivered, but stood still. "But, if she's—"

"It's complicated, hon. Your mother will explain, I'm sure. Your living mother, anyway, unless Lucy wants to."

Lucy shook her head again, reaching up to touch her scarf. She paused, pointing at Angie and miming covering her eyes.

"Right. Angie, honey, go give your mama a hug, okay? Grown up talk." Sandy gently turned Angie around and gave her a push back towards Clara. "Show me," she whispered.

Lucy pulled down the scarf just a little. Beneath it, her shattered jaw hung, misshapen and still bloody raw, and below that a throat gouged clean through to the cracked and mangled vertebrae. She quickly covered it back up again and looked away.

"Let me guess: classic car, no air bags, right?" Lucy nodded, still not meeting Sandy's eyes. "Thought so. Seen it before. Hey," she said, reaching out and putting a hand on Lucy's shoulder. "Even if you *can't* talk, we'll still listen. No one should be forgotten."

• • •

"You're setting that thing loose *why*?" David said, cutting off Leonard's explanation of the lines of kosher salt he was pouring across the floor.

"So he can *leave*," Leonard snapped. "This isn't his fault any more than it is Lucy's. A Reaper's bound him to this task, and unless we break that hold over him, the only other solution is to permanently destroy him, which I will *not* countenance, so if you'd kindly *stop stepping in my runes?*"

"Be nice, Leonard. Found some rosemary, by the way," Sandy added, tossing the jar to him.

"Finally," he grumbled, catching it. He opened it, poured out a palmful of dried herbs, and scattered it across the strange symbols he'd poured out. "Everyone around the circle, come on, come on, no dawdling!" He pulled the family into place, first Clara, then David.

"You too, kiddo. And you, come on," Sandy said, gesturing first for Angie, then for Lucy to join in.

Lucy gave Clara a long, steady look. Clara looked away uncomfortably.

"Don't ignore her," Leonard growled. "I don't need your discord mucking up my ritual!"

"What he means is, please invite her into the circle," Sandy said. "You have to clear the air between you at some point. Might as well be now."

"I wouldn't know what to—" Clara jumped as Lucy strode angrily right up to her, gesturing first at her, then at Angie, then at herself. All her frustration, all her confusion, all her pain seemed to well up in each motion, and the meaning was crystal clear.

Why didn't you tell her about me?

"I was — No. No, that's just an excuse," Clara sniffled, shaking her head. "It just hurt too much. I had to forget you. I'm sorry, if I'd known you were still here—" She covered her face with her hands and wept.

Lucy watched Clara for a moment, while David came and put his arms around her to comfort her. Slowly, she reached out and laid a hand on Clara's shoulder.

"Now that, I call a success," Sandy said quietly to Leonard.

"Yes, yes, very warm and fuzzy," he muttered as he put the finishing touches on a complicated sigil in the center of the circle. "I'm sure the living feel just peachy." Still, Leonard gave them a moment, enough time for Clara to accept a hesitant embrace from Lucy, before he started insisting on starting the ceremony.

• • •

"Here, we who have crossed over stand with those who have yet not," Sandy called. She and the others stood in a circle, hands clasped, cheeks smeared with ash and herbs. "As we are joined, so are we united, living and dead, bound as one, 'til all are at peace, 'til none are forgotten."

"'Til all are at peace, 'til none are forgotten," the others echoed — Leonard and Antonia with confidence, the others in a loose chorus, and Lucy not at all, though Sandy felt the ghost squeeze her hand.

"We rise, from ignorance to enlightenment, to fear not those the Depths would take from us, to fear not the death that changes us. This wisdom we hold, 'til all are at peace, 'til none are forgotten." Sandy heard the chorus again, felt the pressure against her hand, and continued, feeling the room fill with power, verse by verse. "Nameless specter, you who have stood vigil for countless years, know that we see you, and know that your plight is not hidden." The cabinets and appliances began rattling and shifting. "We stand in unity, and as one, we forgive your trespass. We, who remember the dead, and who stand against the Depths, invite you to appear once more!"

A thick, heavy burning smell filled the kitchen as smoke began to weal up from the floor, spiraling upwards and bending into the vague shape of a body — and then, as if it were a trick of the light, something began to glint in the air around its "neck," a delicate filigree of chainwork, so narrow it might have been string.

"Can't believe we didn't see it before," Antonia said.

Sandy let her hands slip from Lucy's and Leonard's, stepping forward towards the smoke. "It's just an echo. He's still reforming from before, but the chain's going strong." She reached up and put a hand around the glistening chain, wincing as she felt a cold so profound it seemed white-hot. "Everyone grab hold."

"You've got to be kidding," Clara murmured.

"*Everyone*," Sandy repeated. "This isn't about muscle, it's about forgiveness." Antonia and Leonard each put a hand around the chain, and the others followed suit — even Angie, riding on David's shoulders, and Lucy, reaching in past the others to keep as much distance between herself and the smoke as possible.

"Now — *pull*!" Sandy tugged hard, leaning back, and the others did likewise, straining against a force much stronger than such delicate craft had any right to. The room began to shake again, more forcefully this time, plates and glasses and entire shelves leaping to dash themselves against the floor. The house creaked and groaned on its foundations, and the windows cracked, then shattered as a smoky wind began to blow.

Finally, the chain gave way with a thunderous crack, the participants in the ritual all falling against the debris-besotted floor. Through the ringing in their ears, they beheld a deep and profound silence, marred only by the sound of a neighbor's dog barking in alarm.

"Is it over?" Clara asked, wincing as she picked herself up off the floor.

"He'll come back," Sandy said, helping Lucy to her feet. "But I doubt he'll stick around, if he's even tied enough to this house to reform here. As for the Reaper—" She shrugged. "Could be a block over, could be miles and miles from here. We'll just have to keep an eye out."

"So, that's a no," David said, still sitting on the floor and checking Angie for cuts or scrapes from the fall.

"It's as good as you're likely to get for some time," Leonard had landed in a pile of half-ruptured canned goods, had finished the job of rupturing them, and was wadding up a handful of paper towels to try to scrape the residue off.

"But there's always hope," Sandy added. "And you're welcome with us any time. We have a support group, actually, Wednesday and Saturday evenings, for living and dead families reconnecting. Feel free to bring Angie. In fact, I encourage it, my Sophie passed when she was just about that age, and she's always looking for new playmates."

• • •

"I can't believe it's going to take a *week* to get the plumbing in here fixed," Clara grumbled as she pulled take-out boxes out of the plastic bag they'd arrived in.

"I like paper plates," Angie announced. "It's like camping!"

"Yeah, I guess it is, a little," Clara said. "I still want the dishwasher and the sink back. Not to mention a meal that didn't come in a box, even if I have to make it. Go ahead and set the table, okay honey?"

"Okay!" Angie grabbed the paper plates and started dealing them out like playing cards.

"Carefully!" Clara said over her shoulder as she walked out to the stairs, where she could just hear the sound of a power drill upstairs. "David! Did you hear me? Food's here!"

"What?" The drill shut down, and he poked his head around the corner.

"Food!"

"Be right down! Just want to get the new hinges in!"

"Fine, but don't take too long," she called as she walked back to the dining room. When she got there, Angie had already poured a truly unnecessary amount of rice onto her plate and was shoveling it into her mouth with a plastic spoon. Three other plates sat around the table, each with a fortune cookie placed carefully in the center.

"Angie, sweetie, remember what I said about waiting for others?"

"Sowwy," Angie mumbled, spoon hovering in midair while grains of rice slipped free to land on the tabletop.

"And — never mind. Remember to chew. And how come you put four plates out?"

Angie paused, swallowed. "That one's for Mama Lucy," she said, pointing.

"Oh. Right." She pulled out a chair and sat, trying not to let the shock show. She knew Lucy was *somewhere*, but ever since her house had been half-destroyed in an exorcism — at least, she was fairly certain it was an exorcism of some sort — she hadn't really *seen* Lucy again. Occasionally, when she thought about what had happened, and especially of Lucy, she thought she saw someone moving in her peripheral vision, but there was never anyone there.

Eric Zawadzki

I.

The house's Underworld shadow brought back memories of delivering specialty diet food to customer homes for Poltun Foods: Checking the address against the crooked numbers on the front door, the large man in his 30s stepping into the porch, leaning heavily on his cane, the boards creaking under his weight as he shuffled out to greet her.

"Are these the ones that will make me tiny enough to fit through a keyhole, or will they make me as big as a house?" he had asked the first time she had delivered here, pointing to her nametag, which read "Lewis, Carole."

Week after week, he had been waiting for her. Week after week, he had looked thinner and was all smiles, greeting her as "Lewis Carole" each time. After a month, he hadn't needed the cane anymore. After three months, he had looked about as healthy as anyone Carole knew. Still, Poltun sent her to his house with a delivery. Week after week, he had gotten thinner and thinner, and less interested in chitchat, snatching the box from her hands and retreating into his house as though he meant to heat up a Poltun Pot Pie right the fuck now. After a month, he had looked gaunt. Two months, skeletal. A month after that, he hadn't been on Carole's route anymore.

Carole felt hesitation creep in for the hundredth time since she had started tailing Charlie, looking for an opportunity to confront him.

Jeremiah is probably right. Killing him won't bring me back to life. But I need to talk to him. I need to understand why.

Her geist, the Mob Accountant, put one hand on her shoulder, a gesture that might have been more reassuring if his fingers weren't twisted and broken, the thumb cut off at the first joint. Carole turned to look at him, took in the bent, wire glasses that sat crooked on his nose, the empty sockets behind the broken glass where his eyes had been gouged out.

"Let's get this over with," she told him.

Her geist nodded and opened up the jacket of his navy, three-piece suit — the one in a style that hadn't been fashionable in decades, like he had picked it up cheap at a garage sale — and beckoned her inside. Carole backed into that lifeless embrace, felt the Mob Accountant wrap itself around her, hiding her from the world.

Carole stepped through the door to the basement and descended the stairs. A light was on, and she could hear the hum of a microwave. As she got closer, her nostrils flared.

It smells like a slaughterhouse down here.

She stepped through the closed door and into what appeared to be a makeshift kitchenette in the unfinished basement. Charles Watkins — the one who had killed her — stared at the microwave door like a tiger waiting for fresh meat.

The microwave chimed only once before he had its door open and was juggling a too-hot meal onto the counter and then over to the table. He peeled back the plastic and attacked the pile of spaghetti with his fork like he hadn't eaten anything in weeks. Several bites later, he leaned over a strategically placed trashcan next to his chair and vomited into it noisily. When he had finished, he picked up his fork again and resumed eating, albeit more slowly.

The reek of death grew stronger, and it took Carole a minute to realize it was coming from the pasta, which, she realized with a start, was infused with some kind of particularly foul-smelling ectoplasm.

The Mob Accountant, her geist, moaned, and Charlie whirled at a sound mortal ears should not have been able to hear. He stared directly at her, but he looked more surprised than alarmed, almost as if he had had worse things in his basement than ghosts.

"Lewis Carole? What are you doing here?" His confusion turned to sudden suspicion. "Did Poltun send you?"

Not the response to seeing an obvious ghost that she expected. "Poltun? No. You left me to die in a stairwell, Charlie, remember?"

He shook his head, only looking more confused. "When was this and where?"

"How could you possibly forget being in a burning building?"

He shrugged. "I've been in a lot of burning buildings, in the last six months."

"Relaste Specialty Professionals, Incorporated? Four months ago?"

"Ah, my former employer. They refused to accept my resignation."

"Did you burn down their home office?"

Charlie snorted a laugh. "It certainly wasn't a gas explosion."

"You burned down an office building full of people in broad daylight?"

"It was the only message Relaste would understand," Charlie snapped defensively.

"Even knowing innocent people would be inside?"

"No one at Relaste was innocent. Even an intern would have noticed his boss worked for the mob."

At the words "the mob," the Mob Account tilted back his head and let forth a howl like a battle cry that made them both jump.

"What's gotten into you?" Carole demanded, but her geist didn't seem inclined to answer. To her irritation, she noticed that the Mob Account had taken a step away from her, forcing her back into the material world, making her solid, leaving her vulnerable. Her face was a mask of fury as she turned back to Charlie. "*I* was inside!"

"How did you survive?" he asked with more curiosity than suspicion, this time.

"I didn't," she told him flatly.

"You don't look like any of the other ghosts I've met."

So, he's a medium. Ghosts are NBD.

"Have you always been able to see ghosts?"

"You ask an awful lot of questions. Maybe if you had asked more questions while you were alive, you wouldn't have been in that building when I burned it down."

He said it lightly, but Carole felt the barb hit home.

I watched people lose 50, 100, or even 200 pounds in a matter of months. Everything I've read about weight loss told me that couldn't be healthy, but it wasn't even that. Longtime customers would reach their target weight and keep on ordering Poltun Portions until they looked unhealthily thin. And then one day, they wouldn't be on my route anymore. Did they finally get help, or did they starve to death?

Then there were Poltun Foods' executive customers. They took delivery in their places of work, and the Poltun Portions' miracle didn't seem to work on any of them. They were a dozen bigshots at businesses I had never heard of until I started the job. Panda Public Relations, LLC. Relaste Specialty Professionals, Inc. Mitobi Real Estate Unlimited. What good or service did they provide? Who were their customers? Who were their suppliers? What did their cubicle farms of employees do all day long?

Carole had had no idea and no curiosity until the day that she died.

"What the fuck happened to you, Charlie?"

"I woke up in the hospital."

A sting of guilt. "Low body weight?"

"House fire." He motioned to the burned-out husk above them.

"Oh my god."

"They think the burglars started it by accident."

"Burglars?"

"Yeah. Six burglars, each breaking in through a different door or window at the same time." He didn't sound like he believed it. "I don't remember it, of course. By the time I got out, I had high five digits of medical debt, on top of what I already owed Poltun. Good thing I also had a new job lined up."

She shook her head, not following this train of thought.

"Sorry. It was confusing for me, too. From what I remember of the last few months, the Poltun Portions somehow unlocked my pyronic sympathy. I can start huge fires with my mind. The trouble is, whenever I do it, I forget everything that happened in the last hour or so."

"So, you don't remember..."

This certainly hadn't been part of her revenge fantasies.

I'm not here for revenge, she reminded herself.

"Thankfully, no. How was I supposed to know you were in Relaste's HQ? It's not like you worked there. I'm really sorry I killed you. I seem to have left a lot of ghosts in my path." He brightened slightly. "Thanks to the fire, though, my former employer won't be giving me any other unwanted contract work, but there are other companies out there with the same...business model."

"What kind of contract work? Or don't you remember?"

"I don't remember, but I can guess. Telekinetics work casinos. Telepaths perform interrogations. Dominars recruit unskilled laborers. I can burn down a house before the fire department gets there. I'm sure I didn't leave many survivors."

"You're an assassin?"

"Not sure what else to call it. Ugly work. I'm not sure how they made me do it or how many times I did their dirty work before I slipped the collar." Charlie seemed impossibly calm, given the subject matter. "Thanks to Poltun, I can also see, talk to, and even touch ghosts, but I pay the price for that, as well." He gestured at the foul-smelling pasta sitting half-eaten on the table.

"What the fuck is it?" Carole asked, unhappy with having her attention drawn to the scent again.

Charlie gingerly plucked a cardboard box out of the trashcan he had just vomited into. It showed an appetizing dish of spaghetti under the Poltun Portions logo. He dropped it back in the trash.

"You're still eating it?"

He sat down, held up his fork to show off the dangling strands of spaghetti and gave her a weak smile. "It still tastes like eating the entrails of your own mother. But if I stop eating it, I die, and therefore..." He stuck the forkful of pasta in his mouth with a grimace.

"Oh god, Charlie. I'm so sorry."

"The killed apologizing to the killer. I suppose that means you're probably not going to kill me, now?"

Carole shook her head. "I didn't come here to kill you, Charlie. I came here to understand."

"Do you, now?"

"I'm not sure I do."

"You played a small role in what Poltun and Relaste did to me. You're part of the reason I'm stuck in the basement of my burned-down house, eating my dwindling supply of microwave dinners that taste like week-old garbage until I run out, after which I will die." He said it with surprisingly little rancor. "On the other hand, I burned down an office building with you in it. I'm directly responsible for your death. So, we're probably about even."

That didn't seem an entirely equal trade, but Carole nodded anyway.

The Mob Accountant had walked over to the remnants of Charlie's food and was sniffing at it with his eyeless face.

"Would you be willing to do me a huge favor?" he asked suddenly.

She hesitated. "What kind of favor?"

"I came back here because I knew I still had a few weeks' supply of Poltun Portions in my basement, but that's almost gone, now. Even if I had money, which I don't, I can't very well go on Poltun's website and set up deliveries. You worked for Poltun, though. They have to have a warehouse where I can get more. Where is it?"

"You're going to steal Poltun Portions?"

"Unless you have some better idea, yes."

The Mob Accountant was gesturing at her furiously from behind Charlie, pointing at the table and mouthing the word "ectoplasm."

"Before I answer, can I try a bite?"

The Mob Accountant shook his head furiously, but the request was already out of her mouth.

How did you expect me to interpret it?

Charlie stood up and offered her the chair. Carole took a hesitant bite. It reminded her of her first taste of ectoplasm, but it tasted rotten.

How can ectoplasm be rotten?

The instant she swallowed the pasta, Carole's stomach clenched, and she expelled it into the trashcan.

Whatever it is, it isn't something a ghost can process as ectoplasm. But what the fuck is it, then? I should tell Jeremiah about this.

The Mob Accountant looked annoyed as it stormed over to Carole and grabbed one hand insistently. With a sigh, she surrendered herself to her geist. Her hand took the phone out of her pocket and started typing.

EATERS OF THE DEAD.

"Obviously," she whispered.

TELL HIM TOO DANGEROUS TO GO THERE WITHOUT KNOWING WHAT IS WAITING FOR US.

"Us?"

BREAK INTO HEADQUARTERS FIRST.

"Wait. Why 'us'?"

SEEN THIS BEFORE. LOST THE SCENT. SEND HIM ALONE AND THEY'LL KILL HIM. WHAT DO I ALWAYS SAY?

"Follow the money."

The Mob Accountant released her.

"Ghostly conference?" Charlie asked.

"I don't know where Poltun has its warehouse," she lied, "but I know how to find out. It'll involve some research at their HQ."

"You still have access?" He looked surprised.

She shook her head. "We'll break in and snoop around."

He frowned. "I'm coming with you."

"We don't need your help."

His jaw tightened. "You used to work for Poltun. How do I know you don't work for them anymore?"

Carole laughed at that.

"Laugh," Charlie said. He certainly wasn't laughing. "Call it ridiculous, if you like, but I've been betrayed by people I trusted more than I do you. Until I have what I need from you, I'm not letting you out of my sight."

"Fine."

II.

Carole slipped into the state between the material and the Underworld, crossing the street between her and a burned-out shell of a house in a blighted neighborhood. No one saw her. No one heard the crunch of her footsteps on the snowy sidewalk. She left no footprints. The stranger she walked through accidentally as he hurried home might have sensed something, but if he did, it was no more than a chill of early winter cold, easily explained and swiftly forgotten.

Carole walked past cameras and motion detectors without hesitation, for they could not see her within the cocoon of the Mob Accountant's shroud. She didn't even need to break a window or pick a lock, walking right through a nearby wall without a moment's delay. This building was new construction, and it did not yet have a firm echo in the Twilight to impede her.

She found the security keypad for the front door and slipped a ghostly hand in it. The red "armed" light changed to a green "disarmed" light immediately. That would prevent Charlie from tripping any alarms, but the cameras would still record him. Fortunately, those were not monitored in real time, so no one would have reason to review the recordings unless they left behind signs of their break-in.

I should have left him behind despite his protestations. He's creating complications.

There was no help for it now. Carole waved at Charlie from the front door. He pulled the fireman's handkerchief up over his mouth and nose and approached quickly, furtively watching for any passersby who might notice him.

The handkerchief served two functions. First, it hid enough of his face to conceal his identity. Second, it included special materials that filtered out embers and smoke – nowhere close to as effective as a full gasmask, but much better in a smoky environment than a wet bandana tied around the face. However, it was conspicuous. No one would mistake it for an ordinary piece of winterwear.

Charlie opened the door and entered front office. By day, salespeople pitched the company's product to potential customers here, executives schmoozed with local doctors to encourage them to send more business Poltun's way, accountants and clerks tracked the key numbers, and delivery drivers clocked in before going to the warehouse for the day's deliveries. All was quiet now, however.

"This way," Carole whispered.

Charlie nodded. She was pleased to see that he didn't pull the handkerchief away from his face, in case they encountered more cameras.

Past reception. Past sales. Past records. Up two flights of stairs. Past management. Right to the door of Mr. Al P. Brown himself.

Charlie abruptly barked a small, nervous laugh.

"What?" she asked, voice low.

"I just had a brief vision of confronting him, *Christmas Carol* style," he explained. "What are the chances Mr. Brown is working in his office tonight?"

She shook her head as she slipped out of her geist's embrace, body regaining its solidity.

"The CEO? Ha. Al never works after hours. The man routinely goes on three-hour lunches and takes the afternoon off to golf at least once a week." Carole opened the oak door with its brass nameplate to reveal a dark, empty office. "Besides, we're not there to kill anyone, *or burn anything down*," she reminded him pointedly.

"It was just a thought," he said with a shrug as he followed her inside.

Three monitors sat on the lavish, wraparound desk. Carole sat in the leather desk chair. A touch of the mouse, and Mr. Brown's computer prompted her for a login.

"Not the type to bring his work home with him, either," Charlie mused from where he stood behind her.

"And lucky thing for us that he isn't," Carole said as the Mob Accountant embraced her, already guiding her arms and hands, ready to get to work.

The password screen vanished, and the CEO's desktop appeared in its place. In moments, the golf-themed wallpaper vanished behind a dozen overlapping windows. Carole only had the vaguest notion of what her geist was looking for.

"What's his deal, exactly?" Charlie asked into the long silence.

"The Mob Accountant? He's sort of my partner."

"Mob Accountant?"

Her geist abruptly stopped what he was doing to move all the windows out of the right-hand monitor. He opened Wikipedia, brought up the entry for "forensic accounting." Then he resumed his work, leaving the entry open for Charlie to read.

Carole sighed. "The Mob needs to hide the source of its money so that it can spend it. He helped find ways to make money made from illegal drugs, prostitution, human trafficking, and racketeering look like it came from casinos and real estate deals. But the Feds figured out the scheme, and he knew it was squeal on his bosses or spend the rest of his life in prison, so he ratted them all out. A lot of mobsters served hard time, but not him. When they got out, though, they tracked him down and gave him a rat's execution — gouged out his eyes and cut out his tongue before finishing the job with a bullet to the base of the skull."

As the screens flashed by almost too quickly to follow, spreadsheets gave way to invoices, and invoices to email correspondence.

"And what is he looking for? I thought we were just here to find out where Poltun's warehouse is." Sudden suspicion.

"We need to find out what we might be up against when we break in. Security cameras and armed guards are likely to be the least of it. You said yourself that your employer had people like you working as assassins."

"But that was Relaste, not Poltun," Charlie said slowly, uncertain.

"I worked for Poltun, remember? I made deliveries to one of Relaste's VPs about once a month, and I can assure you he wasn't getting any thinner."

"You don't think you were delivering Poltun Portions. But what else could it have been?"

"I don't know," she admitted. "It has something to do with forensic accounting, which is the Mob Accountant's specialty. It mostly involves using business records to detect financial crimes."

The geist's movements slowed down, then, giving them time to read what his research had uncovered.

"Mr. Brown was regularly emailing the bigshots I was delivering Poltun Portions to, but none of this has to do with dieting. Here's a request to get regulators off his back. Here's another one to clean up an undefined PR complication."

I was a part of this, and I never asked the right questions.

"This makes it sound like Relaste and Poltun were working together — rather closely, in fact. Why would the vice president at a mobbed-up mercenary recruitment company be emailing the CEO of a weight-loss clinic?"

A handful of invoices for large dollar amounts appeared in the righthand monitor, each paid to Poltun by Relaste for "healthy weight-management products."

"Money laundering?" Carole suggested.

The Mob Accountant made an irritated noise in his tongueless mouth. A text window opened in the central monitor.

OBVIOUSLY.

"But isn't the money flowing backward?" Carole objected. "Selling diet food is a legitimate business. Hiring contract killers is not. Wouldn't they want to mask the money that's coming from the hit jobs, instead?"

HUMAN TRAFFICKING.

"Does he realize the caps-lock key is on?" Charlie murmured.

Carole ignored him. "Go on."

Several more emails appeared, these from a sales representative from a company called Norach Labs. They described new, experimental foods meant to "reinforce pyronic sympathy" or "disentangle spatial constraints."

"Wait," Charlie said. "I recognize pyronic sympathy."

"Your fire powers."

"Yes." He sounded angry, now, angrier than she had ever seen him since the day he abandoned her to die in a stairwell at Relaste Specialty Professionals, Inc.

I was a part of this, and I never asked the right questions.

NORACH LABS IS POLTUN'S MAIN SUPPLIER.

Carole scanned a few more emails. "The food is meant to do more than just cause weight loss. Some is drugged. Addictive. Too much of it, and it changes you."

"Changes how?"

MAYBE IF WE'RE HERE ALL NIGHT. NOT LITTLE CHANGES.

The Mob Accountant highlighted several instances of the words "deep," "fundamental," "transformation," and "metamorphosis."

"Those fuckers knew!" Charlie raged.

"Where does human trafficking come in?" Carole asked her geist.

POLTUN FINDS TEST SUBJECTS. FEEDS THEM ROTTEN ECTOPLASM UNTIL IT TRANSFORMS THEM.

"And then sells them to Relaste," Charlie supplied. "Relaste either recruits them with promises of a paycheck large enough to pay off their huge medical debts or abducts them outright. But all our pay goes to those debts and to buying the Poltun

Portions we can no longer live without, leaving us barely enough for lodging."

I was a part of this, and I never asked the right questions.

"Think Poltun hires back some of those mercenaries to guard their warehouse?" Carole asked the Mob Accountant.

PROBABLY.

"We're not going to the warehouse," Charlie announced.

"What? But I thought you needed more Poltun Portions, that you would die without them?"

"Norach Labs is at the heart of this," he explained. "Without Norach, Poltun can't transform anyone else. And if Poltun can't make anyone else like me, it means that Relaste loses access to new *talent*." He said the final word with distaste.

"That's not what we agreed to," Carole objected. She was suddenly afraid, a fear she had thought death had cured her of. It took her a moment to articulate the source of her terror. "Listen. Someone, somewhere, has learned the trick of cutting up ghosts, poisoning their ectoplasmic remains, and serving it up as expensive diet food. And they're doing it on a massive scale, enough to fill a warehouse serving hundreds of customers every week."

POSSIBLY MULTIPLE WAREHOUSES. POLTUN MIGHT NOT BE THEIR ONLY BUYER.

"It would be bad enough if we were dealing with a cult of eaters of the dead with such a voracious collective appetite, but that's not what this is. Poltun, Relaste, Norach, and whatever other companies are involved aren't even eating the dead themselves. No, they're feeding them to hapless victims as less-than-net-zero-calorie pot pies in hopes of unlocking pyronic sympathy, or disentangling spatial constraints, or whatever the fuck corporate jargon they use for giving people telekinesis or mind control powers."

"So?" Charlie asked. "Doesn't mean we can't burn it all down around them."

"So?" She was incredulous at his failure to grasp the ramifications. "These eaters of the dead are catching and grinding up hundreds, possibly thousands of ghosts, every week, and it's just a means to an end about which we know nothing!"

"And you're just going to let them keep doing that?" Charlie asked. "I'd think you'd be a bit more concerned with the fate of the dead, being dead yourself, and all."

HE HAS A POINT.

Carole rounded on the Mob Accountant. "You said you've seen this before but lost the scent. What happened the last time?"

EXACTLY THIS. EXCEPT WE DIDN'T KNOW WHAT WE WERE GETTING INTO THEN THE WAY YOU AND I DO NOW.

"Sounds like you're not his first partner," Charlie said with a laugh.

THIS IS NOT A TASK FOR THREE. WE NEED TO GET THE WHOLE KREWE INVOLVED.

"Jeremiah might not like our odds."

THEN YOU'LL HAVE TO CONVINCE HIM.

I was a part of this, and I never asked the right questions.

Carole suddenly knew she would do just that.

III.

Smoke. Smoke everywhere. It stung Carole's eyes and burned her throat. Foul-smelling, laden with the toxic bite of burning plastic and office carpet.

This is how it all started, Carole remembered. *This was how I died. This is how I could die again.*

Those were stupid, irrelevant thoughts, she knew. She shambled through the clouds of smoke, trying to remember the way to the exit, any exit.

I haven't seen anyone since we left Dr. Phillips' office, since we first smelled the smoke.

That had been an illuminating side-trip, at least. She and the Mob Accountant had discovered not only the means by which Norach poisoned ectoplasm but the reason they did so.

LIKE A PESTICIDE. IT MAKES THE ECTOPLASM POISONOUS TO GHOSTS SO THAT NORACH DOESN'T FACE CONSTANT RAIDS FOR FOOD FROM THE DEAD.

There was screaming, but no one is screaming, now.

The crackle of flames ahead. She could just barely see the outline of a cubicle farm turned into an inferno.

Is that a body?

Carole didn't want to know. She chose another direction. Every step was an agony.

Where are the damned exits in this place? Why aren't there any goddamned fire sprinklers?

She found a push bar door. In the dim light, she could make out the EXIT sign overhead.

A stairway out. Thank God!

Setting the laboratory building on fire had not been part of the plan.

Clearly, lots of things happened that weren't part of the plan. The rest of the krewe wasn't even supposed to come out of the basement until the lab closed for the night.

She rolled her ankle on the first step, tumbled forward, caught herself on the handrail, but the lancing agony in her shoulder told her it was too late. Only a quick surge of Plasm kept her from falling down the stairs on top of the woman already lying there, gasping for breath and crawling feebly toward the next flight of stairs. Carole could hear sirens, far off but approaching.

We're on the eighth floor. How likely is it that the firefighters will find her in time?

The woman rolled over, and Carole caught a good look at her face.

"Carole, is that you?" the woman wheezed. "You have to help me. It's my ankle. I think it's broken."

"Crystal? Shit. What the fuck are you doing here?"

Carole remembered the brief interview more than a year ago. Crystal Moody trying to pretend not to be bored as she asked routine questions about Carole's education and work history, about which her soon-to-be boss absolutely didn't care about. All that mattered, as it turned out, was that Carole owned a reliable car, knew how to use a GPS, and didn't have any questions about exactly what it was she would be delivering for Poltun Foods.

The NDA. Ironclad and filled with dire warnings about the grave financial consequences of telling anyone about the product, customers, suppliers, or business practices of the company. Under no circumstances was she to open any of the packages she would be delivering to their customers. No social media presence, either — not even to play games. They would compensate her accordingly. They made it clear that this job was the best one she could get with her credentials, and that was no exaggeration.

The job itself? Deliver boxes of specialty diet food to customer homes. This wasn't Slim Fast, Crystal would sneer. Their product worked miracles. Doctors sent patients to Poltun as a last stop before resorting to weight-loss surgery — a cheaper alternative, albeit not by that much.

Most prospects opted for the scalpel soon after the initial consultation. By all accounts, the Poltun Portions tasted terrible. It wasn't the blandness or artificiality of other diet food, either. Carole had overheard customers complain that it tasted like cat food, or rotting fish, or, perhaps most colorfully, like someone had cut out the organs of an infant and served them up raw in a microwave-safe, plastic dish. It took a certain kind of desperation to adopt such an unpleasant regimen. Crystal often talked up the latest innovation, the one that would finally make Poltun Portions taste better than dog shit, but each new shipment from the supplier proved as disappointing as the ones before it.

Charlie would leave her to die as surely as he left me to die. Crystal was much more involved with Poltun than I ever was.

Carole descended the stairs until she stood next to this pathetic, bleach-blond woman who had helped Poltun and Relaste and Norach and all the others create so much misery in the world of the living and its afterlife.

But I am not Charlie. I'm not here for revenge. I'm not here to make more ghosts.

She bent down, helped Crystal stand up. Together, they hobbled down the stairs.

Seventh floor.

"I thought you were dead, Carole," Crystal murmured. "After the fire, they had a memorial service and everything."

"I am," Carole said. The smoke was making her light-headed.

Sixth floor.

The Mob Accountant was tugging at her sleeve, urging her to flee for her life before she succumbed. Carole ignored him.

I was a part of this, and I never asked the right questions.

That would change, now.

Fifth floor.

"Does that mean you're an angel?"

Carole shook her head. "A ghost."

"You don't look like a ghost."

"What does a ghost look like?"

"I don't know."

Fourth floor.

They were far enough away from the fire, now, that the stairwell, though smoky, seemed like fresh air by comparison to where they had been.

"Why are you helping me?" Crystal asked, suddenly crying. "I thought so little of you."

Because if I leave you to die, you'll probably haunt me? Carole thought.

Instead, she said, voicing the mantra that had wormed its way into her head over the last few days, "I'm dead. There's nothing to be done about that. But you still have a chance to avoid the mistakes I made."

"What mistakes?"

I was a part of this, and I never asked the right questions.

"I wasn't curious when I should have been. I didn't ask enough questions when it really mattered. Like asking why Relaste's VP never lost any weight, or what happened to former customers. We're responsible for our inaction as well as for our actions."

Crystal's head dipped, and it was all Carole could do to keep her from collapsing.

"If you die before I get you to safety after I hauled you down all these stairs, I'm going to lecture you in the afterlife," Carole warned her.

Crystal didn't respond.

Third floor.

Carole was dragging her, now. The broken ankle was visibly swollen as it bumped onto every step. The sirens were close, now. The firefighters — and the police — would arrive any minute.

She heard feet pounding down the stairs on the landing above her, descending rapidly. Carole wasn't sure whether to feel relief or panic. She still didn't know what had started the commotion on the eighth floor, after all.

Charlie rounded the corner, his firefighter's bandana pulled up over his nose. His clothes had holes in them where cinders had burned through the cloth.

"Carole!" he cried. "You need to get out of here."

"What the hell happened up there?"

"It was an ambush. You were right about one thing. Norach knows how to catch ghosts. If your krewe had stormed the wing like we planned, they would have been slaughtered, and the ghosts among them captured. I thought for sure they found you already."

"So, you went in there by yourself." Carole couldn't believe it but knew it must be true.

"I thought they had already caught you and the Mob Accountant. I meant to rescue you." He sounded a bit sheepish. "Who is that?"

"Someone who was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Could you help me get her clear of the building?"

"I don't think we have that kind of time. The police will be looking for me, and there are a lot of unstable compounds in some of the labs upstairs…"

"Just help me, Charlie. Don't leave me on the stairs a second time."

That brought him up short. With a mutter, he took Crystal by the legs and helped her carry her down the last two flights of stairs.

The three of them exited the building, which was now surrounded by emergency vehicles. A pair of firefighters spotted them and hurried over with a stretcher. Carole scanned the parking lot. Survivors of the blaze milled around, looking dazed and frightened. She recognized a couple members of her krewe among them, pretending to be just a few more evacuees.

A trio of figures in black suits stood near an unmarked sedan. One of them spoke intently into the microphone connected to his earpiece.

"Find Jeremiah," Carole whispered to her geist. "Tell him we're about to be apprehended and will need the krewe to spring us before we get to whatever destination those three have in mind."

The Mob Accountant nodded once and was off.

As the firefighters carried Crystal to safety and led Carole and Charlie away from the building, an explosion shook the earth and sent the broken glass from several floors up tumbling to the earth.

Whatever Norach was using to poison ectoplasm for Poltun, that fire surely destroyed it.

That left plenty of open questions, of course.

Where were they getting their massive supply of ghosts? What will it take to get enough Poltun Portions from the warehouse to keep the newest member of our krewe alive? Will Crystal remember anything about her ordeal, and will it make her a potential ally in the future?

Carole didn't have an answer to those questions, yet, but she was optimistic about her chances of finding them.

He's a blunt instrument, but he has good instincts. He'll make a useful addition to the krewe, if we can temper his impulses a little bit.

Then the trio of mysterious agents approached Charlie and Carole, handcuffed them, and pressed them into their sedan.

The Notebook

Klara Horskjær Herbøl

Haylie

At 11:25 A.M., five minutes before the bell rings, pens, books, and her notepad are already packed into her bag, hanging by one strap on the side of the chair closest to the door. Hailey plans out the escape route meticulously. She knows every person in her classes, studies their patterns when they pack up for recess, what side of the chair they get up from, and when they leave the room. She makes sure to place herself for an easy getaway in the classroom, and if possible, right next to the door.

At 11:30, when the bell rings, she grabs her bag and jets out the door. This often provides her with enough time to race to the first floor and lock herself in before Michael or his troupe notice her absence. Being shoved in a school locker during recess is oftentimes the last part in a long string of patronizing and humiliating events for bullied pupils. But for Haylie, a metal box is her sanctuary in a world of danger. Every lunch break, when everyone is let out to the hallways, the schoolyard, and the cafeteria, Haylie will evacuate.

In the beginning, the toilets were the safest location to hide from potential harassment, until they broke the last stall's lock, making the lockers the last resort. Haylie leans her head against the locker door. With her ear pressed against the cool surface, she stays relaxed throughout the lunch break and makes sure Michael is not nearby. What day is this… the fifty-sixth? She picks out a bobby pin and scratches an inch-long scratch into the locker door, peeling off the murky green paint crumbling to the bottom. This trip is becoming a daily ritual.

Once safely in her closet, the flashlight tied to the rack with a silk string is lit and the scratch is engraved into the closet door, Hailey grabs her notebook from the shelf and writes the date in the very top corner of the next blank page. Her diary entry is the highlight of her day. The one time she can conduct all of her anger and

anxiety onto paper. Some days, her page is full of wishful dreams about another life and another place. An existence without cigarette burns on her arms, without death threats from obscure phone numbers and fake social media accounts. Without leaked nude photos — the situation that started all this. Without an ex-boyfriend conducting mental warfare because she dumped him. Other days, one word is enough.

Recently, she delegated the last page of her diary to a grim purpose. As anxiety and stress develop, other and more sinister feelings follow, and her fear slowly but surely turns into hatred. At first, the last page of the notebook, or the "page of revenge," was filled with Michael's name scratched over with a black marker, the letters in his name dripping blood, small and innocent threats. But the page is reaching its end, and now contains a fully-fledged plan. A system to take her revenge on Michael.

"Killing my dog? Is this what you were plotting all those hours in your locker? You fucking lunatic!"

Hailey wiggles and thrashes against the back wall of the main building, struggling to breathe, but Michael's grip only tightens to a deathly strangle. Her vision is on the brink of going blurry when he lets her go, and her limp body falls to the concrete. Her legs spin and buzz from her sprint from the library and across the schoolyard. Her wrists ache from Michael's nails drilling into them. The metallic taste of blood leaves a thick film over her tongue, and her insides feel broken into tiny painful pieces. A faded silhouette of her torn notebook lands inches away from her face and, as she slowly regains consciousness and turns her head toward the streetlamp lighting up the bike rack beside them, she feels Michael's boot pressing onto her chest like a thousand pounds.

"You think I'm too afraid, too afraid to end you, huh? You think I'm too scared? I'll crush you, you fucking waste of life."

For a brief moment, all the pain and discomfort are gone. All Hailey feels is the wet concrete pressed against her cheek and the light drizzle of rain. Michael is yelling, but faintly, and almost as if in slow motion. This sudden peacefulness is followed by what seems like an everlasting darkness, an abyss with no beginning and no end. She floats silently in nothing and everything, flashing lights of every color explode around her like fireworks.

As she feels the last breath leave her body, her entire inside follows. If it is her soul, her being, her mind or personality, she does not know. But in this new state and new existence, she is aware she is no longer herself. The fact she is now dying does not come as a surprise for Hailey. What comes as a surprise for her is how aware she is throughout the entire process. She always thought death came quickly and consciousness was not a part of disappearing from life, but she feels everything around her, as if her senses are in a state of overdrive.

After a while, a moment so inhumanly fast yet incredibly slow, Hailey finally feels solid ground beneath her being again, although she is not aware if she even has a body or if she just is. Whispers begin to surround her. At first, she is sure there must be several persons trying to get in contact with her, because it is as if the voices come from every direction. But soon she realizes it is only one voice. A low, soft, almost comforting voice of a man, beckoning her to open her eyes and return to the surface.

"Wake up, princess. I have a plan and you are the very last puzzle piece."

Dennis

"Interrupting the evening news is a warning to young women living in or near Gadsden. The Birmingham Police Department requests that every woman between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five stay inside or travel in company after sundown. Dennis Kramer, also known as the Dusk Driver, is yet to be located after he allegedly committed his third murder this week. The mayor o—"

Dennis flicks off the radio and presses his foot against the accelerator with a smirk on his face. This is their own fault. If they wanted to stop him, they would. It is not his fault they aren't smart enough to figure him out. In fact, they're just asking him to do it by not stopping him. With an aggressive pull, Dennis steers the vehicle into his driveway, or at least what at the moment is his driveway. The elderly lady living on the ground floor of the condo never uses it or her basement, which is where Dennis has created his living quarters for the last month. It proves a suitable hideout while the cops are all over the city. Additionally, a swamp is right outside the fence and creates a perfect dumping ground for bodies once they're ready for disposal.

Dennis puts the car in park and sits for a while, frozen in his seat, listening to the engine. He opens the glove compartment and fishes out a compact photo album with pictures of a blond woman in her late thirties. Her face shows visible signs of aging, with deep-set dimples and smile lines around a pair of green eyes. Dennis' thumb and index finger run over the laminated photographs, like he is caressing the person pictured. He sighs mournfully for a brief second, but then retracts his hand as if it got burned. He flings the album to the backseat of the car, scattering a couple of photos to the ground, and slams his hand into the window.

"You ruined me! You made me a monster! Look where I am now because of you. Why couldn't you love me? Why?"

His head falls to the steering wheel with a bump, and he spends the next five minutes in this position sobbing in despair and fear.

The dim light from a yellow bulb illuminates his basement dwelling, Dennis would not even classify this as a home or a place worth living, but it would have to make do as a temporary hideout. But with only a bed, a dining-room table covered in a wax tablecloth, two lamps, and a mini fridge, Dennis is happy he is no longer in the dating scene. What woman would enjoy this interior? He throws his coat on the fridge and pops off his shoes, changing into his sneakers. He likes to stay ready should he spot a potential victim. They have to live up to a certain standard. Blond hair, shoulder length or longer, green eyes, preferably young. They are easier to handle, get scared a lot easier, and gullible enough to believe most anything.

"Oh, will you please help me find my poor lost dog? He's the only thing I have, and I'm afraid he's lost!"

Dennis snickers and turns on the radio. Buddy Holly's "That'll Be the Day" blasts out of the speakers while Dennis snaps on a pair of plastic gloves. Good thing the basement is constantly cool, it keeps the bodies fresh for longer, although this one is running on her last hours. He carefully runs his fingers through her blond hair, trying to remove clumps of congealed blood. Perhaps if he dressed her in one of Norma's favorite tops, she would look just like her. For now, she is not the perfect match. She is not good enough. The hunt continues. It is past 9:00 P.M., which means his elderly resident is fast asleep. It will give him time to get rid of the body

and perhaps even bring a new one home before sun rises. The police might have issued a warning, but there is always that one person who thinks it never happens to them. Rigor mortis set in several days ago, and a dead twenty-one-year-old woman is heavier than one would think.

With a grunt, Dennis pulls the sheet underneath the body, moving it from the dining table to the metal cart beside it. As he bends down to unlock the wheels, readying himself to push it into the bog, sirens blares through the open cellar window. Red and blue lights reflect on the plastic sheet beneath the table. Dennis knows this is the end. But he will not go out without a fight. Those assholes have been on him for months now, spoiling his plans. Someone is going down with him. As an intense knock on the door commences, Dennis grabs for his shotgun hidden behind the bathroom door, but he only reaches the handle before a piercing pain runs from his shoulder to his stomach and spreads through his entire body. Warm liquid paints the door red and before he hits the ground, the world turns completely dark.

Dennis died that evening, February fifth, after a month-long manhunt. His remains were burned and buried at the only cemetery willing to accept his ashes. He was given no reminder of his existence. But Dennis is not done. The power of his unsatisfied and anguished soul kept a light kindled within him and he spent sixty years roaming the planes of the Underworld, craving to taste life again. Slowly he lost everything that made him what he was as a living being. His keen sense for detail, his interest in music and cars; at one point, the depths of loneliness even ripped away his memories of his own voice. He still heard talking in his mind, but it was merely a cheap imitation of what it truly was. Knowing he could not allow himself to slip into oblivion completely, he yearned to live again. All he needed was a suitable, gullible vessel. Someone he could live through and use to do what he should have done while he still had the chance. Perhaps a young girl? They're the easiest to deal with, after all.

The Bargain

"What are you? Am I hearing myself? Are there others like me wherever I am?"

Hailey twists and turns in an effort to see what's going on around her, but despite her desperation, she is stuck to the ground as if something is pushing her into it.

"Listen."

The soothing male voice appears again, but now clearer than before. As clear as Hailey's own voice, so much so she doubts whether it is her own.

"I've been observing you for days. Are you listening to me?"

Hailey nods hesitantly.

"Good. You see, I know you're not done living. You have an unfulfilled purpose, and you don't belong here just yet. The thing is, neither do I. I've just been waiting for the right person. This place gets boring after sixty years."

"The right person?"

Hailey's voice is dry and raspy but manages to form a coherent sentence.

"Yes. You were killed unjustly, and now you are looking for revenge, right?"

This Hailey cannot deny, although she knows how morally despicable thoughts of revenge are. But does morality even exist down here? Is this being her only ticket back to the living? Is he God…Satan? Dennis continues:

"Let's just say I know exactly what kind of nasty details that little book of yours contains and I must say, for a young girl like yourself, you have quite a mind for murder. Are your ideas rough around the edges? Sure, but I bet you could get far with the right companion or mentor, if you wanna go that way."

The omnipresent voice is crystal clear, yet there seems to be no place from which it derives. As Hailey slowly regains the ability to look around, she sees nothing but darkness. She stammers: "But I don't even know your name."

The voice pauses, as if it needs to think about its answer or recalling what its name is:

"Just call me Dennis. Now, are you in or n—"

Dennis' sentence is cut off by an immediate response from Hailey, with a tone so serious it even surprises the geist.

"I'm in. Bring me back to life."

A light flashes, but this time it is different from the multi-colored kaleidoscopic prisms she's been observing ever since she died. The sound of metal against metal, scissors cutting through linen, crinkling plastic sheets, liters of oxygen, and the smell of a rubber mask awaken Hailey's senses, pulling her from her sleeping state.

"We have a pulse. Adrenaline, please."

She hears faintly among the noise. Suddenly, she regains sensation in her fingers and toes. Pain rushes through her body like a tidal wave and she opens her eyes to face a glaring light over the surgery table. There is no doubt in Hailey's mind that she is alive again. Her heart is beating out of her chest in a mixture of anxiety and agony but, after a nurse grabs her hand and injects intravenous rapifen into her drip, she quickly blacks out again. Just as Hailey is about to slip into a forced slumber, and wonders whether her meeting with Dennis was only a dream, she hears his laugh deep within herself. She feels him somewhere inside of her mind, pulling strings, making ideas she suddenly feels as her own, like she has two hearts beating in synergy. She knows she has to share herself and whatever she is now with this entity.

Although an external feeling of power suddenly surges through her body, Hailey also experiences a foreign duality she's never felt before. Like a meat cleaver parting her into two halves and only letting her keep one. Meanwhile, every inch of Dennis' being wakes up from a long slumber, glowing with life and energy of which he only had a vague memory, from before his death. He is finally alive again. His goal is complete. But with renewal, he also experiences a sensation he has rarely felt before: Fear. Childish fear. Fear of the unknown, the dangerous, the harmful. Fear of getting hurt. A fear he remembers from being a child himself, but he thought long conquered by common sense and knowledge. The price of becoming a part of a child.

The Murder

Describing the feeling of having an alien sharing its existence subconsciously through your mind is impossible. At first, Hailey thought she might be able to hear Dennis, like she had before they merged. But she does not feel him in a direct way. All she knows is she can suddenly perform tasks she couldn't before. Her knowledge of vintage cars has exploded, she knows exactly how long it takes for rigor mortis to set in, and suddenly she has an unrelenting need to listen to Buddy Holly records. With Dennis also came an emotion she has never felt before, the feeling of being watched. She keeps reminding herself this must be because of her sharing her own body and mentality with

a foreign being, but she swears she sometimes sees someone or something moving at the corner of her eye.

"Yes. This is perfect."

She sticks the spade in the pile of soil behind the hole she just dug into the forest floor. The soft ground creates an ideal dumping ground for the body; its isolated nature should cover any visible or audible signs of the kill, and there is something calming about the forest, aiding Hailey in focusing on her mission. It is isolated from the rest of the city, but still close enough for easy transportation of the body. Or perhaps she should just get Michael out to the forest. She ties the shovel to her bike and places herself on the seat with a sigh. Tonight, it happens. Months of preparation comes down to this event, and now Hailey is not only driven by revenge and despair, but a need to kill. She almost feels guilty for not having any second thoughts or remorse, but there is none to be found. She knows what she needs to do.

Hailey already knows she must do her research on her victim before plotting their murder. She has all the details she needs about Michael in her notebook, which miraculously survived her last meeting with her bully. His love of underground rave clubs, especially those only a select few are invited to, gives her the perfect opportunity to make up rumors of a fake club nestled in the woods. She even went as far as creating a fake invitation and sliding it into his locker during lunch break. Now she lies pressed against the dew-wet grass just before the forest entrance. She has everything she needs to subdue him, transport his lifeless form into the woods, and murder him. The plan is bulletproof. Now she just needs her victim. She checks her watch multiple times during her wait. It would not have occurred to her that using a watch is better than a phone, but her other half made sure she understood the illuminating blue light from a phone is not the best idea while hiding.

He should be here by now. A slight nervousness breaks through her cold demeanor, and she grabs the stun gun in her hand even tighter. What if he doesn't show up? Before the Bargain, Hailey would have fled by now. She used to hide from her fears and let them control her life and actions. But now, something inside her makes her stay put and focused on the task at hand. A part of her even looks forward to feeling Michael's warm blood on her hands.

Thirty minutes after Michael's supposed arrival there is still no sign of him. Hailey gets up on her knees from her lying position and sighs. Perhaps he had something better to do tonight? As she gets to her feet, she suddenly feels a presence near her. She grabs her taser, clumsily spins around and almost slips, making autumn leaves fly everywhere, to face the shape of a person standing ten feet from her. She did not recall Michael being this tall. Regardless, she pushes the trigger, and two wires flies off toward the shadow, but instead of attaching to him, they fly right through. Did she miss? That can't be. He's so close. The figure does not move, and in the scarce moonlit forests it looks like it is wearing a mask. It lifts a finger, slowly pointing toward her and, with a voice resembling howling from a winter storm, says:

"You do not belong here."

Hailey stumbles backwards into a tree with her eyes constantly fixated on the creature.

"I...I'm sorry, I know minors aren't supposed to be around these areas after dark, I got lost and...and..."

She pauses her panicked rambling, as the creature moves towards her. As it steps into a beam of moonlight, she gets a clearer idea of what it is. A man, she assumes, clad in long, dark robes, covering its gangly limbs which seems to just hang down its sides like dead meat. It is wearing a mask that resembles a face contorted into a scream or moan, incredibly detailed and black as the night. He towers above her in an almost inhuman manner and, before she knows it, his hand is grabbing her shoulder. Despite her struggles, he manages to hold her in place against the tree.

"Your purpose is harmful. You live in pain in the search of blood. I will bring you back to the Underworld where you shall remain."

Its mouth opens in a monstrous fashion, unhinging its jaw like a snake devouring a prey much bigger than itself, and leans in towards Hailey. Although she is not aware of what the creature is, she knows it is of danger to her. Flashbacks of facing creatures like him in the many years spent in the Underworld run amok in her head, and the way it pushes her back into the hard surface awakens the post-traumatic stress from her days of bullying. It is as if both her geist's and her own fears boils into one mass. This provides her with enough courage to reach toward the mask and rip it from him with inhuman strength. She knows the mask is a powerful object, but she does not know where she gained that knowledge. She flings the mask into the forest and it disappears in the darkness. The creature immediately retreats like a wounded animal, covering its face and, before her vision darkens, the creature almost looks human and vulnerable. At this moment, Hailey is not sure whether she will live or die, but just as suddenly as he appeared, he disappears into the forest behind her. Hailey is frozen in place, terrified from meeting a creature from another plane.

"A Deathmask..."

She whispers. This was not just a ghost or another Sin-Eater. This was a Reaper.

The Synergy

So, this will be the last page I write in my notebook. That meeting I had with the Reaper changed my whole perspective on reliving my life. I didn't ask to get bullied relentlessly in my previous existence nor did I ask to meet Dennis or, indeed, a Reaper. But I know my second chance isn't going to be wasted on dwelling in my past. My whole plan of murdering Michael those many years ago was intriguing and fueled by fire he lit himself In my anger and vengefulness, I was easily swayed into sharing my mind and body with a geist who is an expert on exactly that field.

I think the Reaper was right, though. What was I going to do after Michael was dead? Go on a full-on killing spree, murdering anyone who crossed me or treated me unfairly? What a bitter life that would have been. I did some research into Dennis' life before he became a geist, and I'm not ending up some psychopathic murderer listening to Buddy Holly for the rest of my lifetime. I was provided this chance because I had more to give the world, and because my life was taken away from me in an unjust way. Perhaps the Reaper will one day return to regain is mask and power. But for now, I keep it with me. I treat it is a trophy — me overcoming the monster in more than one way.

After my mission failed, I withdrew and decided to leave my family behind. I was so terrified of myself and what I could do that I didn't want them near me. A couple of weeks after my disappearance, I saw my suicide announced in the local newspaper, so I guess it worked wonders. I hid for months by myself in an attic, stealing and

begging to get by. Not my proudest moment, admittedly, but I was so out of touch with myself I didn't know what to do. My thoughts were not my own, my opinions were not formed by me, the thought of having someone else picking at my brain was driving me to utter insanity. So, after having a complete meltdown at the bus station, I was brought to an asylum. It wasn't kicking and screaming. I was actually happy to have someone listen to me, and even if they didn't understand, at least I had food on the table and a place to sleep that wasn't riddled with vermin.

This also gave me a chance to meet someone of my kind. It wasn't another patient, as one might expect, but my psychiatrist, Dr. Mason. When I told him about my symptoms initially, he looked at me like any of the other doctors did: professionally, but distant. Like I was just another one in the long queue of mentally ill patients. I got the labels: paranoid schizophrenic and MPD, also called multiple personality disorder. Thinking back on it, it seemed pretty spot on. I did have another identity inside of me. But Dr. Mason truly understood what was happening to me when I used one of my acquired powers in front of him. See, back then I didn't really know I had any or what they were. I showcased an immense amount of strength when I ripped that Deathmask from the Reaper's hand, but I put that down as a result of fear and adrenalin.

For a while, one of the other patients had repeatedly stolen my cigarettes while I was hospitalized. In my current state I would have handled things differently, but back then I was unstable, to say the least. So, I decided to catch him in the act one afternoon while pretending to nap. As he reached toward the carton, I flipped to my other side and grabbed his hand. My purpose was only to frighten him and teach him a lesson, but all my anger left an obvious mark on his wrist. I was later taught this is called a Curse. From that day on, he became incredibly sick every time he tried to smoke, and eventually quit. I suppose it wasn't much of a curse to his body, but mentally he couldn't handle not having a cigarette once in a while and ended up sicker than when he came. What I didn't know at the time was that Dr. Mason was in the room. He saw what I did to the other patient and knew exactly what I struggled with. He introduced me to his krewe, a group of night shifters ranging from surgeons and cleaners to nurses, radiologists, and even the hospital priest. He explained what I encountered in the forest that night, and what was going on between me and Dennis. And from then on, I knew what my goal was.

As for now, I am doing what I can to fit into this new life. I've read all the books and articles available to me about what I am and what I can aspire to be. I have many new friends and what I consider a family — my krewe. I even embarked upon a romantic relationship with Dr. Mason. My only issue right now is Dennis doesn't seem to enjoy my lifestyle. Admittedly, this wasn't really a part of the deal. All he wanted was to feel the rush from killing and hunting down victims, and that just isn't a part of who I am now. I am so out of touch with him I am not even sure if he is in there anymore. The only proof of his existence is my abilities, which I have little to no control over. Although I am a well-read Sin-Eater, I can't use any of my granted gifts in a powerful or controlled way.

Currently I am standing between living my life as I want to, surrounded by friends and equal-minded individuals, but not being able to ever use what is the only good part of the Bargain, or only use it scarcely, or basically go out on a murdering spree in order to get closer to Dennis and build up our lost relationship. I recently discussed

my issue with other members of the krewe. Some of them suggested I spend some of my researching time finding out who Dennis was before he turned mad. What was it that triggered his need to kill? Back in the 1950s, it was put down as a "disturbance of the mind," but perhaps he had his reasons. I mean, I thought I did when I was plotting on murdering Michael. Perhaps, if I find out what he once was, what his passions were, what broke him, and what made him a twisted killer, I can figure out how to connect with him besides murdering. I am concerned if his many years in the Underworld made him irreversibly sick, but it is worth a shot.

That's why I'm writing this from the front seat of my car parked outside his last known residence. I was able to get access to the basement he was allegedly shot down in while trying to conceal the body of Irene Granger, a young college student. They gave me a few of his belongings that were confiscated for evidence. One is a photo album full of pictures of a beautiful blond woman. Some of the pictures are missing, others are drawn on, and some scratched over. I was also given the keys to the house. It's been empty since the accident way back, simply unsellable with such a reputation. So, the basement should be more or less intact, and perhaps it will hold some much-needed answers. I am also visiting some of his victim's graves to show him how wrong his deeds were. The doctor did warn me about connecting with a geist so dark and disturbed, and said it was the equivalent of playing with demons without knowing their demands. I was warned Dennis' presence, and me visiting his past, might once again give me an urge to kill. Dennis certainly seems to have changed, becoming gentler and calmer, even showing signs of a conscience occasionally. But I cannot deny his effect on me. Me getting closer to him and rebuilding our synergy will change who I am.

And, I must admit, flipping through this album does awaken thoughts in my mind. The need to feel warm blood on my hands…the satisfaction of wielding complete control over a helpless being who deserves what is coming to them…yes, that does seem intoxicatingly and dangerously tempting. But I am stronger than that now. I can withstand whatever dark urges might occur from this experience. I am the one who is in control of my own destiny and whatever ideas I have are my own! I am me, Hailey, and nothing will ever stop my common sense and humanity guiding my actions…at least, I hope so.

Neall Raemonn Price

Chicago, Westside, 5:23 A.M.

I looked into the mirror's dim reflection, taming my hair into a tight bun. *Okay, Shannon,* I thought. *Check your equipment, check your face, check yourself.*

I zipped my hoodie all the way up, covering my BLM shirt. No sense making my position in this situation even more tenuous. I took a deep breath. The coffee shop bathroom stank of soap and shit, but it was nothing compared to the scene I'd be walking into. It was run by some Ethiopian family — really lovely folks, hell of a cup of Yirgacheffe. I checked the battery on my camera and tested the flash. The bright light showed the circular motions of the barista who last cleaned the bathroom in the patterns of soap scum, every wax-on wax-off stroke clear as day. I looked at myself, looked myself in the eye.

Okay. You can do this. It's your job. The sentiment behind the thought wasn't mine. It was the meat in my skull translating something purer.

I spared a look behind me in the mirror, all horror-movie cliché. He stood three paces behind, leaning on the bathroom wall, watching me. He looked down at the floor for a moment, tilting his head, and I could see the missing back of his skull. There was just a wet and bloody hollow, like a carved-out tree stump after a heavy rainfall. He was wearing a white shirt, gray vest, and suit pants like my grandfather might've worn, but he couldn't have been a day over seventeen. He looked like my brother did in the casket, except for the whiteness. My brother spoke a mile a minute, though. My ghost was more the strong, silent type.

He glared at me, but I knew it wasn't entirely personal. I gave him a defiant smirk, then left the bathroom, went out the front door and crossed the early morning street to the crime scene. I flashed my credentials at the bored-looking rookie in baby blues doing crowd control with a computer tablet in hand.

Her eyes snapped toward me, flashing blue in the spinning police lights, and I knew this was going to be trouble. "McAvoy," I said, digging in my purse for my ID. "Shannon McAvoy. CSI."

"McAvoy, McAvoy," she muttered, tapping the screen of the metal-shrouded tablet with practiced ease. She chewed her lower lip when she was thinking, I noted. "Nope, don't see you here."

I knew the routine when I didn't preempt people by flashing the ID first. I steeled myself for the deferential-but-defiant dance, when a voice rang out from beyond the yellow tape, sparing me from having to chew the rookie out. "Shannon! Lea, let her through. She's CSI, one of ours from the 12th District."

"She's not on the tech lists," the cop named Lea said, her voice a little puzzled.

The voice's owner ambled up to us. He had a barrel for a torso and fire-engine-red hair, but his voice was soft and nasally. His name was Richard O'Donnell, and he liked to hype up his Irish heritage despite being American for five generations. "I got her. It's fine. Hey, Shannon, you're the first tech here for once!"

"For once?" I asked, confused.

O'Donnell nodded. "Usually the last one to leave, right? People comment on your, uh, commitment to, uh, thorough work."

Sure they do. His pause in the middle told me they thought I was slow and lazy.

The boy was young, maybe fourteen. He lay sprawled on the sidewalk, blood painting a tableau on the brick behind him. The rest collected in a pool beneath him, soaking through his dark hoodie. I could see the pockmarks of a dozen bullets in the brick, like a face ravaged by pox. He was alone on the white sidewalk next to black asphalt. Besides the brick building, only a streetlamp was nearby.

"Young victim, too," O'Donnell said. *Not victim, boy. This was a kid.* "They follow each other on a dozen social medias, trading barbs and talking shit until somebody shoots the other." He gestured to the wall. "Make sure you get all of bullets in the brick, there. There was a shooting here a few days ago and we don't want to get our scenes mixed up. City's gotta have its due."

Days? Jesus. Violence was endemic during the summer, the result of desperate men dealing all day with no jobs and no hope. No matter what the media said, most of them weren't in gangs, not really — just victims of the puffing and untampered masculinity. My camera flash flung the scene into stark relief, brightening every color out of the orange haze cast down by the streetlamp.

"Third one this week right by the Addams," said a beat cop, calling the highway by its colloquial. "This one took a while to die." He muttered something else, but I knew the tone underneath it, the kind reserved for watching animals fight in your front yard. But that's what most cops saw, anyways. And the victim *had* taken a while to die; he had smeared his blood all around and tried to crawl for a bit before he was taken. Pain accompanied the dead, but it also creates them, and no ghost ever comes into death smiling.

Two things caught my eye: one, that he was missing the tip of his left pinky finger. The wound looked ragged, like he'd taken a cigar cutter to it. Cleaner ways to lose a finger.

The other was something blue-white floating in the drying pool of blood. I knelt down to get a closer look, and impulsively reached to touch a finger to it, before my

geist waved a hand to stop me. He knelt down in the puddle without disturbing it and plucked the thing out. It wasn't blood, and it wasn't trash from the street. It was sticky and smooth and gummy, with a viscosity that turned my stomach. It was Plasm.

I stood up and looked around, truly taking the scene in full. None of the dead were milling about — not gawking at the scene, not dying again in some repeated pattern long gone, not screaming for anyone to hear them. Most of the time, I'm called in after the detectives, then stay behind after the physical remains are gone to tend to the confused spiritual ones. There was nothing that remained of this boy other than the body.

The sun started to rise. I could see clouds crowded close above the city, glowing gold. The streets were full of the living and empty of the dead.

Chicago PD Forensic Services Lab, 7:43 A.M.

My phone buzzed, rattling and sliding on the desk in front of me. It was my krewe.

Most Bound have a krewe. I don't, not really. I tried, I did — but I couldn't get on board with all the religious crap. I went to St. Sabina's enough times to see how it hollowed people out. I gave up on God a long time ago, and seeing the darkness under the Earth only told me there was a Hell. It was something my krewe could never see eye to eye with me on, so I left.

I reached over and tapped the screen to let the call go to voicemail. If they needed me so bad, they could text, like reasonable human beings. The lab fell silent, and I turned to upload the scene photos. I had maybe an hour before the blood guys came in to start playing with their creepy string models.

I typed my password correctly into the login screen, and the computer spit back an error.

I sat back in my chair for a moment. Not again. I tried again, and the same error cropped up. I knew trying again would probably beep an alert somewhere. This always happened to me — and not just passwords, but my bank account mysteriously closing, or the time that death certificate got filed by the computer.

"The world knows we're dead," came my geist's hollow voice. He was over in the corner of the room, leaning against the corner at an obscene angle.

"Yeah, well, I'm still moving, and you aren't helping." I said, with empty defiance. But I sighed and settled for flipping through the crime scene photos, squinting past my glasses at the tiny pixelated screen. My geist went back to sulking.

He could be surly, but he was sweet sometimes, when only I could see. He was sweet like my brother had been, too. My geist liked babies and cats and the sunlight, and so did my brother. I knew my baby brother, knew he switched out Chief Keef in his busted CD player for Deep Purple when he thought nobody was looking. I knew he could quote the oath of the Jedi from memory. I gave him his first copy of *Lord of the Rings*, and told him that yeah, it was written about a bunch of white folks, but nobody ever said the hobbits couldn't be black. Two weeks later he made me second breakfast and then elevensies.

None of his friends liked sweet. He tried to be tough, to show off for everyone, and nobody told him not to do it. I would have, but school was more important, and I thought being the first one to go would be telling him enough. Nobody told him

about the strength that comes from kindness. I tried to be firm with him, sometimes, but I wasn't firm enough to stop him from himself. He died on an early summer morning like this one, out too late, trying to prove he was tough enough.

I died a year later in a few tons of screeching metal on a rainy night. My chest ached whenever the weather was bad, right in the spot where the steering wheel crushed my ribs and tore open my heart. A degree in criminal justice with a minor in photography made this an easy career move but being Bound was why I kept doing it.

One of the other lab techs came in, setting down a bag heavy with medical textbooks, yawning while he did so. He gave me a half-hearted smile from across the lab, his face glowing blue from the login screen. I waited for him to read a few e-mails in before I walked over, smiling as I tried to remember his name.

"Hey…you," I finally stammered.

"Hey yourself," he said, bleary eyed. He was short and thin, with a pencil mustache that took a lot to keep neat. "Working late, or working early?"

"Little bit of both," I admitted. I thought for a moment and settled on the truth. "Hey, I locked myself out of my account. Can I hop on yours for a moment to upload these scene photos?" I brandished my camera and gave a nervous laugh. "Seriously, it'll only take a second, and the server won't care who uploaded them."

He was already backing off from the terminal. "Say no more," he said. "I'm gonna have to stick by you, though."

There went my chance at scanning the database for every murder in the past few days. Still, this was my job. The cord clicked as I slid it into my camera, and a folder on the desktop started filling up with thumbnails. I opened the series and started flicking through them to make sure they were of the set.

"Huh," said the tech, over my shoulder. "Nice brickwork."

I looked him over. "You don't look like a bricklayer. You don't look like you could lift a brick."

"You'd be surprised, but no, I'm Italian. Great-grandpa was a master stonemason." He shrugged. "Half the places up the Dan Ryan and through the Kennedy, up to near Andersonville, have that pattern. One of my favorite bars has it."

"Which one?"

"Green Mill."

The Green Mill Cocktail Lounge was in uptown, right by Montrose Beach. I'd had a drink or two there, when I dated a guy who was really into jazz. It was an old bar, with stories to match. A neon sign that I thought was gaudy, but others loved, lit up the street. The neon was present inside the bar, too: a bright-green sign with the bar's name in the back, a huge orange ring around the clock hanging above the front entrance. Together, they painted the place in contrasting dark colors playing over the old, dark wood of the bar, staining everything in shades verdant and lambent. I liked the lighting, but I didn't like the guy or the jazz.

It was also right between St. Boniface Catholic Cemetery and Weiss Memorial Hospital. There was plenty of death to go around, even if Weiss was far removed from the violence just a few neighborhoods away, and it wasn't a trauma hospital. I felt my stomach go cold, and my geist suddenly got very interested in the screen.

The computer beeped, and I smiled at — Frank! That was it! — and said, "Thanks, Frank. All good."

He smiled back. "You're welcome," he said, without really knowing how much he'd actually helped.

Uptown, 12:00 P.M.

Nothing opened before ten in that area, so I used the time to get a bite to eat and take a shower. My geist respected my privacy, at least, but he came back out once the sun started shining past the clouds. The Aragon Brawlroom stretched somewhere behind me.

The Green Mill's famous outdoor sign was less impressive in the light of the sun. The building itself was unimposing, sandwiched between a chicken shop and a restaurant that kept changing names and owners. I didn't go in at first, although a doorman walked out and plopped down on a stool outside. Instead, I walked a circuit around the building, pretending to catch monsters on my phone. When I rounded the corner again, I stopped dead.

There was a well-dressed man standing outside the lounge, surrounded by ghosts. They all looked like the boy who had been killed — young, black, dead by violence. There were four, all told — three with dark stains spreading from tiny holes in their chests, one missing half his face and jaw.

My geist was nowhere to be seen, but the ghosts all snapped their heads around to look at me. The one missing half his face had his eye shot out.

The well-dressed man followed their gaze. He wore gray suit pants with pinstripes, and no jacket. His chest looked strong under a tight, white shirt and gray vest to match the pants. His hair was salt-and-pepper, with a gray beard. He looked like those internet memes about the hot grandpa, except my granddaddy's skin hadn't cracked and he didn't look like that.

The man took one solid look at me and fled, white-faced, into the club. He muttered something to the ghosts, who immediately advanced on me.

Oh, shit. Direct violence was not something I was really used to or suited for, despite how I had died. The key in my soul was bloody iron, but the locks it could turn were all for knowledge, not combat. I had a little piece, heavy at the bottom of my purse, but it wasn't something that would be useful here.

I rounded the alley, running as fast as I could, but they were faster. Hands of Plasm burned against my skin, closed all around me. One stood apart, not grabbing me, but reaching out toward my heart. I felt the pressure start to ache the old wounds that had killed me.

And, suddenly, there was a counter-pressure in my chest.

"Okay," I gasped out. "Take 'em." And then I cut my geist loose.

He strode forward out from me, walking straight where I was held at an angle, the blood sluicing out the back of his skull until it looked like a cloak spreading behind him, a single clean sheet. He lit the alley in shades of bright crimson, glowing in the shade. The blood steamed where it hit the ground, skittering and sizzling like grease in a hot pan and dissolving to smoke as it washed down the drain in the middle of the alley.

He wheeled around and made a gun with his fingers, then brought his thumb down. One of the ghosts holding me vanished above the waist, a bit of vertebrae sticking up from Plasm-soaked legs. I moved my arm in sudden shock.

The others looked at each other and dropped me to rush him as one. My geist whipped his head around, the bloody cloak lancing out and completely wrapping one of his opponents. He made the same gun motion with both hands, blowing off a knee and sending the other opponent sprawling.

He didn't get the fourth, though. The ghost had been a big man in life, and his fists were just as big in Twilight. My geist doubled over under a hammerblow, then collapsed as the big man punched through the bloody cloak and knocked him to the ground. I blinked in surprise. My geist was stronger than these ghosts; I'd seen him shred through hostiles like tearing apart tissues in heavy rain.

The big ghost turned back toward me, and I reached back to childhood and what my krewe had taught me before I left them. I didn't really believe in the ritual anymore, but I only knew one way to directly check a rampaging ghost.

"Father, I come to you today, bowing in my heart, asking for protection from the evil one," I stammered out, sounding more like *FatherIcometoyoutoday*. Why did I sound so panicked? I brandished my hand and a little plastic pouch of grave dirt and insect shells.

The ghost stopped dead, struggling against an unseen force. Must've been unusual for him. He was usually the unseen force in people's lives.

"Lord, we are assailed moment by moment, vulnerable to sin of every kind. Surround us with your divine protection." I thrust my hands out in a very specific way. "Encompass us 'round about with your strength and your might. Let all who take refuge in you be glad."

The ghost staggered and dropped to a knee. My geist was in the same position, trying to rise.

But I had my voice now, and it called out strongly. "For it is you who blesses the righteous man, O Lord! You surround me with favor as with a shield!"

I ran forward and punched the ghost as hard as I could. It worked well, almost too well; his jaw popped off, sailing across the alley to smash into mucus on the brick. The second punch went right through him, and I felt his heart trying to remember to beat, pressed against my forearm. He dissolved all around me, and I felt my geist's presence return to the small, sore spot in my chest. I held my own keys again.

I ran down the street, past the towering Upton Theatre, past everything else, past the people milling about in the street. They averted their eyes, except the ones who perversely smelled vulnerability and catcalled me. Nobody really wanted to see a crying black girl.

Harold Washington Library Center, 7:00 P.M.

The stack of papers and film rattled a little as I set it beside the film reader. The sun was going down, and the library was getting dark. They'd kick me out soon enough, but this was the last stack I had to search.

I had to see if the well-dressed man was present in any coverage of the Green Mill. How he looked would tell me a lot about him, whether he was a necromancer or something far worse.

The microfilm made everything look green, dead, decayed, like they were corpses posed in a semblance of life. But I was used to those things. And the Green Mill had a grisly history that fit the mood, even as far back as just before my lifetime. Fifty, sixty years back, there was a mention of the Green Mill every week, a report of someone stabbed or beaten to death. There were a lot of mentally ill people roaming the streets after Reagan closed the mental hospitals, put them in buses, and dropped them off at the corner of Lawrence and Broadway. History repeated itself with Rahm doing the same during his mayoralty. Some social-justice part of me chided the thought that the mentally ill were automatically violent. I wondered if the reports of all the neighborhood attacks were manifest prejudice or just many exceptions to the rule.

Further back, it got even worse. People had their throats slashed at the Green Mill. Prohibition agents shook the place down every other day. It was a haven for the Italian mob. Victims would have little pieces of themselves sliced off as trophies.

I stopped and read that again. Some ears got taken, the news said, a nose, but mostly fingers and particularly the pinky. I looked around for my geist, but he refused to come out. Something was spooking him worse than the beatdown, and I could feel the not-me agitation roiling in my chest.

I flicked to a picture in 1936, and there he was. He looked a little older, maybe, hair a bit whiter and suit a bit more ill-fitting. But there was the man who the paper said owned the Green Mill Gardens, now the Lounge. He'd offered a million in cash to the owner to buy it, and it seemed the owner took him up on that after all.

There was a boy beside him, one whose face I knew intimately. There was my geist, smiling wide with youthful exuberance.

My heart beat hard in my chest. My ribs ached where they'd stove in. But my geist was silent.

Uptown, 10:00 P.M.

The theater was shrouded in scaffolding, the attempt of a community to break the spell of aging, but I could see lights within. The "Coming Soon" marquee blazed, bulbs naked, on the front. I breathed deep and thought back to all the blood these streets had seen, then reached forward and yanked hard on the door's heavy padlock. It broke apart in a cloud of rust, despite being bright stainless steel.

"Easy, guy," I said to my geist, still hiding. The same man who had offered a million for Green Mill was an owner in the theater, the paper had said. It stood over a former garden plot, one that had a dark reputation. I was going to need every ounce of power.

The stage was well-lit, perversely enough. Inside I could see the rot crawling up the ceiling of the theater, smell the decay of the structure. It had gorgeous bones, but so did everybody when life was finished with them. The well-dressed man stood on stage, dressed in off-white, surrounded by a second cadre of ghosts. He squinted against the lights as I peeked around the corner at him. My geist was silent, and my chest didn't ache.

"You're not as stealthy as you think," he called from the stage. "Please, come closer. I'd like to speak. Come on, come on, I won't bite."

Cautiously, my heart trip hammering, I walked forward. "I know what you are," I called out. "You're feeding on the people who die along the old routes of the city."

"Quite right, except for one thing," he smiled. "They're not people."

He plucked something brown out of his pocket and blew on it. Plasm flowed out of it and coalesced into a ghost. It was the boy murdered hours ago. The boy squinted against the lights, obviously confused. He shrieked when the man casually reached his hand into the ghost's belly and pulled out something long and thick and stringy. The shriek turned into terror when the man brought the organ to his lips and began to eat noisily.

"Once you cut them, they have to stick around in their remains, if you do it just right," he said. "You can usually hold them for seven days, and I prefer mine to ripen for a few, but I'm starving right now. I figured I'd need my strength to deal with you."

"No, no, no, fuck you man, please, no, fuck you," the ghost moaned. He whimpered when the well-dressed man yanked out another length of intestine and stuffed it into his hungry maw.

"It's strange, you know, what memories you pick up from eating the dead," he called from the stage, Plasm dripping invisibly down into his close-cropped beard. "Their anatomy is really remarkably preserved, but each piece has its own memory. He couldn't tell you his last meal," the man gestured to the ghost writhing on the ground, then looked at me and smacked his lips. "His body knows. It remembers the taste of blueberry pancakes. Late-night diner meals, the cheap sugar in fake syrup. Nothing so sweet." He grinned. He had straight, white teeth.

"You're fucking sick," I spat.

He laughed at that. "No, I *was* sick, and this made me far better." There was a little more pepper than salt in his hair now, his hairline just a half-inch lower. "Chicago takes what it's due. Death in this city happens with the sunrise, and the ground eats more than I ever will. Tell me, why shouldn't I have my fill? Aren't I due something, too?"

He sounded like every old white man I'd ever known. *Okay, enough. Time to come out. Rip this fucker to shreds*, I growled at my geist. But nothing happened. I felt the fear coming off in waves, something I'd *never* felt from him before.

"Haven't you decided to kill me yet?" the Eater called. "*Antonio! Vieni fuori!*"

My geist came out at that. He didn't draw himself out of me entirely, just enough to shine between worlds, to let the Eater and the ghosts on stage see his form. He trembled at the sight of the man on the stage. One look at him told me that he wouldn't do what I was asking.

Okay, Plan B. The well-dressed man was talking about the past, about the darkness under the Earth. The gun in my hand thundered, and he doubled over in shock. I took a step back, steadied, and shot again. He went down trying to run off from the stage.

Uptown, 10:07 P.M.

I left the Eater's body behind me. The shots would bring attention, and if I was really right about him, he'd be back soon enough. I needed the time to really research how to kill him properly. The next few nights would see blood, probably, but nobody else would be eaten if I acted fast enough.

Action required an explanation, though. I stopped in the alley, the blue lights of cop cars glinting off distant windows. The ache in my chest urged me on, but I snarled at it.

"Fuck you," I growled at my lazy passenger ghost. "Why? Come out the fuck now and tell me."

My geist came out — for everything else, he was a follower, not a leader. He looked at me with sad, dead eyes, and that told me what I needed to know.

"Always two there are," I muttered, my nerd card showing strong. "You were his apprentice, weren't you? He was teaching you to eat the dead."

A bit of bloody Plasm rolled down his neck, circling slowly to drip onto his front lapel. He nodded, slowly. I felt anger, I felt disgust, but mostly I just felt tired.

He gestured, the blood flowing again from the back of his empty skull. The blood stretched out with tendrils all crimson and wet, forming little rivulets on the ground that swelled at their tips to be small figures. I saw the Eater and my geist talking to some men in suits a century out of fashion. I saw the Eater run when the men didn't die the way they should've and watched my geist try to wade through gunfire. Trying to act real tough, but death eaters aren't Sin-Eaters, and I watched the tiny bloody figurine's head blow out.

He'd died trying to be tough, trying to be more powerful by stepping on someone else. And I could understand that, even if I'd never do it. I knew someone else like that, too.

And then he showed me something else. He held up a finger, then two, then counted off on his hand and the other until he reached seven. The bloody figurine spurted off a thinner version of itself, one that walked off.

I didn't need a few more nights. I could end this now.

"It's okay," I said. I wasn't trying to be soothing, but affirming. Firm with myself more than him, maybe, the way I wasn't before. "We're going to do this together, okay? You won't have to fight him. I'm not asking you. We're all we have."

My bae looked at me, and I smiled. "He's going to kill himself."

The moon lit the clouds like a candle under a shroud.

Cook County Morgue, 2:11 A.M.

This is more important than your job, I thought, flashing my credentials. They catalogued my entry into the morgue, I knew, and I'd have to answer for it in a few hours. More than I needed. The Eater's body would be inside by now, and the medical examiner wouldn't be in for a while.

The keypad shorted out at my touch, and the stainless-steel lock dissolved into the rust of a hundred damp years. It cracked against the ground when I wrenched the door open, geist trembling in my breast.

The Eater's body was already chill to the touch, sliding naked out of the cabinet. With a steady hand, I produced a pair of garden shears and clipped his left pinky.

His eyes shot open and he sat bolt upright. He touched the bloodless exit wound in his chest and fingered a bit of the cold, torn flesh. I smiled at that, then lifted his pinky to my mouth and blew on it like a whistle.

Pain produces the dead, but it also creates them. The trauma of death locked the Eater's spirit in, same as his victims.

Something wet flowed out of his severed pinky, a smiling face taking the shape of the Eater. The smile faded as their eyes widened at each other. The sounds of their scuffle echoed behind me as I ran down the hall, and the living Eater screamed.

The pain in my chest felt oddly whole, like the bones had knitted together. My geist thundered vengeance in my ears, soundlessly whooping for joy. But I'd deal with that later.

I walked up the steps into the night. An ambulance had pulled up, the EMTs carefully unloading a zipped-up body bag. Beside them, unseen, was a young man, eyes wide at his own carried-off corpse.

The city would take what it was due. But I'd keep what I could.

About the Authors

Loved the stories in this collection of spooky tales? Learn more about the authors who lent their talents to this anthology.

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Meredith Gerber is a freelance graphic designer, photographer, social media specialist, and a RPG Publisher Service Representative at DriveThruRPG. When she's not working, she's playing video games, baking, or adventuring with her husband, Hollywood, and their two cats, Noctis and Banjo. This anthology is her first writing project and she's thrilled for the opportunity to incorporate her personal experience with mental health into the setting of **Geist: The Sin-Eaters Second Edition**. @meredithgerber www.meredithgerber.com

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Klara Horskjær Herbøl has been running and playing RPGs for most of her adult life and started writing them professionally for companies such as Onyx Path, Make Believe Games, Helmgast, and Modiphius. As well as being a gamer, Klara is an enthusiastic student of Scandinavian history, an intensive care nurse, and polyglot, being able to speak and write in English, German, Swedish, and her native Danish. Klara's credits include **The Contagion Chronicle**, **Mummy: The Curse Second Edition**, **Vampire: The Masquerade 5th Edition**, **Dark Eras 2**, **V5: Chicago by Night**, **Night Horrors: Shunned by the Moon**, and many more. She lives in her apartment with her guinea pigs Otto von Bismarck and Napoleon and when she doesn't write or nurse, she paints or reads. Her twitter handle is @xLadyGamerx.

Danielle Lauzon

Danielle Lauzon is a freelance game designer, writer, developer, and gamer living in Austin, TX with her two dogs, two cats, and one husband. When she isn't writing, developing, designing, or otherwise occupied in getting games organized, she is playing games instead. She has worked for Onyx Path Publishing since 2012 on both Chronicles of Darkness and World of Darkness game lines.

Neall Raemonn Price

Neall Raemonn Price has been a published author for more than a decade, with work in fiction, nonfiction, and roleplaying games. He contributed to the **Geist: The Sin-Eaters Second Edition** core book (writing the Underworld intro and the Eaters of the Dead) and is the lead developer for **Scion Second Edition** from Onyx Path Publishing. When not writing, he works as a data scientist and lives with his cat. He can be found on Twitter @burntneall, a reference to the 13th Century Icelandic saga The Story of Burnt Njáll, a reference he grows tired of explaining but is too stubborn to change. "Read a book," he says with a sneer.

Renee Ritchie

Renee Ritchie is a writer, editor, and avid LARPer. Her work has been neatly strewn about across the World of Darkness and Chronicles of Darkness lines, specifically **Vampire: The Masquerade Dark Ages 20th Anniversary Edition**, **Vampire: The Requiem**, **Demon: The Descent**, and **Beast: The Primordial**. Writing is also part of her day job, where she creates and manages content for various high-tech companies. When not typing her fingers to the bone, she knits yarn and chainmail, belts out Queen at karaoke, and does her best not to cause too much trouble.

Lauren Roy

Lauren Roy is the author of the urban fantasy novels *Night Owls* and *Grave Matters*, and the YA fantasy *The Fire Children*. Her short fiction has appeared in Fireside Magazine and on Podcastle. If she's not scribbling out a story of her own, she's writing for tabletop RPGs, including several **Chronicles of Darkness Second Edition** and **Exalted Third Edition** titles for Onyx Path Publishing. Lauren is a graduate of and staff at Viable Paradise, a week-long SF/F writers' workshop — ask her about the jellyfish! She lives in southeastern Massachusetts with her husband, their cats, and the ghosts of the houseplants she forgets to water. You can find her on twitter as @falconesse.

Monica Valentinelli

Monica Valentinelli's stories have been published in anthologies and magazines by publishers including Prime Books, Apex Book Company, Uncanny Magazine, and Stone Skin Press. Her upcoming releases include a short story titled "From an Honest Sister, to a Neglected Daughter" for *Sisterhood: Dark Tales and Secret Histories* (2020) from Chaosium Publishing. She has written several game-related stories including "Only the Strongest has the Heart of a Wizened Queen" for the *Proving Grounds* solo card game, "Suffering of the Unchosen" for *Tales of the Dark Eras*, and "My Enemy, Mi Amici" for *Drawing Destiny: A Sixth World Tarot Anthology*. Visit www.booksofm.com for more information.

Vera Vartanian

Vera Vartanian is a writer and analog game designer. Her fiction has appeared in Crossed Genres Magazine, and she has contributed to a wide variety of lines by Onyx Path Publishing, including **Scion Second Edition**, **Exalted Third Edition**, and **Geist: The Sin-Eaters Second Edition**, for which she is the current line developer. She is queer, transgender, and very loud about both. Her Twitter handle is @MsBellwether.

Peter Woodworth

Peter Woodworth is an English professor, game designer, and freelance writer, not necessarily in that order. He has been gaming since he stumbled across a set of D&D dice in first grade (no, really!), and a professional game writer since he was 15. He's written for both the **World of Darkness** and **Chronicles of Darkness** since 1997, where he developed for Mind's Eye Theater and cultivated a love of all things LARP. His credits include **Changeling: The Dreaming**, **Changeling: The Lost**, **Vampire: The Masquerade**, and **Hunter: The Vigil**, as well as **Mage: The Awakening**, **Beast: The Primordial**, and **Wraith: The Oblivion**. He has also accumulated fiction and game writing credits for Galileo Games, Evil Hat Productions, ArtHaus, Magpie Games, Eschaton Media, and West End Games. His favorite ghost movie is Lake Mungo. You can find him online at peterwoodworth.com.

Eric Zawadzki

Eric Zawadzki is a fantasy writer and game designer. His writing credits include work for **Mage: The Awakening**, **Demon: The Descent**, and **Beast: The Primordial**, and he is co-developer for the new **Deviant: The Renegades** line. He spends his free time hanging out in Minneapolis with his filk rocker wife (Beth Kinderman) and their two children (William and Arya), attending local sci-fi conventions, and, of course, running regular tabletop RPGs.

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