

NORSEBARD PRESENTS



THE
BOOK
VOL
4 OF
CHILLS

GHOSTHUNTERS, LTD.

by Norsebard

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I.

Tracy Cross took a deep breath and let it out slowly. A quick glance on either side of her white Vauxhall Astra proved that her employer had listened and had pulled well back to leave her by herself in the gravelly forecourt to an abandoned railway depot that her company, Ghosthunters, Ltd., had been hired to cleanse of the supposed tormented soul she had found there when she had performed a thorough psychic sweep two days earlier.

Taking the red plastic crate with her tools, she closed the boot of her car and ventured into the abandoned depot itself, briefly looking over her shoulder to check that her employer really was at a safe distance - meaning he was so far away he couldn't see what she was about to do.

The concrete floor of the old depot that had fallen into disuse in the late 1960s when the local railway line had been closed was treacherous and riddled with water-filled potholes, and Tracy was thankful that she had decided to wear her favourite high-legged wellies so her nearly-new pair of black jeans wouldn't be stained.

Two sets of old and rusty iron rails led into the depot through a pair of tall, wide doors that appeared to only stay on their hinges through sheer determination. Originally, there had been sixteen window panes in each door, but the passing of time had left none intact.

Finally reaching the centre of the large depot - the floor was nearly twenty three thousand square feet - Tracy stepped over a particularly wide puddle and put her crate down next to a complete set of horrendously rusty steel wheels that had been left in the depot when it had closed down.

She glanced over her shoulder again and quickly crouched down to attach a little cordless pin microphone to the left sleeve of her black turtleneck sweater - the microphone was connected to a combined receiver-amplifier-speaker unit that looked exactly like a toolbox.

Ready for the big production number, she closed her blue eyes and arranged her long, dark brown hair into a ponytail that she left hanging down her back, knowing that moving hair was always a good visual effect.

'Right, Tracy, this is it... the stage is all yours... make it loud and spectacular!' she thought as she reached into the crate to take the tools she needed to pull off the charade: a small electronic instrument with a digital readout that could supposedly sniff out the amount of clustered neutrons in the air, a spectral analyser - perfect for hunting spectres - and finally an antique leather drum with a small club.

Side-stepping twice to the left, she held up the antique drum and struck it with the club to create a hollow dong; first once, then again, then a pause and then twice in rapid succession. After a few seconds, the sequence was repeated.

While she performed this sacred ritual supposedly carried down through the generations from the time of the Druids, she engaged in a little dance, moving one step sideways or back, depending on the amount of times she struck the leather drum.

Her efforts suddenly paid off - whipping her head around, she zoomed in on a spectre that was only visible to her. Increasing the tempo, she beat the drum faster and faster until she stopped with a loud *Dong!* and froze in place.

"Dickie! I see you! I feel you!" she said in a booming voice for the audience she knew she had. Glancing to her right, she briefly checked if her employer was still at a safe distance before going back to the charade. "I'm here to set you free from your eternal prison!" - *Dong!* - "Dickie!" - *Dong!* - "You are free to leave! You have done your duty!" - *Dong!* - "But now it's time to go home!" - *Dong!*

After pausing for a few seconds to heighten the tension, Tracy used her secret weapon, the glorious trick that had always worked so well for her - her sublime skill as a ventriloquist. Casually raising her left arm so the cordless pin microphone would be close to her throat, she started groaning from somewhere deep in her chest, a horrendous, tormented, ghostly groan that seemed to come from everywhere at once.

Enhanced tenfold through the amplifier-speaker unit in the crate, the otherworldly groans seemed to fly back and forth in the old depot until they sort-of escaped through one of the many broken windows and disappeared into the ether.

When the last wisps of Dickie's poor, lost soul had finally left its earthly prison, Tracy quickly turned off the pin microphone, let out a highly dramatic sigh and drew the sign of the cross in mid-air. "It's done," she said out loud for the benefit of her audience. "Dickie has gone home. He's with his family now."

'Oh, that's just splendid!' a male voice said from just beyond the old doors of the depot. Soon, Kenneth MacDowell, Tracy's employer, stepped away from his Jaguar with his secretary in tow. Mr. MacDowell was a slightly overweight, white-haired man in his late sixties wearing a steel grey business suit and a black pair of shoes that looked like they shouldn't get anywhere near the water-filled potholes. "Splendid... wonderful news, Miss Cross. So old Dickie has gone away now, has he?"

"He has, Mr. MacDowell," Tracy said, pretending to be mentally exhausted from the paranormal activity by crouching down next to her crate - in reality, she was turning off the speaker so it wouldn't create feedback.

"Right, right... good! Miss Lane," Kenneth MacDowell said and turned towards his secretary, "you may call Mr. Barley now. He and his lads will have this old, decrepit structure down by lunchtime tomorrow. Oh, and see to it that Miss Cross receives her due reward. She has certainly earned every penny."

"Yes, Mr. MacDowell," the secretary said, finding the company's chequebook.

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An hour later, Tracy locked herself into her office and put her plastic crate down on the floor inside the door. She was one of a group of small businesses who had banded together to buy an old dairy plant to save it from demolition a few years earlier; the buildings had been converted into an industrial estate with many small or smallish offices, and it had served her well ever since as a base for her supposedly paranormal goings-on.

She picked up the small pile of letters that had landed on her coir mat but found most to be junk mail, save for one that came from her younger brother whom she knew was always trying to squeeze her for a few pounds after their parents had cut him off after his suspended jail sentence for attempting to steal a car.

Her office wasn't large but she had made sure to make it nice and comfortable. In addition to a second-hand metal desk, a swivel-chair and a few filing cabinets, she had a really nice sofa bed she had bought with a special discount in IKEA, a small stove with the indispensable electric kettle, an even smaller fridge-ice box unit and finally an old-fashioned television set that one of her fellow business owners had hooked up to the new digital communal aerial in the hope of earning himself a date with the tall, picturesque Tracy - but when she had told him she would rather have a date with his sister, the subject had been quietly dropped.

Tracy had barely had time to put the kettle on before her fancy new phone rang. "You've reached Ghosthunters, Limited. This is Tracy Cross speaking," she said and sat down on her swivel-chair while holding the Samsung smartphone to her ear.

'Good afternoon, Miss Cross,' a male voice said at the other end of the line. 'My name is Sidney Thompson and I have seen your ad in one of our local newspapers.'

"Good afternoon, Mr. Thompson. Please go on," Tracy said and rummaged through the mess on her desk searching for a ball point pen and her notepad. When she finally found the items, she tried to doodle on the notepad only to find the pen as dried up as her love life - scrunching up her face, she chucked it into the bin where it landed on the junk mail.

'I rang to inquire about your availability. You see, I've recently bought an estate at a foreclosure auction, a historic roadside inn called The Crow & Peacock and I'm afraid the old privy in the courtyard and several of the upstairs rooms are... how can I put it... haunted.'

"Haunted? Mmmm," Tracy echoed, settling for the next best thing after a ball point pen, a pencil. She quickly jotted down the names of the roadside inn and the potential client, intent on looking them up on the Internet later.

'Haunted, indeed, Miss Cross. You're the expert on these matters, but I do believe the term that comes closest would be a poltergeist.'

"Mmmm!" Tracy said excitedly while she drew a fat box around the name of the roadside inn.

'Can we meet later today? How about eight o'clock at the other pub I own, the Queen's Arms? It's about five miles up the road from where you are, Miss Cross.'

"Oh..." Tracy said and looked at her wristwatch. "Uh... that shouldn't pose a problem, Mr. Thompson. I know the Queen's Arms. You can count on me... and Ghosthunters Limited!"

'Excellent, Miss Cross. See you then. Goodbye.'

"Goodbye, Mr. Thompson." Closing the connection, Tracy calmly put the smartphone on the desk and rose from her swivel-chair. She briefly studied the things she had written on the notepad before jumping a foot in the air and letting out a loud "Wo-hoooo!"

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At a couple of minutes to eight, Tracy swung open the heavy, wooden door of the Queen's Arms and entered the pub that was held almost exclusively in dark brown colours. After unzipping her blue windbreaker, she went up to the bar of the old-fashioned establishment and nodded a Good Evening to the barman, a retired postman who had worked with her father once upon the dawn of time.

"Evenin', Tracy," the elderly man said with a smile as he was polishing a glass. "What can I get you?"

"A ha' pint of bitter, please, Jack. Has Mr. Thompson arrived yet?"

"Yes, he's back in the office. D'ya want me to fetch him, luv?" Jack said and pointed his thumb over his shoulder.

"No, thank you. I'll just wait at a table."

"All right," the barman said and filled a half-pint glass with dark brown beer. Once it was full, he made sure the head was nice and equal before putting the glass on the counter. "That'll be two pounds fifty, please. Can I get you anything to eat? Perhaps a nice shepherd's pie?"

"No thanks, Jack. I had a curry earlier."

"Blasphemy! But I guess it's a sign of the times... which reminds me, how's your father these days?"

"Oh, he's just fine, thank you. He's practising his croquet swing."

"Good, good."

"Here's three quid, keep the change," Tracy said and handed Jack a handful of coins.

Grinning, the barman quickly counted the coins and pretended to tip his cap at his younger customer. "Thank ye very muchly," he said in an exaggerated, old-fashioned accent.

That seemed to be the cue for Sidney Thompson who came out from the back office putting on a tweed jacket that soon covered his white shirt and black tie. Sidney was in his early fifties, but the 1960s-era narrow-rim spectacles that were all the rage with self-made businessmen made him look older and more distinguished.

His eyebrows shot up when he realised how tall and sculpted Tracy Cross actually was - not only was she at least five inches taller than he was, but her turtleneck sweater did a very good job of defining her upper body.

"Oh, how do you do, Miss Cross. I'm Sidney Thompson, we spoke over the telephone," he said and put out his hand.

"How do you do, Mr. Thompson," Tracy said and shook it before taking her glass of bitter. "Shall we go over to a table?" she continued when it registered with her that the eyes of her potential client weren't exactly on her face.

"Yes, let's," Sidney said and looked up in a hurry. With a smile, he put his hand on the small of Tracy's back and led her over to a bench by a table.

Sitting down, Tracy placed a beer mat in the centre of the wooden table and put the glass on it. "So," she said as she found her notepad in the pocket of her windbreaker, "I've done some online research on The Crow & Peacock but I couldn't find much... only a few scattered reports of paranormal sightings, but they were quite old."

"Oh," Sidney said and adjusted his fashionable spectacles. "There's quite a bit more to it than that..."

"Fill me in, please," Tracy said with a smile. After taking a swig of her bitter, she clicked on a brand new ball point pen and held it ready to the notepad.

"Right... where do I start? Oh, I suppose I should start at the beginning. The Crow & Peacock was built in 1488. For centuries, it was a popular stop on the route to London, but it fell into disuse in the mid-nineteenth century when the railway line took over. Since then, it has been grossly neglected until earlier this year where I bought it at the foreclosure auction I mentioned. It's currently undergoing a costly restoration. My plan is to reopen it one day... as I'm sure you know, our common history is quite popular these days, so..."

"I see," Tracy said, thinking how odd it was to have two jobs on the same day that both had something to do with the railway.

"Well," Sidney continued and adjusted his glasses again. "I believe there are two ghosts. At least. One seems to be... uh, haunting the old privy that is still in the courtyard... as outrageous as that may sound... and the other has been

seen on the upper floor of the inn itself. Furniture was moved across the floors, worklights were toppled over, a woman was heard crying and screaming, and there was even an apparition on the stairs, wearing a white robe and holding a candlestick," he said in a voice that trailed off when he thought about the strange occurrences.

"By yourself?"

"Sorry?" Sidney said and snapped back to reality.

"Have you encountered the spectres yourself?"

"No, I haven't, Miss Cross. I've... well, to be perfectly honest, I haven't found the courage to go there at night, but what I told you was reported to me by a very reliable employee who was forced to spend the night there because his car wouldn't start. Poor fellow... the doctors had him committed to a mental hospital... he couldn't stop talking about how one of the ghosts had wanted to tell him stories."

"I beg your pardon?" Tracy said, stopping between two letters on the notepad.

"His words," Sidney Thompson said with a shrug.

Scrunching up her face, Tracy took a long swig from the bitter. *'What a load of sh... One of the ghosts wanted to tell him stories? Another ghost using the privy? Prob'ly just a couple of yobs who wanted to give him the fright of his life... all in all, this is just my kind of gig.'*

Clearing her throat, she put down the glass and dabbed a bit of foam off her upper lip with a napkin. "Mr. Thompson, this sounds like it could be a perilous assignment. I'm afraid I need to ask for danger money."

"That's understandable, Miss Cross. I'm willing to stretch to three hundred pounds."

Tracy puckered up her lips and blinked several times - she had been on the brink of asking for a hundred and fifty. "We have a deal, Mr. Thompson," she said and reached across the table. "I need a day or so to calibrate my instruments. After all, this needs to be spot on," she continued, narrowing her eyes and squaring her jaw to emphasise her expertise.

Sidney Thompson nodded solemnly and shook Tracy's hand. "I couldn't agree more, Miss Cross."

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II.

Three days later.

Tracy had used the time between getting the assignment and arriving at The Crow & Peacock to shop for various camping equipment. Now, she was the proud owner of a stainless steel thermos, a brass lantern that was charged by turning a crank, an insulated jogging suit - black, with a hoodie and two narrow white stripes down each arm and trouser leg - lined slippers to stay warm at the witching hour, and last but not least, an LED lamp she could wrap around her head so she could have her hands free to take notes in her notepad.

With such an important and large-scale job, she had decided to go for the full Monty and really make it look like she knew what she was doing. "And for three hundred quid, I'd do the bleedin' limbo in a gold tutu and bowling shoes..." she mumbled to herself as she turned her Astra off the road and into The Crow & Peacock's gravelly carpark.

In the rapidly fading light of the day, The Crow & Peacock turned out to be quite foreboding; pulled back slightly from the road, it was two hundred feet long and two stories tall. On the ground floor, it had four larger windows on either side of a wide, central entrance, and the upper floor had five smaller windows on either side of an even narrower porthole that Tracy surmised provided the light for the stairwell.

Looking beyond the old inn's sorry state of disrepair, Tracy could easily imagine how it had once been the pearl of the entire riding, though now - as expected for a building that had been neglected for a century and a half - it looked quite sad, with a drooping roof, rotten windowsills everywhere and plenty of chipped paint.

She was still alone so she decided to go on a little tour. Stepping away from her car, she shuffled across the gravelly carpark and around the inn until she reached an inner courtyard that had been cobbled with large, uneven stones. Walking into the courtyard, she turned on her LED lamp and did a slow turn to take in all the sights.

The inn was in an L-shape where the short wing seemed to have been a utility or storage shed. The eaves over the courtyard were in an even worse shape than the main roof and looked quite dangerous in places. On the back of the inn, the windows on the upper floor were even smaller than they were on the front, though there were still five panes on either side of the stairwell.

The allegedly haunted privy was in a very sorry state, with the door - complete with a heart-shaped cut-out - hanging solely on the top hinge. There were two neatly arranged piles of modern construction material next to the privy, no doubt a legacy of the restoration, but beyond those items, the inner courtyard felt like it hadn't seen a living soul since the day The Crow & Peacock had closed for business, a theory backed up by the mildewy smell that hung in the air underneath the decrepit eaves.

A car door closing made Tracy snap out of her exploration and head back to the car park at the front of the building.

Unseen by Tracy, a ghostly blue orb flickered into existence on the upper floor of the inn. Pulsating, the orb moved parallel with her down a hallway until it reached the outer wall of the building that it apparently couldn't penetrate.

"Good evening, Mr. Thompson. I'm all ready to reach out to whomever is in there," Tracy said and put out her hand.

As Sidney Thompson shook it, he furrowed his brow at Tracy's jogging outfit. "Are you planning on staying the night, Miss Cross?"

"Yes. The way I see it, if the ghosts have been in there for centuries, they may consider it their rightful home by now. Perhaps I'll need to persuade them to move on. It could take some time," Tracy said, showing an appropriate amount of sincerity.

"Oh... right. You're certainly a brave, brave woman, Miss Cross," Sidney said and dabbed his suddenly clammy brow with a handkerchief. "Well. It's ten to ten... I feel we should proceed so you'll have time to do... uh, whatever it is you need to do before the clock strikes midnight. Shall we?"

"Let's," Tracy said with a grin as she went over to her Astra to get the crate with her props.

Ten minutes later, Tracy put down the crate on a modern nightstand in the room Sidney Thompson's employee had chosen to spend the night in when his car had caused him problems, the centre one of the five at the left side of the stairwell.

The room was only sparsely furnished, but since Tracy hadn't expected the Ritz, the nightstand and the army-style camp-bed would do just fine. A very old wooden table with an even older chair had been placed at the other side of the room, but they appeared so frail she wasn't sure they could survive even being looked at, much less used.

With Sidney standing right next to her, she realised she had to skip the cordless pin microphone for once, and went straight for the electronic gizmos, quickly putting the clustered neutron scanner and the spectral analyser on the bed and turning them on.

The digital readout on the neutron scanner suddenly started playing the fandango; the little display flashed all sorts of gibberish and changed between positive and negative numbers faster than Tracy could furrow her brow and let out a mumbled "Bloomin' hell..."

She tapped her knuckles on it but the electronic equipment didn't seem to want to come back to normal. '*Sod that, it cost me fifteen quid at a flea market... what a time to get a ghost in the works,*' she thought and glanced over at Sidney, but he hadn't noticed the peculiarities. Sighing, she decided to leave the faulty instrument be and get on with the show.

She took the antique leather drum and the small club and held up the items for her employer to see. "Mr. Thompson, don't try this at home without supervision from a licensed paranormal investigator. Supernatural beings aren't necessarily friendly... it's best to leave it to the professionals," she said solemnly, earning herself a nervous nod.

Side-stepping twice to the left to stand at the centre of the room, Tracy held up the antique drum and struck it with the club to create a hollow dong; first once, then again, then a pause and then twice in rapid succession. After a few seconds, she repeated the sequence.

While she performed the sacred ritual, she remembered to perform the little dance, moving one step sideways for one bang of the drum, and one step back for two bangs of the drum.

Sidney stared wide-eyed at the odd sight of a tall, fully grown woman banging on a drum and dancing about, but when he locked eyes with her, she offered him a reassuring wink.

Tracy's efforts suddenly bore fruit and she whipped her head around and zoomed in on a spot just above the old table. "There... there's an apparition of a young boy right there," she whispered, banging the drum faster and faster until she stopped with a loud *Dong!* and froze in place. "He's by the wall. Do you see him?"

"N- n- n- no!" Sidney stuttered, holding his handkerchief to his mouth and staring at the empty space beyond the wooden table.

"Yoric! I see you! I feel you!" Tracy said in a booming voice. "I'm here to set you free from your eternal prison!" - *Dong!* - "Yoric!" - *Dong!* - "You are free to leave! You stayed in the room like your mother said you should!" - *Dong!* - "But now it's time to leave... to go home!" - *Dong!*

Behind the two people, an orb of pale blue energy became visible above the camp-bed which sent the electronic instruments into a frenzy. Within a second, the ghostly head of a young woman appeared through the wall; no older than seventeen, the ghost assumed a rather puzzled expression at the strange goings-on in the room, furrowing her brow which made her fair hair fall down around her face. A pair of hands appeared through the wall to casually arrange her hair back behind her ears.

The curious behaviour of her female guest seemed to intrigue the ghost, and she moved a bit toward the hallway to get a better view of what the two mortals were looking at - which proved to be nothing at all.

The ghostly young girl narrowed her eyes and tapped a tendril against the tip of her nose. Shaking her head in confusion, she pulled back through the wall.

Tracy paused for a few seconds to heighten the tension before she deployed her secret weapon, her ventriloquistic skills, to create a groan that seemed to come from the wall she and Sidney were looking at. The groan grew into a tormented, ghostly wail that seemed to bounce around inside the smallish room before it slowly faded away into nothing.

By the time poor Yoric's ethereal cries had ceased, Sidney was whiter than a sheet and he clung to the doorjamb to keep himself upright.

Tracy let out a highly dramatic sigh and drew the sign of the cross in mid-air. "It's done," she said in a strained voice. "Yoric has gone home. He's with his mother now."

"Wh- w- wh- who was h- h- he?"

"I honestly can't say, Mr. Thompson," Tracy said and crouched down next to the bed to check her instruments. "His former name was carried to me on a psychic wave, but he was so terrified we couldn't communicate properly. Poor child. I could sense that he had been here for a long, long time."

"Y- yes... h- he... was terrified... I'm t- terrified right n- now," Sidney said and wiped his face again.

"Oh, don't be alarmed, Mr. Thompson. Yoric is in a much bet-"

A deep, slow sigh suddenly ran through the room, causing both Sidney and Tracy to shut up and bolt upright. The sigh was followed by a groan and several clicking sounds that seemed to come from another part of the inn.

"I, uh... I... ummm..." Tracy said and rubbed her chin. She glanced down at the clustered neutron scanner and the spectral analyser and saw to her great confusion that both instruments had sprung to life and were registering something she had no idea what meant.

"We. Are. Not. Alone," Sidney Thompson whispered hoarsely through clenched teeth. He hurriedly looked around the room and out into the hallway, but he couldn't see anything untoward.

Tracy licked her lips a couple of times but kept quiet.

Neither of the creepy sounds returned, but it was clear that Mr. Thompson was eager to get out while he still could. "Miss Cross, ah, I, ah... I'm willing to add another hundred pounds to your wages if you can rid The Crow & Peacock of these... these... ghouls. Please say yes!"

"Uh, yes. Yes, I'll... yes," Tracy said, nodding enthusiastically.

"Oh God, thank you- See you at seven o'clock tomorrow morning! Goodbye!" Sidney said and tore out of the room.

"Huh..." Tracy said, walking over to the doorway to look after the fleeing man. "All right. That's four hundred quid for spending the night here... I can do that. Even I could hear that it was only the roof creaking from the evening chill... easiest money I'll ever make," she mumbled under her breath.

As Tracy turned around and sat down on the camp-bed to take off her boots and put on her lined slippers, the ghostly young girl appeared in the upper corner of the ceiling.

Briefly observing her dark-haired guest, she let out a silent, gleeful snicker and pulled back into the wall.

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The bells in the nearby church tower struck midnight just as Tracy won a round in the 1980s music quiz game app she had for her Samsung. Looking up, she felt a brief shiver run down her spine, but she shrugged it off and resumed playing.

Her concentration suffered from the arrival of the witching hour and she gradually lost interest in the game. After closing the app and putting the phone away, she became antsy and decided to have a cup of tea.

Holding the cup with the steaming liquid in one hand, she took her brass lantern in the other and ventured into the hallway. Everything appeared quiet, though the old building did offer the occasional creak and groan as it cooled off after spending most of the day under the rays of the late summer sun.

A few more creaks and groans were heard, but Tracy didn't think much of it. By the time she had casually strolled to the far end of the hallway, she realised the creaks were rhythmical and rather insistent. Spinning around, she stared down the dark corridor with trembling hands and her heart thumping in her throat.

The noises gradually grew less and more distant, and Tracy let out a sigh of relief. "It's all in the mind, Tracy... it's all in the mind," she mumbled as she took a sip of tea to calm her nerves.

Light and movement in the courtyard made her move over to one of the decayed windows to see what was going on. What she saw made the sip of tea grow to the size of the Atlantic Ocean in her mouth, and it took all she had to gulp it down without choking on it.

A full-bodied apparition in the shape of a traditional White Lady came out of the storage shed and silently crossed the courtyard headed for the stairwell. The creaks and groans returned and were joined by the sounds of rattling chains, sighs and what appeared to be distant chanting.

Tracy's eyes grew wider and wider as she waited for the ghost to make it to the top of the stairwell. There had been plenty of time for her to flee, but her lined slippers were glued to the wooden floor, and no matter how hard she tried to coax her legs into moving, they simply wouldn't obey.

The ghost finally appeared at the upper landing. Turning towards Tracy, it slid closer and closer to her, hovering a foot above the floor and moving completely silently. It had a petite, vaguely female form, though the hooded robe that covered it from top to toe obscured nearly all of its features apart from the jaw. Its right hand was visible and holding a candlestick with a burning candle, but the left hand and the legs were hidden underneath the robe.

"Ho... ly... hell..." Tracy stammered, staring at the ghost with wide, spooked eyes.

As Tracy was watching, the apparition lost its figure and morphed into an orb of pale blue light that hovered six feet off the floor. The orb fluctuated between a hollow and a solid state, but the solid state eventually took over completely. Flashing brightly, the orb suddenly raced towards Tracy but stopped mere inches from her face.

Frozen stiff with terror, the blood rushed from Tracy's head and she was on the brink of passing out when the orb moved back slightly and began to pulsate.

A couple of seconds later, the orb turned into a figure of a toddler in tattered clothes who was playing with something unseen, then it morphed into a slightly older girl who had her hands on her back to get some relief from the weight of her very pregnant belly, and finally it turned into a girl in her late teens wearing a breezy dress, who danced around and around in a circle to a silent beat.

Tracy's hands trembled so much that her tea had long since parted company from the cup and was distributed evenly over the floor and her new jogging suit. Her eyes ached from not blinking for the entire duration of the ghostly encounter, but she didn't dare move a muscle in case matters got worse.

The apparition stopped dancing and just stood there, staring in puzzlement at the supposed ghost hunter like it was wondering why Tracy didn't join her.

A sudden noise behind the young ghost made her jump and hurriedly look over her shoulder. When she turned back to Tracy, she had a dark look of fear on her fair face.

The look sent a whole ocean of shivers down Tracy's spine and her teeth began to chatter in her mouth.

The ghost of the young woman dissolved in a flash which left the hallway in complete darkness save for the brass lantern that Tracy was clutching hard, but even that had faded quite severely from not being cranked regularly.

Somewhere in the distance, a series of groans were heard, but unlike those created by the young girl, the new ones were deeper and angrier. Down in the courtyard, a mature female voice cried for help in a muffled, yet insistent manner. Another cry for help was heard, followed by angry, heartfelt sobbing. After a few seconds, the same female voice cursed violently but the cursing soon trailed off into mere echoes.

Tracy's breath came in hard, staccato bursts, and she had clutched the stainless steel cup so hard it had buckled. Realising she needed to get out of The Crow & Peacock before God knows what else could come at her - like a pack of devil dogs with burning eyes, she thought morbidly - she staggered down the hallway and into her own room.

She didn't bother to pack any of the larger items, but she sent the lined slippers flying and jumped into her boots without tying the laces. Getting up from the bed in a hurry, she clenched her jaw to stop her teeth from chattering, but when the silence brought an infernal mix of groans and sighs from the stairwell, she wished she hadn't.

"You bloody fool, you had to bite off more than you could chew," Tracy said under her breath as she hurried out of the room and into the hallway - but a single step beyond the door, she thumped head-first into a presence that felt as hard as a brick wall.

"Ooof!" Tracy cried and staggered backwards with a hand across her eyes. Her face felt like she had tried to headbutt a solid wall and she rubbed her brow furiously to get an odd, numb feeling to go away.

She didn't even have time to let out a curse before she felt a pair of strong hands on her shoulders that pushed her backwards into the room she had only just vacated. The pressure increased until the unseen force delivered a push that made her stagger back and trip over her own feet.

Landing on her rear with a rattling bump, she cried out and shielded her head with her arms, but the ghostly presence that had pushed her moved away and flew up against the ceiling where it materialised with a long, angry groan.

Tracy could hardly believe what she was seeing when the dark shadow turned into a female form with arms and legs that were horribly twisted, deep brown eyes that shone brightly with insanity, and a wild mane that seemed to flow freely around the ghostly head.

A series of groans and tormented sighs emanated from the new apparition that kept hovering in the air without doing anything. Suddenly, some of Tracy's things began to move on their own: the thermos, the crate, the smartphone and even the discarded slippers began to tremble and then slide back and forth.

Without warning, the items were raised into the air and flung at Tracy with devastating force. The soft slippers couldn't do much harm, but the plastic crate slammed into her legs with such force the amplifier-speaker unit fell out and hit the floor with a loud bump. Immediately following that, the stainless steel thermos slammed into Tracy's upper chest, causing her to cry out in pain and clutch her collarbone.

She knew she had to get up to stay alive, but she found herself pinned down by the ghostly forces. Her smartphone came out of nowhere and hit her across her right cheekbone before disappearing into the darkness, drawing blood and numbing that side of her face.

Struggling to get up, she could hear an insane cackle emanating from the spectre, but all of a sudden, it seemed to lose interest in her, and the pressure was released from her shoulders.

Tracy used the respite to jump up, but just when she had made it to her feet, the spectre zeroed in on her and gave her a hard shove in her back which sent her flying towards the camp-bed.

Shrieking, she managed at the very last moment to twist her body to prevent landing on top of the electronic instruments, but it meant that she fell rather ungracefully on her right shoulder that was already tender from being hit by the thermos.

Tracy let out a groan that segued into a brief cry for help as she careened over the side of the camp-bed and crash landed head-first down into the gap between the bed and the wall it was next to.

Going down, her legs snagged on the mattress which pulled that and both electronic instruments after her - she and the items eventually ended up in an unruly heap on the dusty floor. Working on sheer adrenaline, she grappled for the mattress and succeeded in pulling it over her for protection.

Tracy stared at the underside of the mattress in wide-eyed horror. She was panting so hard she could nearly taste blood, and every part of her body hurt - especially her collarbone and her cheek - but she was determined to stay well out of sight of the malicious being for as long as she could.

She could still hear the angry spectre cackling insanely, but the awful noise gradually grew fainter until it disappeared completely.

As the ghost went back to the dimension it had come from, the temperature and the humidity in the room fell to bearable levels, almost like at the end of a thunderstorm, and Tracy began to breathe more easily.

The environment down on the dusty floor wasn't exactly the most inviting she had ever experienced, but considering the alternative, the dusty floor won out handsomely and she decided to stay under the mattress until dawn.

"Dear Lord above... what did I get myself into...?" she croaked, feeling an ice cold shiver trickle down her body as the adrenaline slowly left her system.

*

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III.

Rest was a long time coming for Tracy, pinned down as she was in a highly uncomfortable position between the dusty mattress and the even dustier floor. When sleep finally did claim her, it was a fitful one: all her dreams were of fair-haired young women, dancing around and around in circles while their breezy dresses fluttered out to reveal they weren't wearing anything underneath.

The odd images woke her up with a jerk and she spent several long seconds trying to work out where she was. When she realised she was still at The Crow & Peacock looking at the underside of the mattress, she let out a groan and began to shuffle around.

During her sleep, a persistent itch had developed on her left calf, but no matter how she tried to rub her leg against the floor, it wouldn't go away.

She held her breath to listen for any ghostly sounds but found the old building completely quiet. '*Quiet as the grave,*' she thought and sat up, rolling her eyes at the unfortunate analogy.

The split second she discovered the cause of the itch, she rued the decision of not staying under the mattress until dawn: the strange sensations in her left leg had been caused by the first ghost, the young woman, who was draped over her legs and used the left one as her pillow.

"Fa... fa... gah!" Tracy cried and scrambled to get to her feet. As she jerked her legs back from the ghost, her boots didn't follow - she hadn't had time to tie the laces when she had put them on - and they fell harmlessly to the floor.

She quickly cleared the bed, but before she could get to the door, the young ghost swept over there and stood in front of it with her arms held out towards Tracy.

'Milady, I mean you no harm,' Tracy heard a crystal clear voice say in her head.

"I'm hallucinating! Ha, ha... HA, I'm hallucinating!" Tracy said and began to pull her hair, tearing it free of the neat - if dusty - ponytail. Her eyes were as wide as the second, nasty ghost's had been, and they were shining just as brightly with the beginnings of insanity as well.

She hurriedly ran back to the window to see if she could use it to make her escape, but the frame had long since jammed shut. "Bloody hell," she growled, slamming her fist down onto the windowsill.

'Please do not be afeared... I would never harm you, Milady,' the crystal clear voice said, and Tracy turned around slowly to take a better look at the apparition.

The ghost had assumed the last of the shapes it had been in when Tracy had spotted it earlier in the hallway - that of a late teen, with a loose, white dress and fair hair. The ghost seemed quite sincere with a face that was open, friendly and even pretty, if terribly sad.

Despite the bizarre situation, Tracy could sense no immediate danger coming from the spectre, but her heart was still thumping hard in her chest and every single instinct within her was screaming in her ear that she should run away now!

'Elsbeth of Hull am I... may I ask your name, Milady?'

Tracy's throat tied itself into a knot and she couldn't get a word past her lips. With a look of fear etched on her face, she crept to her right to get back to the safety of the mattress - but then she remembered it wasn't enough to stop the young ghost from finding her.

'Milady, I... I beg you... I need your help!' the apparition said and held her ghostly hands to her heart.

The idea of a full-bodied, shape-shifting, free-floating, pale blue spectre asking for her help made an insane laughter bubble up from Tracy's chest.

At first, she was able to contain it by slapping her hands over her mouth, but it soon broke free, ending in a wild, unbridled belly laugh that felt so loud in the quiet room that even the ghost was startled. "You need my help? You... need... my... help...? Ha! HA HA HA! Ha! This is madness... it's worse than madness, it's... it's... insanity! It's insane! I'm insane-sane- sane, I'm so insane-sane-sane... HA HA!" Tracy said, releasing all the pent-up tension and fear that she'd had bottled up inside her since the first of the sightings in the hallway by performing an impromptu jig.

Elspeth of Hull was taken aback by the rampant madness of her female guest and started floating back and forth at the door while staring wide-eyed at the tall, dark-haired woman dancing about and letting out streams of insane ramblings.

'Milady, will you please calm down? I really do need your help!'

Tracy stopped dancing and leaned forward to put her hands on her knees. Panting hard, she eventually shrugged and nodded at the ghost. "Right, right. Why not? I'm headed for the loony bin anyway so I might as well jump into the straitjacket with wide open arms!"

Elspeth furrowed her brow and looked like she didn't understand a word of what her guest had said. *'I beg your pardon?'*

"I'm Tracy Cross of Huddersfield. Enchanted to meet you, my fair lady. How do you do?" Tracy said with a broad, slightly insane, smile.

'Uh...' Elspeth said and scratched her cheek. *'Good day, Milady.'*

"Right... what do you need my help for?" Tracy said and sat down on the dusty floor with crossed legs. "Wash the stairs? Vacuum the curtains? Polish the silverware? I'm your maid for all seasons!" she continued, grinning insanely.

'I... no. None of those things, Milady,' Elspeth said and floated over to the old table at the other side of the room. With a sigh, she sat down on the edge and started pulsating.

"Oh, and you don't have to call me Milady. I'm not a lady. I'm just Tracy," Tracy said and waved cheerily at the ghost.

'You are wearing men's attire... are you a scoundrel? A highwayman?'

"Oh, no, these are actually women's jogging trousers. The button's on the left side... oh-right, there's no button as such, ha ha, there's an elastic band, but the button would have been on the left right here," Tracy said and tapped her index finger against her waist where the brass button would have been. "And a scam artist is what I am. A rip-off merchant!"

'Oh... I am... not entirely sure what that is...' Elspeth said and furrowed her brow again.

"It's a boring tale that you don't need to know anything about. How long have you been here, Elspeth?"

'I cannot say for sure. Many, many years, I think.'

"Must be if you don't know what a jogging suit is..." Tracy mumbled, picking at a loose thread on her right pocket.

'Milady?'

"Nothing. What was it you wanted my help for?"

'Well... would you mind if I told you my story first?' Elspeth said with a cute look on her ethereal face. *'I have not had a chance to tell my story to anyone for a very long time. The last person did not appreciate it and left screaming before I could utter but a single line...'*

Tracy clapped her hands down on her knees and took a deep breath. Letting it out slowly, she sensed that she didn't have anything to fear from the young woman, though she obviously couldn't know for sure - after all, despite her chosen profession, holding nocturnal conversations with ghosts wasn't a common occurrence. *'If I get out of this alive, I think I'll write a book... on the other hand, I'd probably need to self-publish it,'* she thought, chuckling at the surreal situation.

"All right," Tracy said and got up from the floor, "but my bum will go numb if I sit down there for too long so I think I'll make the camp-bed first. Okay?"

'Uh... now that I do understand,' Elspeth said with a dimension-warping snicker that seemed to echo around the room.

With the mattress back on top of the bed, Tracy placed her rear end on the soft cushion and crossed her legs. "You may continue," she said with a flamboyant and slightly mad wave.

'In the grand days of King Henry, I-'

"Which Henry?"

'I'm sorry?'

"Which King Henry? If you know which of 'em he was, we can work out how long you've been here," Tracy said and nodded vigorously.

'Oh... I cannot remem- oh yes, it was Henry the Eighth! Does that help?'

"Henry... the Eighth...?" Tracy said and stared at the ghost with a shocked look on her face. "That means... that means you've been here... uh... uh... uh... for nearly five hundred years! Sweet mother of God, you've been haunting The Crow & Peacock for five centuries!?"

'Time really has no meaning for me so I suppose it is true... may I go on?'

"Oh, please do," Tracy said quietly, still digesting the shocking fact of how long Elspeth had spent between the narrow, leaning walls.

'Thank you, Milady,' Elspeth said and seemed to get comfortable on the table. *'I was one of the mistresses of the local Count, and for a while, I lived a rich, well-rewarded life. One day, my master's attentions brought forth a child to my womb... but I was a mere child myself, barely seven'een, so my master sent me away and left me to endure the hardships of pregnancy on my own.'*

"Cor, that was bloomin' rude!"

'Is it no longer such, Tracy?'

"In some places, I suppose it is... but not here. Now, the fathers are stuck with their children. I know that from my brother who had a little accident with a girl a few years ago. They split up but he's still paying child support."

'Some things never change...'

Tracy could only chuckle at that - some things did indeed never change. "Go on," she said with a nod.

'I worked as a housemaid for another family, but they did not want me either by the time I was showing. I wandered from village to village in search of shelter, but I was not welcome anywhere as my reputation had preceded me and everyone knew I bore a bastard child. Alas, the night I rested here at The Crow & Peacock, I became gravely ill from the fever and a poisoning of my blood. Despite the best efforts of a local physician and his leeches, I was beyond help and eventually died.'

"Oh, I'm so sorry to hear that, Elspeth. That hasn't changed much either. Pregnancies can still be very dangerous for mothers and their children..."

Elspeth nodded and kept silent for a little while. The diffuse edges of her being started to pulsate, but she recovered and continued her story: *'The poor boy I had carried within me and I were on our way to heaven... or so I thought. Upon my dying moment, I left my mortal shell and watched how it withered and died in a sea of blood. I was fully prepared to travel to the light but the angels never came for me. Then... then two men simply took my body and threw my unborn child and I down an old, dry well in the courtyard. Gone were we... stayed behind did I.'*

"That's why you're a ghost," Tracy whispered, wiping her suddenly misty eyes on the sleeve of her black jogging suit. "Breaks my heart to hear that, but... but I'm glad you told me. Thank you."

'Tis only the third time since I came that I have been able to tell my story in full... I have tried, but...' Elspeth shrugged and let out a deep sigh that seemed to come from all sides at once. *'But people will not listen to someone like me...'*

"Oh... I'm the third? Who were the other two?"

'The first was a young girl. That was shortly after my death... the other was much, much later. A lady. I believe she referred to herself as a medium. Of what I am not sure...'

"That means she was trying to make people believe she could span the worlds... well... uh, if you spoke with her, I suppose she actually could," Tracy said and scratched her neck.

'What does a scam artist do, Tracy? Can you span the worlds, too?'

Tracy chuckled and shook her head slowly. What could she say? That she made a living from ripping off businessmen and -women who believed in the ridiculous dance with the leather drum and her skills as a ventriloquist? "No, I... well, I trick people into giving me money for nothing."

'By dancing and beating your drum... and speaking in tongues? Are you like a court jester?'

"A court- Ha! Yes, that's me!" Tracy said and let out a loud laugh. "I'm a bloody court jester, though the people I perform for take it very, very seriously."

'Can you juggle and breathe fire? I briefly travelled with a jester who tried to teach me to juggle... alas, I was too pregnant at the time and could not catch the balls,' Elspeth said excitedly, floating nearer to the camp-bed.

"No, I can't, I'm afraid. I only juggle my mortgages, ha ha."

'Oh...' Elspeth said and furrowed her brow all over again. *'I do not understand... never mind,'* she mumbled.

Though Tracy felt the situation was already surreal bordering on the grotesque, she remembered that before Elspeth started telling her story, she had asked for Tracy's help with something - but how could a living being help a ghost?

"Um, Elspeth, what was it you needed my help f-"

'Oh! Nearly forget, did I!' Elspeth said and gleefully clapped her hands. *'The other ghost. I want you to help me rid her from my home. I cannot stand her! She is such an evil being... she torments me night after night...'*

Staring wide-eyed and slack-jawed at her ghostly companion, it suddenly dawned on Tracy that reality as she knew it had ceased and that she was stuck in someone's wicked fantasy world - that would be the only logical explanation for the crazy goings-on at The Crow & Peacock. "Rid her from your home? You want me to help you get rid of her?" she said, pointing at herself, back at the ghost and finally at the door to the hallway.

'Y-'

"Her... the angry poltergeist who can throw things across the room... who can throw *me* across the room?!" - As she spoke the sentence, Tracy's voice fell to a whisper out of fear the apparition with the insane eyes would hear her and return for round two.

Elspeth opened her ghostly mouth but nary a sigh came out. After a little while she shrugged and said: 'Yes.'

"Sod it... that's what I thought you said," Tracy said flatly and buried her face in her hands.

'She came much, much later... centuries later,' Elspeth said and floated closer to Tracy. *'Her name was Leonora Griffith and she was like this in life, too. She was the wife of a merchant, one who treated their servants like animals. She and her husband came on a carriage a stormy night searching for shelter, but stayed for several days. I observed her closely because I could feel she was evil. I tried to frighten her into going away, but I could not...'*

"Did you try the White Lady shape? The one you showed me... with the candlestick?"

'Oh, yes.'

"Bloody hell, she must've been a cold fish..."

'I do not underst-... never mind. One night, she said to me that she was afeared of no man, woman nor creature. She was right. I tried all I knew, but she was beyond me.'

"Well, something must have happened to her since she's still here...?"

'On the third day, two of their footmen banded together and slew her. Bludgeoned her to death with a blacksmith's hammer... in the outhouse...' - the last part of the statement was delivered with an ethereal snicker that bounded around the room.

"Oh... that explains why Mr. Thompson said the loo was haunted. Huh," Tracy said and rubbed her chin.

'Alas, my new-found peace did not last long. A mere two nights later, Leonora returned in a most dreadful mood. She frightened her two slayers to madness and soon came after me for rejoicing in her departure...'

"Well..."

'But, Tracy, she has a secret,' Elspeth said conspiratorially, *'one little secret that I have been able to discover. I feel we should be able to use it to rid her from my wonderful home.'*

"Ghosts with secrets... what's the world coming to...? What is it, Elspeth?"

'She told me she was not afeared of man, woman nor creature... but over the years, I have discovered that she is... that she is...' - it was clear by the ecstatic look on Elspeth's ghostly face that she could hardly contain her giddiness at finally seeing a possibility to get one over her eternal opponent.

"What? What, Elspeth?" Tracy said and rose from the bed.

Just as Elspeth opened her mouth to continue, she was transformed into the orb of energy she had been earlier. She fluctuated between a hollow and a solid state, but unlike the previous time, the hollow state won out and the orb began to tear around the room, going at a frenzied pace that threatened to blow the old room completely apart.

"Elspeth! What happened to you!?! Calm down! Calm down, you're making me bloomin' dizzy here!" Tracy said, whipping her head and body around to follow the progress of the orb - and to stay away from it in case a collision between the worldly and the otherworldly planes were bad for both.

The orb thumped into the outer wall but bounced off it and took off in another direction. The door proved less troublesome, but the orb was soon back inside the room and zoomed around in ever-decreasing circles.

'Pot!' an ethereal voice said from somewhere in the room. *'Pot!'*

"Pot? Pot what? Oh, this is bleedin' insane... insane!"

'Pot!'

"Elspeth! You're not making any sense! Not that any of this is making sense..."

'Pot!'

"The evil poltergeist is afraid of pot? How would it even know what pot is?" Tracy said and jumped back to clear the orb as it suddenly shot down towards the floor and disappeared through it.

When it finally came back up, the two beings were too close to avoid a collision.

The orb blasted in through Tracy's stomach and out her back faster than she had time to shriek. "Ooooooh! That bloody tickles!" she cried, rubbing her tummy that had suddenly turned numb.

Behind Tracy, Elspeth bounced off the outer wall again and materialised in a diffuse cloud of pale blue energy that raced through all the shapes she had used over the years of confinement - the toddler, the pregnant young girl, the White Lady and finally her own shape, that of the fair maiden.

'Chamber pot!' she said triumphantly, stretching out her arms like she wanted to pull Tracy into an embrace.

Tracy's face fell. Then her eyes narrowed into dark blue slits. Then she reached up and plucked an eyebrow just to see if she was hallucinating the whole thing after all. "Chamber pot...?" she said flatly. "Leonora the evil poltergeist is afraid of chamber pots...?"

' 'Tis true, 'tis true, Milady! Forget not, she died in the outhouse!'

"Uh-huh... well, that was a crappy way to go, but..."

'If we can only capture her in a chamber pot we're rid of her!'

"Uh-huh?"

'And!' Elspeth said and did a complete flip in mid-air, 'and I know where there is a chamber pot we can use. It even has a lid so she cannot escape again!'

"Uh-huh... a bleedin' ancient chamber pot with a bleedin' lid," Tracy said and rubbed her brow. Turning around, she took her boots and began to put them on. "I knew I should have stayed at home and watched the Emmerdale omnibus... all right... but this chamber pot had better be empty... it had better be empty, Elspeth!"

'I am sure it is, Tracy,' Elspeth said with an angelic look on her ethereal face.

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IV.

'Gah! It's not empty! GAAH!' Tracy shrieked from inside the next room down the hall. *'Three hundred years old shite! Gaaah!'*

The alleged paranormal investigator inched backwards out of the room holding a decorated porcelain chamber pot as far away from her as she could. When she came out into the hallway, the LED lamp that she had wrapped around her head illuminated her discovery with startling - and very much unwanted - clarity. "Bloody hell, can it get any grosser?" she croaked, narrowing her eyes at the sight.

'I found the lid!' Elspeth said from inside the room. The apparition effortlessly swooshed through the wall and came out to float in front of Tracy. *'It has fallen into a crack in the floor. I cannot get it for you...'*

Tracy sighed and crouched down to deposit the chamber pot on the floor of the hallway. "At least it's lost the smell... but shite is shite," she mumbled as she stepped back into the room to search for the lid.

With the light from the LED lamp, it didn't take long for Tracy to find the lid, and the unlikely partners were soon on their way down the hall. "Elspeth... where are we actually going with this bleedin' thing?" Tracy whispered, taking great care in not tripping over any loose floorboards.

'Into the courtyard.'

"Where we're going to do... what, exactly?"

'That part of the plan has not come to me yet, but I was always a quick thinker so I am sure something will present itself when the need arises,' Elspeth said with a smile.

Tracy chose not to answer. Instead, she and her ghostly companion turned the corner in the hallway and began to descend the stairs. The central part of The Crow & Peacock had already been restored so at least the steps were in good shape, something Tracy was grateful for as she held out the porcelain chamber pot as far as she could reach.

Of course, the stairwell was pitch black so the first step Tracy took was nearly into thin air despite the best efforts of her LED lamp, but she managed to keep her toxic load steady.

Suddenly, they heard a series of groans in the distance, most likely originating from the courtyard they were headed for.

'*Tis her!*' Elspeth said and clutched her head. '*Tis Leonora! She has come!*'

"Sod that... we're not ready for her yet... hell, can it get any worse...?"

The answer to that question was a deep, angry moan that floated up the stairwell, immediately followed by a muffled cry for help.

Tracy felt an ice cold shiver run down her back, not only because she was dreading the prospect of once again squaring off against the malicious spectre, but because of the pain and suffering that was carried on the centuries-old voice.

Another cry for help drifted up towards them, quickly followed by heartfelt sobbing and sudden, violent cursing.

"I made fun of it before, but... God, it must have been a horrible way to die," Tracy mumbled as she stepped onto the central landing and turned around to walk down the final flight of stairs. "Having your head bashed in with a hammer... no wonder she likes throwing things around..."

The cursing stopped abruptly and trailed off into faint echoes. With deafening silence filling the stairwell, Elspeth floated in front of Tracy which stopped her quite effectively.

'*She is here. Now,*' the ghost of the young woman whispered with a terrified look on her pale face. Like before, she made a sudden jump at a sound only she was able to hear, but this time, she stayed, even if it did look like it took all her strength to do so.

Tracy clenched her teeth and strained her senses to possibly pick up the scent of the evil Leonora before she could reach her. She took another slow step down the stairs, but her knees were knocking so hard it was difficult for her to keep her balance.

In front of them, a shadow raced across the wall just inside the old, wooden door to the courtyard.

Tracy gulped and held her breath to listen for the evil ghost. Looking down, she noticed that her hands were trembling, but before she had time to even think about getting a better grip on the chamber pot, a strange force began pushing against her chin, slamming her jaw shut and forcing her head backwards.

'*Milady!*' Elspeth shrieked, but Tracy was in no position to answer.

With her nostrils flaring and her eyes as wide as saucers, she thought she could hear her vertebra creak and groan, and for a split second, she was mortally afraid that she'd suffer a broken neck and die right there - then, the supernatural pressure was released and she fell forward with a sobbing gasp.

Struggling to maintain her balance, she had to leap down the final two steps or she would have fallen down, which wouldn't have been particularly pleasant considering she held a chamber pot.

Once on the floor, she spun around to look for the shadow that would indicate that Leonora was near, but she couldn't see it anywhere. There was no sign of Elspeth, either, but she couldn't blame the young girl for not wanting to be around.

She hadn't even had time to finish that thought before she was shoved very rudely in the back. Howling with surprise, she was flung out of the inn and nearly fell over the doorstep as she entered the courtyard.

Just as Tracy spun around, she found herself face to face with the twisted Leonora who was staring at her with her deep brown, flamingly insane eyes.

The evil ghost let out a moaning sigh, and all around them, items began to shiver and shake, including the construction material and an orderly pyramid of new cobblestones similar to those already laid out in the courtyard.

"Oh God, no," Tracy croaked, staring at the cobblestones that had to weigh at least eight pounds each. "If one of those nails me, my brains will be mashed potatoes!"

'The pot! The pot, Tracy,' an ethereal voice cried out from nowhere and everywhere at the same time.

"The pot!" Tracy echoed and looked down at the porcelain chamber pot.

Just then, Leonora let out a tormented groan that sounded like it came from the seventh level of hell. One of the cobblestones flew up from the pyramid and tore through the air, aimed directly at Tracy's stomach.

Tracy shrieked and thrust the chamber pot out ahead of her, thumping into the evil ghost's solid figure. "Eat this, you miserable bugger!" she cried, staring with one eye at the ghost and the other at the flying cobblestone so she could try to evade it.

Faced with the porcelain chamber pot, Leonora let out a terrified scream and made a wild escape through the courtyard and up the side of The Crow & Peacock.

"Ha!" Tracy barked. With the ghost out of the way, her greatest concern was the flying cobblestone, but it fell harmlessly to the ground some distance away from her and rolled off to the right.

Once Leonora reached the thatched roof, she turned around and used her twisted arms and legs to crawl down the side like a big, pale bluish-black spider. There, she hissed and moaned at her mortal opponent.

Elsbeth reappeared inside the upper floor of the inn and began to fly back and forth in the hallway, so agitated that she changed shape for each time she went past one of the windows.

By the fourth pass, Leonora noticed her old adversary and ducked in through the window closest to her. The two ghosts squared off in two adjacent windows, hissing and sighing at each other like a pair of alley cats.

"And there I was... thinking I had seen everything after stumbling over Mum's private drawer," Tracy mumbled, shaking her head slowly.

A pained cry from Elspeth made Tracy snap out of her stupor and race back towards the stairwell. As she bounded up the stairs still holding onto the chamber pot, she thought she could hear the young ghost cry out several times and then fall silent. "Elspeth! Elspeth!" she shouted as she turned the corner onto the hallway - once she had made it to the top, Elspeth was nowhere in sight.

"Oh, no... what did that evil creature do to her?" Tracy said, baring her teeth in a worried grimace.

The very next second, she received such a hard shove on her shoulder that she was pushed several feet to the right, towards one of the windows. Letting go of the chamber pot, she tried to grasp hold of the frame but she ran out of time.

With a loud crash, she went head-first through the old, brittle glass and was flung out of the window. She screamed in terror as the merciless cobblestones came rushing up towards her, but at the very last moment before the assuredly fatal impact, a pale blue cushion appeared underneath her to break her fall.

The cushion let her down gently and immediately transformed itself into Elspeth who had large tears running down her ghostly cheeks. *'I c- could not watch you d- die... b- but I cannot exist out h- here...'* she said, trembling all over. With a sigh, she faded fast and dissolved into a cloud of energy that drifted up to the upper floor.

"Oh, God," Tracy croaked, scrambling to her feet. She was trembling too - her entire body shook like a reed in a storm, but she knew she had to do something to stop the vicious attacks.

She had lost the porcelain chamber pot and didn't know where it was, but she suddenly realised she had another - and far more radical - weapon at her disposal.

Groaning like the ghost she was fighting, Tracy staggered over to the privy and broke off the old, rickety door. She stared inside and quickly spotted a large wooden bucket under the hole in the seat. "Oh God... this is disgusting... this is so disgusting!" she whined as she pulled out the bucket, thankful that it didn't hold any unwanted presents from the past.

When she noticed the lid for the bucket squeezed in between the privy and the utility shed, she let out a little whoop and jumped over there at once. Holding the bucket and the lid, she staggered back towards the stairwell to come to her ghostly friend's rescue.

Upstairs, she peeked around the corner but couldn't see either of the ghosts anywhere. The first few steps along the hallway didn't bring any problems, but the next one did. She had barely made it past the door to the room she had tried to spend the night in when she was jumped by a huge, pale blue blob of a barghest - a devil dog - with a thousand sharp teeth sticking out at her from a mouth that barked like thunder directly in her face.

"Gaaaaaaah!" Tracy screamed and spun around. Tripping over the bucket, she fell forward and landed with a hard thud on the dusty floor.

'Oh dear, 'tis you...' the fanged monster said and transformed itself back into Elspeth. *'I am truly, truly sorry, Milady... can you forgive me? I thought you were Leonora... I just wanted to help...'*

"Ohhhh, I don't need this crap..." Tracy croaked in a shaky voice as she got up on her knees. In the fall, her LED lamp had fallen off her head and had shut itself off, so now the hallway was pitch black. "If Sidney thinks he can buy me off with four hundred quid, he's got another thi- OOF!"

Out of nowhere, Leonora came rushing through the hallway and slammed into Tracy who went flying again, landing on her hands and knees a good ten feet further down the hall towards the stairwell.

At first, Leonora didn't recognise the bucket from the privy, but when she did, she spun around in mid air and zoomed back through the hallway, slamming herself up against the outer wall out of sheer terror while letting out a siren-like high-pitched scream.

'Tracy! The bucket... she is ready for the bucket...!' Elspeth cried and tried to grasp the item, but her ghostly fingers went straight through the wood.

"I'm ready for something else... I'm having a bloody awful time here!" Tracy croaked, once again getting on her feet. With a growl, she picked up the bucket and began to move menacingly down towards the malicious Leonora.

'I am with you! We cannot let her escape this time!' Elspeth said, floating just behind the stalking Tracy.

"Insane... insane... insane! This is bloomin' insane!" Tracy shouted as she thrust the bucket forward at Leonora. Her first attempt at trapping the evil ghost was unsuccessful, and she promptly received an almighty whack over the brow by a piece of wood that was flung at her through Leonora's powers, but it didn't deter her from trying again and pressing the bucket against the outer wall.

Finally, at the third attempt, she managed to trap Leonora inside the bucket - then all hell broke loose. The entire inn started shaking, thatch and mortar rained down from the roof, several of the floorboards broke free of their nails and stood up straight, and one of the doors to the rooms fell off its hinges and created a dust storm as it landed on the floor with a loud bang.

Leonora screamed ceaselessly inside the bucket, and kicked and pulled at it to break free. Parts of the outer wall they were pressing up against started to crack, and large fragments of plaster fell onto the already loose floorboards.

"The lid! I need the effing lid!" Tracy shouted, looking over her shoulder at Elspeth who was watching everything from a safe distance.

'I cannot take the lid, Tracy... I cannot grasp it!'

"Bloody hell, I forgot... all right... uh... all right," Tracy said and stretched out her right leg. Inching backwards along the floorboards, she just managed to reach the lid, but the bulky tip of her boot pushed it even further away.

Growling, she hurriedly pulled her leg back and kicked off her boot. Trying again, she let her blue and green sock adorned with Thomas the Tank Engine - the pair had been a joke gift from a friend but they had been so comfy she had kept them - sneak across the floor until her toes grasped the lid. Stretching out the farthest she could without losing her grip on the bucket, she pulled the lid closer and closer to her until it was close enough that she could reach it with her arm.

"Gotta time it... gotta time it to perfection," she mumbled as she snatched the lid and held it ready. "Not yet... not yet... not yet... NOW!"

Almost moving at the same speed as the ghost she was trying to contain, she tore the bucket down from the outer wall, slammed on the lid, smacked the bucket down on the floor, sat on it and closed all four latches that were used to carry the bucket when it was full - all within the space of a few seconds.

"I got her! Blimey gov'nor, I got h- Oh!" - Tracy had barely uttered the phrase before Leonora started screaming in such a terrified voice inside the bucket that Tracy was thrown off the lid from the reverberations.

'Are you all right, Tracy?' Elspeth said, glancing down at her human companion, but at the same time looking worried at the way the bucket was dancing about from her opponent's screaming.

"Oh, I'm just tickety-boo... just simply tickety-boo, darling," Tracy said surly as she discovered a long, jagged tear in her brand new jogging trousers.

'What is going on with her? She sounds like she is terribly frightened...'

"She's locked inside a shite bucket... you do the math," Tracy said and got up from the floor, dusting off her hands and putting them on her hips.

'I do not underst- ...never mind. Oh!' Elspeth said, whipping her head back around as the screams grew more and more distant, and more and more terrified.

Somewhere at the back of Tracy's mind was a niggling thought about what kind of judgement she would be facing for locking someone in a privy bucket once it was her time at the Pearly Gates - malicious apparition or not - but she decided to push it aside for when the moment actually came.

With a final, terrified scream from Leonora that slowly petered out into nothing, all became quiet - the bucket settled down, as did the rest of the inn. Like before, the temperature and the humidity dropped to more pleasant levels, and it became easier for Tracy to breathe.

'Has... has she been vanquished? Have I been freed of my tormentor?' Elspeth said in an increasingly excited voice.

"Looks like it... maybe the shite bucket was a gateway to hell?" Tracy said and carefully nudged the aforementioned item with her sock. "Wouldn't surprise me one iota... nothing in this inn can surprise me now... oh... perhaps I shouldn't say things like that before I'm well away from here," she continued in a mumble.

'But... but... but that means I am free! Free! Oh, my sweet Lord, I am free!' Elspeth howled and began to dance around.

"Careful with that! You're gonna turn into the-"

Squealing with laughter, Elspeth morphed into the hollow, pale blue orb of energy and began to bounce around the hallway like a demented pinball.

"-orb. Right. Too late," Tracy said and ducked to get out of Elspeth's path.

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Five minutes past seven the next morning, Sidney Thompson drove onto the gravelly lot in front of The Crow & Peacock and stepped out of his car.

Tracy had been waiting for him and stepped forward. "Good morning, Mr. Thompson," she said and put out her hand.

"Good morn- my goodness! What happened to your face?!" Sidney said and touched his own upper cheek where the tall woman had an angry black bruise from the smartphone giving her a whack.

Shaking hands with her employer, Tracy grinned and turned around to show the tear in her trousers. "Hellfire and brimstone, Mr. Thompson. Let's leave it at that."

"Did you... are they... were they..." Sidney said, staring at the even sorer state of the inn. Since he had seen it last, several cracks had developed in the facade, and two windows had fallen out completely and were lying in pieces in the gravel.

"I did. Yes, they are... and yes, they were. Quite, even."

Speechless, Sidney Thompson walked along the facade of the inn and inspected the damage.

"So you see, Mr. Thompson, all 's well that ends well."

"Mmmm! But look at the state of my inn!"

"Utterly unavoidable, I'm afraid, Sir," Tracy said, putting her hands into her pockets. "You see, when I discovered I was battling one of the original dark angels of hell, I had to pull out all the stops." - '*...plug all the buckets,*' she thought and had to stifle a snicker.

"One of the original- ... goodness me!"

"Indeed. This was truly a job for professionals, Mr. Thompson."

"The boy..." Sidney said and turned to face Tracy. "The boy you released while I was there, what was his connection to the poltergeist?"

"The boy?" Tracy said and scrunched up her face - so much had happened since sunset that she had no recollection of what her employer was talking about. "I don't remember a b- Oh! Oh, you mean buh... wotshisname... Yoric... yes, he was, uh... he was part of a family who... uh... perished in a fire in the late eighteenth century. Yes. Possibly. You see, apparitions are notorious for not always telling the truth. Occasionally, they throw in a little white lie to keep things fresh and interesting."

"Tragic."

"Quite," Tracy said, holding her tongue so far into her cheek she was surprised her employer couldn't see it.

Sidney clapped his hands together and walked back to Tracy. "We can finally get on with the restoration. Miss Cross, thank you so much. I shall wire the money to your bank later today."

"Excellent. Ah, there is perhaps one tiny, little thing that you need to be aware of, Sir..."

"And that would be?" Sidney said as she walked back to his car.

"Well... I left one ghost."

Sidney jumped a foot in the air and spun around so fast he nearly lost his footing. "What the devil are you on about, woman? Didn't I pay you to rid the inn of ghosts?" he said, grabbing hold of his car's door.

"Ah, yes, but this last one is benign, Sir. She's a young girl and, in a way, you might call her the household fairy. You're a local, Sir, I'm sure you remember the ancient tales of household fairies. Every home should have one. They keep the peace and-"

"I'm well aware of the ancient tales, Miss Cross, but can you guarantee that your fairy won't disrupt the restoration?"

"Absolutely, Sir," Tracy said and nodded vigorously. "She only comes out at night, and I can assure you that she will not disturb anyone... well, unless they invite her in. Sir, think of the possibilities... the inn will have a genuine house ghost, a benign one, even. And that means there's money to be made for both of us," she added with a raised eyebrow.

As expected, the M-word made Sidney interested, and he leaned against the car's wing and crossed his arms over his chest. "Hmmm?"

"Yes, my company, Ghosthunters Limited, could organise guided ghost tours at night where there's a one-hundred percent guarantee the visitors will have a supernatural sighting... you have to go all the way to the castles of Scotland to find a similar setup. Or... or, perhaps, for Halloween, we could host a horror event! Yes, show a scary movie in the courtyard and close at midnight by having our very own haunting... oh, she'd love that... she's a bit of a show-off, you see."

'Terri, calm down... you're screaming into the microphone. Just sing, okay?' Aaron Shulman's disembodied voice said over the speakers. *'From the top,'* he continued, stopping the recording.

Standing in the center of a sparsely equipped though top-professional recording studio with her face near a microphone that was suspended from the layered ceiling, the twenty-two year old Terri Wentworth shot the man on the other side of the pane of glass a slightly dirty look, but grudgingly adjusted her headphones and rolled her shoulders. "All right... I'm ready."

'Terri Wentworth demo take seven,' the producer said before restarting the uptempo instrumental dance track Terri had selected for her demo. By writing new lyrics for a well-known hit, she hoped the talent scouts at the various record labels would see that she was not only a quality, wide-range performer but a clever lyricist as well.

The rhythm flared in the budding singer and she soon started wiggling her left foot to the beat. The wiggle crept up her incredibly tight black slacks and up to her bare midriff where it seemed to pause for a moment; then it continued up past her black halterneck top that left so little to the imagination it was borderline obscene, and finally to the shiny bling-bling she had around her neck and on her ears.

As the song reached the cue, Terri jumped into action: *'Calling me is a shooting star, a shooting star that's come from afar, around and around goes the star, be the one you aaaaaaaaare.'*

Inside the mixing room, the mid-forty-something Aaron Shulman shook his head repeatedly while adjusting a few knobs on the huge mixer. Sighing, the experienced producer looked at his second in command, Elliott Paulsen, who was sitting next to him with a wide grin on his face.

"What the hell are you grinnin' at?" Aaron said, twisting a knob to the left.

"The song sucks but she's sexy as hell. She's gonna be a star!" the mid-twenty-something Elliott said. Unlike his older colleague who was dressed casually but classy, Elliott was wearing torn jeans and a Thunderskull T-shirt with the dates for the death metal band's 2011 world tour.

"She can't sing worth a damn, Elliott. Crap, to think that she's paid three grand to get a demo produced..."

"Yeah, but look at her!"

Sighing, Aaron did just that. "All right, she looks good. But you'd think with artificially enhanced gazonkers like that, she'd actually have a pair of lungs behind 'em. She's short of breath already and she hasn't even made it to the second verse."

"Doesn't matter whatsoever these days, Aaron, and you know it. That's why they invented playback."

"Uh-huh?" Aaron said and twisted a few more knobs to make Terri sound good for her demo.

'My heart can hold your love, hold it like a glove, hear me now shooting star, be the one you aaaaaaaaare.'

"I Googled her," Elliott said, grinning at the way the tight slacks accentuated Terri's wiggling rear, "and it turns out she was rejected from the casting sessions for no less than three talent shows, Pop Princess, Star Makers and The World's Your Stage."

"Hell, even from Star Makers? The people they have on that show are pathetic..."

Laughing out loud, Elliott reached over and thumped Aaron's shoulder. "Ha! I knew you watched that show even tho' you said you didn't!"

"Uh... I may have zapped past it once. Eh," Aaron mumbled, concentrating on following the VU-meter on the microphone. As before, Terri's pipes threatened to blow the needle off the scale, and he hurriedly adjusted the gain a bit down.

'My love is like a rock, withstanding any shock, the shooting star calls my name, be the one you are, be the one you aaaaaaaaaaare.'

As the dance track slowly came to an end, so did Terri's wiggling. Huffing and puffing, she wiped a few drops of sweat off her brow and stepped back from the microphone.

'That was great, Terri. A real beauty,' Aaron said over the speakers. *'I think we should do another take just for-'*

"God no! I need a break!" Terri said with a chest that was heaving quite badly. Taking several deep breaths, she bent over to put her hands on her knees.

Inside the mixing room, Elliott let out a wolf call at the sight of Terri's two globes wiggling as she bent over. "Hey, Aaron, do you think they'll fall out if she-"

"Man, Elliott, will you show her some respect? Dammit, I wish the young girls these days didn't have to dress like hookers to get noticed. Her talent should bring her to the top, not her damn breasts," Aaron grumbled, remembering to take his finger off the intercom button before he spoke.

"Dude, you live in the wrong decade," Elliott said, slowly shaking his head to show what he felt about his older colleague's antiquated ideals.

An hour later, Terri stepped out into the alley behind the downtown recording studio. Night had fallen during her four-hour session, and the alley was partly obscured by deep, dark, scary shadows that made the scattered cardboard boxes, the dumped shopping carts and the rest of the garbage seem even more intimidating.

At the far end of the alley, she could see several homeless people standing around a burning oil drum trying to keep warm, but they were too far away to pose a threat to her.

Somewhere in the far distance, two sirens tore through the night - sounding like an ambulance and a paramedic unit - but they were driving away from the alley and were soon lost in the regular cacophony of sounds from the pulsating big city.

Shivering, Terri zipped her white down jacket all the way up and hurried over to her car: her Mom's old Cutlass that she had borrowed for the evening even though she felt the dented Oldsmobile was far beneath her.

After finding her car keys in her pocket, she inserted them into the lock, opened the door and got inside. Just as she was about to turn the ignition, a black Porsche of the latest model, with pitch black windows and no headlights, crept up next to her Olds and boxed her in - the car had seemingly come out of nowhere.

"Uhhh!" Terri whined and rolled down her window to give the other driver a piece of her mind. The black, foreboding car sent a shiver down her spine, but she clenched her jaw and stuck her head out the window. "Hey! Do you mind? I was trying to leave!"

At first, there were no signs of life from the driver of the black Porsche, but after a few seconds, the side window was rolled down to reveal a woman of ethereal beauty and indeterminate age.

Terri felt another shiver run down her spine as she looked at the mysterious, silent woman who was wearing black leather gloves, a black leather trench coat and a black silk shirt where the top two buttons were undone to allow a peek at tanned skin and a blood red pendant - but the thing that really made the budding singer shiver was the fact that the other woman was wearing mirror shades that for some creepy reason only reflected Terri's gobsmacked face.

As Terri was gawking wide-eyed at the woman, a gloved hand was raised to remove the shades.

"Hi, Terri," the woman said in a soft, velvety voice. When she didn't get a reply, she chuckled, folded the mirror shades and put them down between the seats.

Terri was mesmerized by the blueness of the woman's eyes - she couldn't recall ever seeing eyes that intensely blue outside of a photoshopped image. "Uh... how do you know my name?" she croaked.

"I know things," the other woman said with a smile that showed a set of perfect teeth. "And besides, Aaron has just called me," she continued, holding up a telephone.

"Oh..."

"I was nearby and I thought, yes, this young girl could be somebody. Oh, allow me to introduce myself, I'm Alma Negra. I'm the owner of Blacque Soul Records. Here's my business card," Alma said and held out a small plastic card with her gloved hand.

Terri took the card and tried to read it with a gobsmacked look on her face. "Uh... soul? I don't sing soul..."

"A minor detail, Terri. I have musicians from most genres on my roster," Alma said with a dreamy smile. "I listened to your demo and-"

"H- how? I've... I've only just..." Terri said, dropping the business card down onto the floor of the Oldsmobile.

"Ah, through the magic of modern technology," Alma said and held up her phone again. "To cut a long story short, I liked what I heard. In fact, I believe that you have what it takes to hit the top."

"I wish..." Terri said somberly.

"Mmmm. I have a song for you that I think would suit you and your lyrics like an old glove. If you come over to my car, I can play it for you. I have it on a Flash drive."

"Oh, I..." - Furrowing her brow, Terri hesitated as she tried to make heads or tails of the situation. When she had been a young girl, her mother had often told her to never get into cars driven by strangers, but she wasn't a young girl anymore. *'And besides... this could be... hell, no... this *will* be my big break! Yeah! Limelight, here I come!'* she thought and nodded vigorously.

"All right," Alma said and started the Porsche's engine. "I'll just back up so you can get out."

Soon climbing down into the sports car, Terri marveled at the luxurious look of the dashboard and the high build quality that offered a night and day difference to her Mom's tired Oldsmobile. The sports seats were comfortable, the carpets were exquisite and the center console was packed with electronic doodads of all types, most of which she had no idea what did.

Looking to her left, she noticed Alma Negra smiling at her with perfect teeth, and she felt just the tiniest spark of jealousy at the boy - or gal - who would have unlimited access to the sculpted body beneath the leather trench coat and the endless legs held captive by leather pants.

"So," Alma said and plugged the Flash drive into the car's combined stereo and navigation unit. "I hope you're ready, because this will be your ticket to the top of the charts."

As the song started, a series of emotions tore through Terri - first shock at hearing her own voice singing her own lyrics to a brand new instrumental track, then a wave of searing heat that swept every corner of her being when she realized how great it sounded, and finally a devious sense of getting a chance to prove all the naysayers wrong, and that with a vengeance.

"How?" Terri breathed with clear dollar-signs in her eyes.

"Oh, modern technology you know," Alma said and put her hand on the rim of the Porsche's leather steering wheel. Glancing to her right, she lapped up the sight of unbridled greed on Terri's face. "Mmmm," she continued, nodding to herself.

The small vein on the side of Terri's neck pumped in perfect tune with the hit-to-be, proving how much she relished the unexpected shortcut to the stars. "I don't have to settle for second billing," she whispered in a thick voice laced with greed, "or play the seedy clubs... or deal with craggy producers..."

"You don't, that's right," Alma said, turning off the stereo as the song ended. "Of course, it comes with a price."

"Nothing is free... what'll it cost me?"

"Your signature on an exclusive contract. A lifetime contract," Alma said, emphasizing 'lifetime'.

Terri furrowed her brow and turned around in the seat, wondering about the part Alma had emphasized. "Okay... but what's in it for me?"

"Ah, you're definitely my kind of girl," Alma said with a husky laugh that made Terri's nape hairs stand on edge. "What's in it for you? Well, apart from a guaranteed hit, anything you like, Terri... anything you like."

A cold shiver briefly swept over Terri but it was soon overpowered by another surge of heat that filled out every part of her being. "Where do I sign?" she said in a voice that matched the huskiness of Alma's.

"We'll get to that later... say, tomorrow evening at nine at the Blacque Palace downtown?" Alma said and shot Terri a lusty gaze.

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Three minutes past nine the next evening, Terri drove up a curved driveway and parked the dented Oldsmobile between two impossibly long stretch limos. She hurriedly touched up her hair and her makeup in the rear view mirror - long lashes, thick eyeliner and plenty of starry glitter on her cheekbones - before leaving the car and strolling across the paved forecourt with a confident spring in her step and a jaunty wiggle to her anatomy that was highlighted by a pair of skinny jeans, a white tank and a black and gray letterman fashionably hanging down on one shoulder.

The Blacque Palace was a high-rise of mammoth proportions - a full city block long and two hundred stories tall. Roughly halfway up, the skyscraper split into two separate towers that were both covered in panes of dark glass that gave Terri an association of a pair of devil's horns.

She briefly slowed down when she realized the Palace's address was 666-something-or-other, but she soon scoffed at that ridiculous coincidence.

The glass double doors were guarded by a man whose shoulders were so broad that he seemed wider than he was tall. The dark-skinned, completely bald African American wore a black business suit, and as Terri came closer, she could see a bulge under his left arm that indicated a weapon of some sort.

"Hello, I'm-" she said, but she didn't have time to introduce herself before the beefy sentry received a message in the earpiece he had in his right ear.

Without speaking a word, he stepped aside and opened the glass doors.

"Terri Wentworth..." Terri said, but shrugged when it turned out the doorman didn't care one bit.

She stepped into the well-lit lobby that was equipped with several expensive armchairs, glass tables and even miniature palm trees. Ahead of her, the door to an elevator opened as if by magic, and she upped the tempo to catch it before it could close again; her inch-high heels clicking rhythmically on the hard floor.

Inside the elevator, she quickly realized that the panel only had one button - the penthouse.

Half a minute later, she stepped out of the elevator after having been shot upwards at what felt like the speed of sound. Woozy and disoriented, she needed a moment to catch her balance, but nearly fell over when a sentry identical to the man she had just left behind at the front door came into sight.

"Okay, this' a joke, right?" she croaked, leaning against the doorjamb of the elevator while she blinked several times.

"Oh, don't be alarmed, Terri," Alma's disembodied velvety voice said from somewhere over Terri's shoulder.

"They're twins," the voice continued, soon followed by Alma Negra herself who came gliding out of her office.

"Uh..." Terri said, pushing herself off the doorjamb.

Unlike the previous day, the owner of Blacque Soul Records was wearing a straight-edged, blood red pantsuit with square shoulders and a plunging neckline that proved that she was very much a Lady with a capital L. With a smile, she held out her hand and stepped aside so her newest subject could enter her office.

Terri smiled nervously and slipped past her new boss. Once she had ventured into the unknown, Alma quietly closed the doors behind her and glided over to a desk at the other side of the office.

The room was huge, larger than anything Terri had ever seen outside of Hollywood, and it was clear that no expense had been spared anywhere - among other things, the entire floor was made of marble, the walls were untreated rock, and the windows reached from the high ceiling down to the floor, giving the people in the office a spectacular - if vertigo-inducing - view of the big city.

Alma shot Terri a wolf-like grin as she sat down on a vintage leather armchair behind a shiny black obsidian desk that was roughly ten feet deep. After a little while, she reached down and clicked on a hidden button. Behind her, the wall of untreated rock came alive and was transformed into a video wall that had to be at least one hundred and fifty inches across.

As Terri was watching, the video wall split up into nine different mini-screens that each showed a broadcast from various stations that appeared to be foreign as well as local.

"It's a hologram of my TV stations around the world. I like to keep in touch with what's going on," Alma said off Terri's gobsmacked look. She briefly turned around and studied a few of the images, but soon came back to her newest recruit.

"Uh-huh...?"

"Yes. Now, about your contract," Alma said and reached into a drawer to find a leather-bound folder. Once the folder was on the obsidian desk, she opened it and pulled out a single piece of paper. "Just sign on the dotted line, Terri."

"Wait..." Terri said and moved over to the shiny desk where she picked up the contract and began to skim it. "I... I still don't see what's in it for me..."

Alma chuckled darkly and reached into the desk drawer again. When her hand became visible, she was holding five neatly folded stacks of bills and an empty key fob. "Well, up front you'll get twenty-five thousand dollars and a car of your choice. I'd say that's a good starting point for our relationship... wouldn't you?"

"Buh-"

"You have the talent, I have the contacts... together we'll make magic. Oh, and the twenty-five thousand will feel like chicken feed by the end of the week, I guarantee it."

"Jesus..." Terri croaked, staring so hard at the money and the key fob that she forgot to blink.

"No, I'm quite sure he's got nothing to do with it," Alma said with another dark chuckle. After finding a black fountain pen, she got up and slid around the desk. With a smile, she pressed the money into Terri's left hand and led the budding singer's right to the fountain pen and the contract. "It's the right thing to do, Terri. You know it," she whispered seductively.

Shivering, Terri took the fountain pen but paused briefly to sort through her jumbled mind. She knew there had to be something fishy in the whole deal, but the tangible weight of the twenty-five thousand dollars she was holding outweighed her minor, ill-definable worries. With a greedy smile that slowly spread over her features, she leaned down to sign her name on the dotted line.

Behind Terri, Alma Negra clenched her fists and closed her eyes. When she reopened them, her blue orbs had disappeared, replaced by blood red pools of hellfire that briefly flared up before her regular eye-color returned.

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Over the next several weeks, *B Tha I U R* became a worldwide hit - as Alma Negra had promised Terri it would be - and she received worldwide exposure, appearing in countless magazines, on tv and in net-media from Alaska to Zimbabwe where she presented her sole hit, or offered her masses of adoring fans a brief glimpse into her oh-so-common life before she became a star, or simply said that the world would be a better place if everyone followed the title of the song and remained true to themselves instead of blindly following what the starlets said in glittery magazines.

She traveled the world on the private jet she had leased from the earnings of the first week alone; that, her four identical black Infinitis and the twelve-bedroom mansion she had recently moved into were her most prized possessions. The only sour note for Terri was the fact that her Mom had refused to join her in the mansion - for some reason, her mother didn't seem too impressed with the whole thing.

While sitting in a comfortable leather seat at thirty thousand feet en route from Los Angeles to Vancouver, she checked herself on YouTube and found to her great satisfaction that the music video to *B Tha I U R* had been given unofficial Spanish, Brazilian Portuguese and Japanese subtitles by excited fans.

Snickering loudly, she held out her heavily bejeweled hand and waved one of her entourage over. Soon, one of her personal assistants - she had four - had booked her onto tv shows in Mexico, Brazil and Japan.

Smiling wickedly, Terri leaned back in the seat and allowed herself to be lost in the splendor.

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The following Friday evening, Terri was in the wings of a late night TV talk show waiting for her cue to go on stage. The four hundred dollars worth of cocaine she had snorted in the dressing room raced around her system and set every fiber of her being alight.

Her torso and limbs were buzzing from the drug and her eyes were wide open, taking in the sight of the celebrity talk show host going through his customary introductory spiel.

'And here she is, Ladies and Gentlemen, the one you've been waiting for! The extraordinary LaTerri! Now celebrating her fourth week at the top of the charts! Give her a warm welcome, everybody!' the host said and began to clap.

Terri felt the drugs kick in as she stepped onto the stage and waved to the audience. Her tight red plastic top and mini-skirt were barely there as she staggered across the stage on heels that were too high for her present condition.

Sitting down in the couch, she fluffed her big hair and crossed her legs to show miles and miles of thigh, earning herself several wolf calls and lecherous looks from the audience and the other guests.

"So, LaTerri," the talk show host said, sitting down in an armchair placed at a ninety degree angle to the couch, "you've been on the cover of every glittery magazine there is... can you tell us a secret you haven't told anyone else?"

"A secret? Well... yeah," Terri said with a manic snicker.

"Well, now's your chance!"

"I'm not wearing any panties!" Terri said and spread her legs so quickly the camera didn't have time to zoom in.

The revelation earned her a storm of applause and wolf calls from the audience, and she waved at them like crazy with a manic grin on her face.

After performing a very poor lip-sync of *B Tha I U R*, Terri was quietly shuffled off the stage by her entourage and one of the show's minders, and out to the back door where she was met by a storm of flashes from a motley selection of autograph hunters and paparazzi.

Terri's manic mind couldn't absorb the wall of noise and light that was flung at her, but she took a few autograph books and doodled something illegible, much to the squealing delight of the fans.

Her minders decided that enough was enough and began to push away some of the autograph hunters to clear the way to the limo that was already parked at the back of the group.

A mother and her young daughter each holding autograph books were rudely pushed aside and fell over, creating a scene the photographers jumped on with the viciousness of a pack of locusts. Terri was practically drowned in a sea of flashes as she tried to force her way through the throng to get to the limo instead of helping those who had been pushed aside.

Flinging herself through the door and onto the floor of the limo, Terri reached behind her and grappled for the heavy door. "Drive! Drive, you fuckin' bitch! Let's get the fuck outta here!" she screamed manically to the driver who responded by pressing down the horn and stepping on the gas. Soon, the stretch limo was on the street and driving away from the public relations disaster.

As Terri climbed up on the back seat, she stared into nothing with eyes so wide they nearly fell out of her head. She had a vague idea that something had just gone wrong, but she couldn't figure out what.

Suddenly, a phone started ringing somewhere in the car.

"What...?" Terri said in a manic voice. "What the fuck is that? Where's that fuckin' phone?"

"It's on the shelf by the window, Miss," the driver said over his shoulder.

"Mind your own fuckin' business, bitch!" Terri growled, but climbed forward to take the phone.

After a few seconds of confusion, she remembered how to use it and pressed the little button. "Yo, it's the star. Whatup?" she said as she fell back onto the back seat.

'It's Alma Negra. We need to talk. Now,' her boss' velvety voice said through the connection.

"No, but... I can't. I'm in my limo on the way to... to... uh... Mista Kool-Gee's midnight party. Isn't that tonight?"

'No, it's not,' Alma said icily.

Terri furrowed her brow and tried to remember which day it was. "Hey bitch," she said to the driver, "which fuckin' day is it?"

"Friday, Miss Wentworth."

'The party is tomorrow night, Terri,' Alma said over the phone.

"No... fuck that," Terri said, rubbing her face, "I wanna go to a party tonight!"

The connection fell silent and Terri thought she could feel the temperature falling several degrees in the limo.

'Terri, let me speak to the driver,' Alma said in an ice cold voice.

"Uh... okay," Terri replied and climbed forward to hand the driver the telephone.

Within a few seconds, the limo changed direction and drove towards Blacque Palace.

From her position on the back seat, Terri knew she was in trouble when the limo drove up the curved driveway and further into the parking lot in front of the imposing building.

Alma Negra was standing next to the parking bays wearing her full-length black trench coat, her black leather pants, her black silk shirt and her mirror shades. The woman - who seemed as foreboding as the building behind and above her - had a dark, no-nonsense look on her face that had a spooky, red shadow across it even though the nearest lamp post had an orange filter.

Once the limo had come to a stop, Terri stared out at her boss. She gulped but eventually opened the door. Stepping out on wobbly legs, her tight red plastic top and mini-skirt were horrendously inadequate in protecting her from the numbing chill that crept up her legs and swept around her bare mid-riff, and she rued her idea of going commando. "So?" she said in a voice that was still a bit aggressive.

"So," Alma echoed. Once she had uttered the simple statement, the owner of Blacque Soul Records returned to her stony silence and simply stood there.

The silence got to Terri who cringed under Alma's icy presence. "Oh, God," she said, crossing her legs to combat the chill, "it wasn't that bad! It... it... was only a couple of people! They got pushed over, so fuckin' what? No big deal... happens all the fuckin' time!" she continued, breaking out in a manic laugh that was way too loud for the situation.

"Well, perhaps you should have helped them-"

"I have people for that. Perhaps you don't know everything you think you do!" Terri said, throwing a hand gesture to Alma.

A nasty grin spread over Alma's features and she took off her mirror shades to send the young woman a fiery glare. "Terri, Terri, Terri, what am I going to do with you?"

Folding the shades, she put the frame into her coat pocket and stepped closer to her protegee. "First of all, you appear on the Howard Valentine show high as a kite, then you create a scene outside the studio, and now... now it sounds like you're dangerously close to treating me with disrespect."

"I-"

"But you're not, are you?" Alma said and put a gloved hand on Terri's shoulder. "You see, if you are, your contract will be nullified. And that would spell disaster for you, wouldn't it?"

"No, but-"

"Yes it would, Terri," Alma said and gave Terri's shoulder a strong squeeze.

"Get your hand offa me, you crazy bitch!" Terri screeched and threw the hand off her shoulder. She staggered away from Alma's reach and sent her another hand gesture, one that couldn't be misinterpreted.

Alma furrowed her brow, but soon shrugged and put her mirror shades back on. "Perhaps I was wrong to sign you to my label. Right now, you're not worth anything to me... I gave you a shortcut to the top, but it's a long way down for those who can't control themselves. And you obviously can't."

"The fuck I can't! I'm the Queen of the fuckin' world, bitch, and I'll prove it... yeah, I'll prove it to you right now!" Terri said and started belting out a horrendously off-off-off-key rendition of *B Tha I U R*. Once she reached the chorus, the area had been effectively cleared of small animals and assorted other critters.

"Mmmm. Charming," Alma said and moved over to the limo to tell the driver to take off.

Once the limo had reversed out of the bay and was down the other end of the parking lot, Alma put her hands on her hips through her trench coat. "From my point of view, you don't have many cards left to play, Terri. Your hit won't be one for much longer, and although you'll draw headlines with that stunt you pulled tonight, they won't be good. That's not why I signed you. Anyway," - Alma turned around and began to walk back towards the Blacque Palace - "don't forget I have you on a lifetime contract. It's up to me and me alone what you'll be working on. Perhaps I should find a new place for you in my hierarchy."

"But I'm a worldwide star! The kids fuckin' love me! Everybody fuckin' loves me!" Terri said and threw her arms in the air.

Alma chuckled and spun around, making the lower edges of her leather trench coat flutter out and then back in. "For now, Terri. For now."

With that, Alma Negra disappeared into the deep shadows created by the Blacque Palace towering over the parking lot.

Behind the imposing woman, Terri crossed her legs and wrapped her arms around her body, looking very much like the lost twenty-two year old she was. "I'm a star... they love me. I know they love me..." she mumbled, shivering from the cold that was sneaking up on her half-dressed form and from the fact that her cocaine high was wearing off. "And how the fuck am I supposed to get home now...?!"

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Two weeks later, *B Tha I U R* had been thrown on the scrapheap for forgettable pop songs and Terri Wentworth had been pushed aside; eclipsed by the Next Big Thing, a boy not yet old enough to shave but who could sing rock'n'roll with the voice of a forty-year old.

To add insult to injury, the most popular clip of *B Tha I U R* on YouTube was a version performed by an overweight, middle-aged, balding man from Milwaukee who was belting out the song into a showerhead as he was jumping about on top of his king-sized bed only wearing a purple thong.

All but forgotten, Terri spent her nights driving around and around the big city in her last remaining black Infinity M56, looking for her next fix and trying to get away from the eight million dollars lawsuit a slick lawyer had slapped on her after the incident outside the Howard Valentine show.

Driving until the gas gauge read close to Empty, Terri decided that she wasn't ready to roll over and die just yet - she could always squeeze more money out of Alma Negra. With renewed vigor, she sat up straight in the expensive car's seat and pulled over to the curb to find out where she was.

As she clicked on the interior lights, she wished she hadn't - the young woman staring back at her from the rear-view mirror had dull, bloodshot eyes, bags where there shouldn't be any, greasy, ugly hair, and a very unhealthy, pale gray complexion that underlined the fact that she had snorted one line of cocaine too many.

After struggling a bit with her burning red eyes, she finally managed to work out her location, and she was soon on her way to the Blacque Palace.

Initially, the beefy African-American sentry guarding the glass door wasn't about to let her in, but a mumbled command in his earpiece made him step aside and open the door.

Terri threw him a hand gesture and stepped into the lobby. With her clothes sponsors withdrawing their support following the lawsuit and the disclosure of her rampant cocaine habit, all she had to wear was a tracksuit and an old

pair of formerly white, now quite filthy, sneakers. As she walked across the smooth floor, the track shoes squeaked most annoyingly.

Before she could make it to the elevator, the doors opened and Alma Negra came gliding out to meet her.

The tall woman was wearing yet another new outfit, a blood red, breezy pantsuit with a sleeveless, deep V-neck top that really brought out her tanned chest, her seemingly endless arms and her long, pitch black mane.

Standing opposite such a beautiful creature, Terri felt even more haggard and worthless, and she crossed her legs and began to squirm.

"Hello, Terri. I wish I could say you look good, but you don't. You look like you haven't slept for a week," Alma said and cocked her head. She let her eyes glide up and down the shabby outfit and the even worse shoes and crinkled her nose in disgust. "Or maybe you slept in **that** for a week."

"I need your help... I need your help really badly..." Terri said, breaking out into a shiver that traversed her entire body. "I c- I can't... I need a new hit."

"Seems to me you need something else. Something that I certainly can't give you," Alma said and crossed her arms over her chest, assuming a cold, distant posture.

"I n- need some money..." Terri croaked.

"No."

"Y- yes, I do! Don't tell me no, I really need some money!" Terri screeched, pulling her greasy hair. "I'm gonna die if I don't get some fuckin' money right now!"

Alma furrowed her brow and shot her protegee a disgusted look. "Terri, listen to me... don't you understand your album is ready for release? It'll be available on Monday. It will sell, I guarantee it. You've gained notoriety here and that'll hurt your sales, but you're still a hit overseas. Hell, *B Tha I U R* is still number one in Australia and New Zealand."

"I c- can't wait 'til Monday... I need the money now, for fuck's sake!"

Not getting a response from her boss, Terri rushed forward and grabbed hold of Alma's bare arms. In the split second before she was viciously pushed down to the ground, she realized that Alma Negra's skin had been ice cold to the touch, almost like she wasn't quite human.

Terri's abused mind couldn't cope with that; all she could do as she grappled around on the smooth floor was to shake her head and stare wide-eyed at the tall, dark-haired woman.

"Don't touch me! Don't you **ever** touch me!" Alma growled, clenching her fists. As she spoke, her voice gained a dark, demonic quality that was gone as quickly as it had come.

Terri slowly got to her knees but shied away from her boss. Her face - already gray to begin with - had turned white from the craving and the shock, but she still needed money for a fix, so she had no choice but to plead with the owner of Blacque Soul Records. "Please..." she whimpered, "please, I need some money... just a few hundred dollars..."

"No," Alma said coldly as she studied the pitiful creature at her feet. "No, I won't give you any money."

"Jesus-"

"Don't speak that name here!" Alma bellowed. Composing herself, she closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Her face was a mask of passiveness, but it was clear that a storm was raging just below the surface. After a few seconds, she opened her eyes and even allowed a faint smile to grace her lips. "How did you get here?" she said in a calmer voice.

"My c- car..."

"All right. Tell you what, go out to it and wait for me. I'll be with you in a moment. I have something for you that I think you'll appreciate."

"Wh- what...?"

"Oh, you'll know in due time," Alma said and spun around. Walking towards the elevator, the door slid aside for her before she even got there. As she stepped inside, she put her hand on the door so it wouldn't slide shut. "And Terri, the new album will make all the difference in the world. I guarantee it." - With that, Alma Negra allowed the door to close.

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Thirty minutes later, the two wildly different women sat in Terri's black Infinity at the Griffith Observatory and studied the glorious night-time vista ahead of them. Everywhere they looked, millions of lights shone back at them from the countless high-rises and homes spread throughout the greater Los Angeles area.

"I gotta have it... I gotta have it," Terri croaked from the passenger seat, trembling all over and looking like she was about to die. Initially, she had been the driver, but her condition had deteriorated so much that it wasn't safe anymore, and Alma had taken the wheel when they had stopped to get gas.

"And you will," Alma said and turned around in the driver's seat. She had changed back into her black outfit - gloves, leather pants, silk shirt and the trench coat - and she wore her mirror shades that once again only seemed to reflect Terri's sorry figure. "I have it right here," she continued, putting a gloved hand into her coat pocket.

Instead of the money - or even the drugs - that Terri had expected, Alma produced an old-fashioned compact disc jewel case that she opened. Turning on the stereo, she inserted the disc into the slot on the front.

"Wh... what the hell do you want me to do with that?" Terri croaked, putting both hands on the dashboard on the passenger side of the Infinity.

"This, my friend, is a pre-release copy of your new album," Alma said and drew back her lips to flash an ice cold smile. "Congratulations. This will hit number one on the album charts later tomorrow," she continued and hit Intro Scan.

Soon, the stereo started playing ten or so seconds of each track, revealing a set of diverse tunes: a few uptempo dance tracks, a few soulful love ballads with plenty of violins, and even a gospel-version of *B Tha I U R*.

"But..." Terri croaked, shaking her head slowly, "that's not me singing... I haven't performed any of those songs..."

"Yes, you have... your name is on the CD, isn't it?" Alma said and ejected the album. Smiling, she inserted the disc into the jewel case and put it into her coat pocket.

"No... no, I..."

"Terri, back at the Blacque Palace, I thought to myself, Alma, what should I do with this young, lost girl?" Alma said and got comfortable in the luxury car's seat. "First I wanted to cut you some slack... after all, there is some talent hidden deep inside you. But then I thought, no, she'll make more money for Blacque Records if she becomes a legend. Wouldn't you like to be a legend?"

"A l- legend? Uh... b- but I only have one hit record..."

"An all too common tale, I'm afraid," Alma said with a nasty chuckle.

"Wh- what?"

"Terri, when this album is released tomorrow at noon, you will become an instant legend. Or maybe even sooner, who knows. Even I can't control the Internet, much as I would love to."

"I d- don't understand... I don't understand any of this..." Terri whimpered, rubbing her gray, sweaty face. She shook her head and let out a whimpering sob before several tears leaked from her eyes and rolled down her sickly gray cheeks. "I don't deserve this... all I ever wanted was the fame..."

"Mmmm. And famous you'll be," Alma Negra said with a snort. Wetting her lips, she slowly took off her right glove. "Terri, look at me... look at me now."

Terri did as told and turned her head left to shoot the dark presence next to her a puzzled, bloodshot glance.

Reaching up very casually, Alma placed two ice cold fingers at the center of Terri's forehead.

A moment later, the young woman's eyes glazed over and she fell forward, thumping her head into the dashboard. Another moment later, she twitched and let out a long, slow sigh that marked the end of her all too short life.

"How tragic," Alma said in a voice that had gained a growly, demonic undertone. "To die of a massive brain hemorrhage at twenty-two...? How utterly tragic. And just when her new album was about to be released, too."

Putting her glove back on, Alma Negra stepped out of the black Infinity and reached into her other coat pocket. There, she found a small mirror, a ruler and a bag of cocaine. Placing the items on the driver's seat, she opened the bag and distributed the powder over the mirror to make it look like Terri Wentworth had overdosed.

Nodding to herself, Alma closed the door and walked away without looking back at the car or the dead body of the lost, young woman who was sitting in the front seat with a look of extreme terror forever frozen on her face.

The very next day, the shocking news of Terri's untimely death meant that *B Tha I U R The Album* reached number one on the album charts like Alma Negra had promised it would, which made the dollars roll in by the truckload - landing in Alma's many bank accounts.

B Tha I U R scored a resurgence in the singles charts, but it was brief. On the Internet, hundreds of adoring fans set up vigils and memorial sites, though most had been forgotten about by the following weekend - and the overweight, middle-aged YouTube sensation from Milwaukee grabbed the headlines for a day when he claimed that Terri Wentworth had stolen the lyrics from him, even if he couldn't actually prove it...

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"Good. Make yourself at home. I shall just make sure the fire is well-fed for the mead," Gunnvor said and walked back to the hearth.

Dagrún smiled and sat down on a bench at the other end of the one-room hovel. Once she was seated comfortably, she unbuttoned her top to ease her young son's access to his dinner. With the toddler suckling merrily on a large, pink nipple, she rocked gently back and forth and hummed to him to keep him satisfied. "Tell me, Gunnvor, are you still nae with child? Your husband will be disappointed when he returns. We all heard the efforts he put into it before he left a fortnight ago."

"Nae, I'm not with child, Dagrún. Maybe I'm as barren as Haldor's first wife," Gunnvor said and stirred a large pot of mead she was cooking over the fire for the festivities she had planned.

"Mmmm. That was such a tragic case," Dagrún said and wiped her left breast with a small cloth after her son had finished feasting. "To imagine that she chose to walk into the bog... Sweet Gefion, I would nae do that... no matter what happened, I would never let myself drown in those murky waters."

"Nae," Gunnvor said quietly as she swept a strand of her red hair behind her ear.

Another knock on the door interrupted her dark thoughts, and she hurried over to it to greet the latest arrival. "Good eve, Ragnhild Skallgrimmsdottir," she said with a slight bow to the eldest woman of the settlement who had recently turned a near-ancient fifty-seven years of age. "As always, I am deeply honored and humbled by your presence."

"Thank you, child," Ragnhild said in a frail voice. "The mist is hard on my old bones... but the prospect of getting warm listening to one of your tales far outweighed the strain of the cold. I also came to see my sister. How is she this eve?"

"Oh, much the same, I'm afraid. The coughs are as strong as ever, though slightly further apart," Gunnvor said as she guided the elderly woman into the hovel and helped her take her cloak off.

Sighing, Ragnhild turned to look at the young redhead. "Aye. She does nae have far before she'll sit at the long table with our family. Oh... good eve, Dagrún, I dinnae see you at first."

"Good eve, Ragnhild Skallgrimmsdottir," Dagrún said and quickly rose to bow to the elder while her son was resting in the warm valley between her bare, full breasts.

With a smile, Gunnvor helped Ragnhild over to one of the two berths at the other end of the hovel. Once there, Gunnvor helped stir the woman resting on the berth but soon withdrew to allow the two elderly sisters to have some privacy.

She hadn't even made it back to the pot of mead before someone else knocked on the door. Shaking her head, she made a sharp turn to the right to get to it. As expected, her last two guests for the evening, the sisters-in-law Jórunn Hrodgeirsdottir and Brynn Gautstafsdottir, arrived in high spirits and with a merry song on their lips.

"Good eve, Jórunn, Brynn. Oh, I can see you've started without me..." Gunnvor said once she caught a glimpse of the somewhat disheveled appearance of Brynn who leaned on her sister-in-law's shoulder.

"Aye, that we did, Gunnvor! The sun was warm as was the mead," Brynn said and stepped inside the hovel where she took off her cloak and absentmindedly handed it to her companion. "And together, the two were irresistible. Oh, good eve, Dagrún! Do ye have room for one more over there?"

Dagrún laughed and scooted to the side of the bench. "Of course, Brynn. Good eve to the both of you," she said as she raised her top and buttoned it while she rocked her sleeping son on her other arm.

The tall, strongly-built Jórunn rolled her eyes as she hung her sister-in-law's cloak on a nail just inside the door, and put her own next to it. "Good eve, Gunnvor. Sweet Frigg, it's chilly enough to freeze the tits off the Fenriswolf out there," she said, flicking her shoulder-length, reddish hair free of the collar of her dress thus revealing her trunk-like arms that were the most visible results of the years spent working in her father's smithy.

"Well, in here you'll find warmth from the hearth, the mead and the company, Jórunn... and I'm sure we can spin a yarn or two that can give you a different kind of warmth," Gunnvor said with a wink and a smile as she hurried back over to the pot of warm beer to stir it before it burnt in.

Soon, the festivities were in full swing with tall - and not always pious - tales told in a round robin that was kept alive by frequent additions from Gunnvor when her sisters came to a stuttering halt.

The women continuously egged each other on into adding to the already outrageous story until they ended up with a mythical man and woman of such proportions and endowment they'd each need a wheelbarrow to go anywhere.

Shaking her head, Ragnhild Skallgrímsdóttir raised her hands in the air and shushed the others. "Nae, nae, nae, it cannae go on like this. Even the likes of me have a limit, you know! Let's start over... Jórunn, you go first."

"It would be my honor, Ragnhild," Jórunn said and rubbed her chin to find a good tale. "All right... many, many years ago, a woman sat by a petrified tree and awaited her husband's return from the northern islands. She counted the longboats that came in, but none bore the red snake of her husband's clan... Brynn...?"

The slightly inebriated Brynn looked up in surprise, and it took her several seconds to come up with a good continuation. "Uh... her long hair was braided... Dagrún."

"Nae, Brynn, you'll have to give us a bit more than that!" Jórunn said and reached over to thump her fist against her sister-in-law's shoulder, prompting the others to break out in laughter.

Chuckling out loud, Gunnvor heard one of her patients ask for water, so she left the round robin and took the dipper from the bucket. As she crouched down next to the young woman in the berth next to the elderly sister, a pang of regret for the unfairness of Mother Nature raced through her.

Yngvild Eyricksdóttir, seventeen like herself though taller and of a far sturdier build, lay flat on her back with a pained look on her face. "Water?" she whispered.

"Aye, water you shall have, Yngvild," Gunnvor said and knelt down so she could administer the liquid to the prone woman who had suffered an acute miscarriage three days before while she had been working in the field.

"Who is here, Gunnvor?"

"Oh, Dagrún, Jórunn and the incomparable Brynn. We are also graced by the presence of Ragnhild Skallgrímsdóttir," Gunnvor said and dabbed Yngvild's chin with a piece of cloth to wipe away a few droplets of water.

"I wish I could sit and laugh with you instead of wasting away here..."

"Your wish shall come true, Yngvild. Next time, you-"

"Nae," Yngvild said quietly and turned away from her helper. "I lost too much blood. My heart aches, and not just for the loss of my daughter. The Traveler should have taken me, too... there and then. Would have saved us all from so much grief."

Gunnvor didn't have a response to that, so she simply leaned down and placed a comforting kiss on Yngvild's forehead.

After checking up on the elderly sister and finding her to be comparably all right, Gunnvor went back to the hearth and put the dipper back down into the bucket, shivering from remembering the gruesome sight of Yngvild arriving at the hospital covered in blood and residue from her placenta, and nursing her grayish-black stillborn girl.

The next round robin soon came to a sticky end in the middle of a sentence with Brynn and Dagrún falling out and bickering over whose fault it was - Brynn for introducing a well-hung man-beast or Dagrún for killing him off instantly with a golden arrow sent by the great Huntress, the Goddess Freya.

Chuckling, Gunnvor raised her hands in the air and stepped between the warring parties. "Sisters, sisters... I call a truce. I can see the values of both stories-"

"Aye!" Brynn said strongly, jumping up from the bench.

"Aye, Brynn, but tonight is nae a night for arguing. It is a night for drinking mead, eating cheese and buttered bread, spinning yarns and spending time with our family. Let's show the teasing faery the door and return to creating a good time for all. Eh?"

"Well... all right," Brynn grumbled and sat down with a bump. After a brief pause, she put out her hand palm-up in the age-old sign of magnanimous defeat and waited for Dagrún to slap it - it didn't take long, and then everything was back to normal between them.

"Good," Gunnvor said and sat down, but before she could suggest starting a new story, Ragnhild Skallgrímsdóttir had cleared her throat.

"I remember when I was but a young girl," Ragnhild said with a dark gleam in her eyes, and instantly, the others piped down and turned their focus towards the elder, "there was another eve much like this one... the mist had rolled in from the bog and had brought the Pale Lanterns with it. A very dear friend of mine defied the warnings of the elders and ventured outside. She was a fearless girl, one who always tested the limits. Alas, this time, she nae should have."

Almost like he sensed the story becoming creepier, Dagrún's son began to whimper, but she comforted him by rocking him back and forth against her bosom.

"As the mist withdrew, so did the Pale Lanterns," Ragnhild continued, "but they left dancing elves in their wake to lure in unsuspecting fools. We could hear them as clearly as you hear me now... and my friend was outside. I begged, I pleaded with my father and my mother to let me outside to save her, but they told me nae. And rightfully so, because the elves took my dear friend with them."

Totally immersed in the story, Brynn took a deep swig from her mug of mead without even noticing she had already emptied it.

"Aye, she was gone the entire night and we thought we had seen the last of her. But come dawn, she returned, out of her mind from the horrors she had witnessed in the realm of the elves and the terrible Huldra, the Keeper of Souls. She danced for seven days and she danced for seven nights until she could nae dance anymore. From one step to the

next, she collapsed onto the ground... but even in the throes of death, her wide open eyes and her insane cackling proved that her once so strong soul had been stolen by the beings who lived in the bog."

The crackling of the hearth provided the perfect backdrop to Ragnhild's tale, and as the elder sighed and looked down to mark the end, it didn't take more than a large crack from a log to make all her devoted listeners jump where they sat.

"The marshes are dangerous," Gunnvor said quietly, refilling all the mugs of mead with the last from her pot.

"Aye, that they are, child," Ragnhild said and held out her mug.

Once everyone's mugs had been refilled to the brim, an eerie silence fell over the party, only broken by an occasional whimper or hiccup from Dagrún's son. "I have a story about the Dark Traveler," the new mother said quietly, holding her toddler closer to her.

"Go on, Dagrún," Ragnhild said and leaned back.

"Thank you. As I'm sure you all know, the Traveler can change his shape. He can come as your best friend, or your worst enemy. He can come as your husband, or he can come as your mother or father. Even his own father Loki, the mighty trickster, afears the Dark Traveler, and Loki has bathed in all the rivers of the world. When the Traveler came for my first child-" - once again, she held her son to her bosom - "he came as a woman I met at a market in the next village. How was I supposed to know that it wasnae her but the Dark One? I could nae, and I let him play with my firstborn. At first, everything was normal, but a few days later, my son started coughing. Whatever I did, I could nae stop the coughing... sometimes he turned violet in the face from the wretched coughing... and then he started bleeding from his mouth when he coughed. A mere six nights later he had nae more breath in him and he died in my arms... he was but a pup. The other settlers cast me out of their circle and then I came here, but that's nae the point I'm trying to make... sisters, fear the Dark Traveler. You never know when he comes."

Weeping, Dagrún pulled her child to her lips and offered him a little kiss on his pink forehead. "Och, fie me," she said when she noticed the others had fallen silent. "I've ruined the ev'ning for all. I beg forgiveness of you, it was nae my intention."

Brynn shook her head and held out her right forearm in a highly suggestive manner. "I hope when" - *hicst* - "the Dark Traveler comes for me, he comes in the" - *hicst* - "shape of a hard-up stud." - *hicst* - "That way I can" - *hicst* - "go out screaming," she slurred.

"Brynn!" Gunnvor said strongly. Jórunn didn't speak, she merely leaned across and thumped her sister-in-law again, only this time, it was hard enough to push her off the bench.

"Bugger it, I was jesting!" Brynn said, grappling around on the hay-covered floor to get back up.

"You shall nae jest more tonight, Brynn," Ragnhild Skallgrimmsdottir said coolly, and when she spoke, everyone listened.

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A fair while later, the evening drew to a close with Brynn being too drunk to stand and Jórunn helping her back to her own hovel. The sisters-in-law were sent away with the usual wishes for a safe homecoming, especially since the mist had withdrawn - Ragnhild's tale of the dancing elves had left a mark on all of them.

Dagrún was once again busy feeding her son, so Gunnvor helped Ragnhild Skallgrímsdóttir up from the wooden bench she had been sitting on the entire evening.

"Thank you, child," Ragnhild said, stretching out her back that responded by popping and cracking. The elder grimaced at the pains but politely denied the hand offered to her by Gunnvor. "Child, I have enjoyed your mead, your company and your tales. Tonight, I shall pray to Frigg, the Goddess of the Family that we will often meet under such circumstances in the future."

"I'm humbled by your praise, Ragnhild Skallgrímsdóttir," Gunnvor said with a slight bow. "Would you like to wish your sister a good night before you go?"

"Aye, child, I would like that very much."

"Please allow me to-"

Knock, knock

"Gunnvor, the night is cold so you had better see who that is. This old woman can take care of herself," Ragnhild said and put her aged hand on the young redhead's back.

"Aye, Ragnhild. Just call my name if you need help," Gunnvor said over her shoulder on her way to the door. As she unbolted and opened it, she expected to see Jórunn, back after something she had forgotten, but in her place stood another woman.

A breeze that chilled Gunnvor's bones to the marrow swept in from the opened door, but the new guest kept standing outside so she wouldn't appear to have hostile intentions. She was tall - taller than Haldor, Gunnvor noted - and she was dressed in an unusual, hooded black cloak that seemed to hide an equally unusual black dress. She wore a black scarf over the lower part of her face that only left her gracious brow and sparkling blue eyes visible.

"Good eve, fair maiden," the guest said in a silky smooth voice muffled by the scarf. "Can you offer shelter for a lone female traveler whose horse has gone lame?"

Gunnvor stood like in a trance, simply staring at the woman's bright blue eyes. She knew she was behaving rudely, but she could not tear herself away from the brilliant sight.

A choked-up burp from Dagrún's young toddler snapped Gunnvor out of her stupor and made her step aside. "Uh... aye... aye, I can offer you shelter. Come in. Please," she said, gesturing her guest inside.

The dark-clad traveler ventured inside and took off her cloak, revealing that she wasn't wearing a black dress as Gunnvor had first surmised, but a short, black tunic accompanied by sturdy riding boots and that most un-feminine of clothing items: long, straight pants.

Even beyond that shocking revelation, her hair was the color of the darkest soil in the bog: near-black with some dark brown strands here and there. A few long and carefully woven braids ran down from the sides and the back, but the rest was hanging loose.

Once again Gunnvor stared like she had rarely stared before - dark-haired women were as rare as hen's teeth in and around the realm of King Eysteinn, the sole ruler of the land they lived on.

"Such a stare, fair maiden. Have ye nae seen a woman before?" the stranger said in a voice tinged with mirth.

Before Gunnvor could gather her thoughts to answer, the guest walked further into the hovel and headed for the hearth. "Good eve," she said to Dagrún who was just finishing up wiping her breast after her son had completed his feast.

"Good eve. Is it nae a bit late for a woman to be out on her own?" Dagrún said as she buttoned her top and gently rocked her toddler back and forth to get the last burps out.

"Aye, it is. And I would nae have been had my steed not gone lame," the guest said. She quickly knelt down next to the hearth, holding up her hands against the flames. "I have walked beside it for a league... if nae more. Wretched Hel, you have some uneven fields here. I nearly took several tumbles," she continued, concentrating on the fire.

Gunnvor and Dagrún both furrowed their brows at the hard, shocking profanity uttered by the woman, but neither chose to make a comment since they didn't know the woman's story. Getting up, Dagrún collected the things she had been working on during the evening and stuffed them down a knapsack. "Gunnvor, I wish you a good night. It's time for my son and I to get some rest so we can be fit and ready for the chores of the morrow. Please wish Ragnhild Skallgrimmsdottir a good night from me, too."

"I will, Dagrún, and a good night to you, too. Do nae forget to light the heath so Mara will nae appear at your bedside. Eh?"

"I'll light one for my son, too, Gunnvor. Thank you and good night," Dagrún said and donned her cloak before leaving the hovel.

Gunnvor briefly checked what her new guest was doing - the tall woman was still warming her hands by the hearth - before she went down the other end of the hospital to check up on her two patients and to pass on Dagrún's well wishes to Ragnhild.

After giving Ragnhild Skallgrimmsdottir a proper send-off, Gunnvor dusted off her hands and rejoined her guest. There was something odd about the stranger, even beyond her unusual choice of clothing and her hair, but Gunnvor didn't dare ask about the details.

Instead she kept quiet and observed the tall woman's graceful presence. She had an air about her of strength, skill and danger, even down to the way her slender yet strong hands and fingers were shaped. *'And those eyes... Great Freya, those eyes... I have dreamt of eyes such as those...'* Gunnvor thought, biting her cheek.

The mysterious stranger seemed to have heard Gunnvor's thoughts as she turned to offer the young redhead a smoldering gaze with the very eyes that had weighed so heavily on her mind.

A burning sensation soon spread over Gunnvor's cheeks and throat, and she looked down to break the spell. "I beg for forgiveness. My manners are sorely lacking... I cannae offer you any mead as we have had it all, but I can heat up a mug of water for you if you so wish...?"

"I would like that, thank you. I suffered a cold eve and night on my way here," the stranger said and rose from her place by the hearth. In a few graceful steps, she crossed the hay-covered floor and sat down on a wooden bench.

While Gunnvor filled a dipper and poured it into the same pot she had used for the mead, she stole several glances at the tall woman, in particular at the unusual sight of shapely women's legs in pants.

The stranger chuckled and crossed the very legs Gunnvor was looking at. "Again I sense your interest in me. Tell me, am I really that unusual?"

"I beg for forgiveness, traveler," Gunnvor said and ducked her head. "I am but an uncouth peasant who forgets her place. It is clear you are a woman of some standing or even nobility."

"Nobility? Nae, child. Far from it," the stranger said with a dark chuckle.

"Oh... then I cannae understand why you wear such strange clothes," Gunnvor blurted out without thinking. She immediately groaned inwardly and ducked her head even further down between her shoulders.

The stranger leaned back on the bench and let out a strong - yet somehow silky smooth - belly laugh. "Och, fair maiden! Ye certainly have a way with words!"

"I beg for forgiveness..." Gunnvor mumbled as she took the boiling pot and poured some of the water into a mug.

"Nae, forgiveness I cannae give you, for ye dinnae insult me. I am Leika Asmannsdottir. What is your name, fair maiden?"

"Gunnvor Thorleifsdottir, Leika. And I'm nae a maiden but a married woman since two summers. To Haldor Sigurdsson who is visiting Heithaby for King Eystein's annual gathering."

"I see. Now I beg you for forgiveness," Leika said with eyes that sparkled with mirth as she took the steaming mug from the young redhead's hands.

Gunnvor mumbled a few unintelligible words as she went back to the hearth, but she still took a moment to sneak a glance at the tall, graceful figure.

"Aye, King Eystein Halfdansson's annual gathering," Leika said and crossed her legs the other way. "I was there, oh, what was it... four summers ago? Four... or maybe five, I cannae remember."

"You were at the gathering? But I thought the gathering was strictly for men?" Gunnvor said and went back to sit on another of the benches.

"Aye, it is. But I was there on business, so... it was dull. Large groups of important and not-so-important men in armor laying down their markers and claiming their territories. All speaking in words larger than any of them can grasp, simply because the man next to them had used such words and they dinnae want to look like imbeciles."

Gunnvor snickered and scooted a bit closer to the fascinating woman with the strange appearance - but suddenly, she remembered something her father Thorleif had told her when he had returned from one of the gatherings. "Wait... Leika, four or five summers ago? Was that nae when the old King Halfdan Hvitbeinn died?"

"Aye, it was, Gunnvor," Leika said and took a long swig from the hot water. "King Halfdan, so proud of the extent of his conquests that he boasted the Midgard Serpent could nae span his realm, that Odin's horse Sleipnir could nae ride from the east to the west, that the mighty Thor could nae throw Mjolnir from the north to the south... and yet, he forgot one. One, who had nae interest in the size of his Kingdom."

"Who?" Gunnvor said excitedly, moving even closer to Leika.

"Why, the Goddess Hel, child. The Dark Traveler. The ugly one, aye, the ugly one came to the great King Halfdan Hvitbeinn and claimed him to her bosom. He tried to bargain with her, he pleaded with her, he wept, he cursed... he died. Now, the old King resides in the nine worlds under the roots of the tree Yggdrasil until he is sent forth to

Valhalla or Folkvangr... neither wanted him at last count," she added laconically as she took another long swig of the hot water.

Gunnvor shook her head in amazement at the laid-back way her guest had told the exciting story. "Leika Asmannasdottir, I bow to your superior skills. I believed I knew how to spin a yarn, but I'm nae fit to tie your bootlaces!"

"Thank you, child. Just one of the many yarns I have collected in my travels. Gunnvor?"

"Aye?" Gunnvor husked with excitement shining through her every pore. She leaned even closer to her guest, nearly surrendering to the mysterious pull of the woman's bright blue eyes.

"You wouldnae happen to have another mug o' hot water, would ye? My throat is drier than a field after four weeks of drought," Leika said, smiling broadly enough to reveal that she had - most unusually - a full set of bright white teeth.

"Och, aye! Aye, I have so much water we could get a longboat to float in it!" Gunnvor said with a laugh as she bolted from her seat and hurried over to the bucket to prepare another dipper.

Behind her, the fair smile faded briefly, replaced by a far darker expression, but the smile returned when Gunnvor stole yet another glance at the tall, unusual woman.

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A muted plea for water from Yngvild Eyricksdottir a while later made Gunnvor shoot her guest a smile and a mumbled apology before she took the dipper and made her way to the two berths at the end of the hovel.

"Gunnvor, I dinnae think you had heard me. May I have some water, please?" the young woman said once Gunnvor went to kneel at the side of her cot. "I feel so warm... is it a warm night?"

"Nae, Yngvild... the night is cold. The mist rolled in earlier but it's gone now. Here, part your lips," Gunnvor and held the dipper ready at the young woman's weak mouth.

Once Yngvild had drank from the dipper, she sighed and leaned her head back on the hay-stuffed pillow where she looked vacantly at the ceiling of the hovel. Suddenly remembering something she had heard earlier, she turned her head towards Gunnvor and grabbed hold of her arm. "Gunnvor! Did you hear the horse whinnying before?"

"Nae... a horse, Yngvild?"

"Aye, a horse! It sounded like a big one. Could be a stallion... it was very close by. It sounded eerie... like a big lindworm."

Gunnvor chuckled and patted her ill friend's hand. "Yngvild, if it was a stallion, I'm sure it was nae a lindworm. Oh... but of course, mindless me... the horse you heard was the one my guest arrived on. She said it had gone lame."

"It dinnae sound like a lame horse to me... I work at the blacksmith with Jórunn and her father, remember? I know what a lame horse sounds like," Yngvild mumbled, pulling back her hand.

"Get some rest," Gunnvor said and rose. "You are pale and warm. A good night's sleep will do you well. I'll light the heath so Mara cannae come in. Eh?"

"Thank you, Gunnvor."

After checking the elderly woman in the other berth, Gunnvor dusted off her hands and went back to the other end of the hovel where her strange guest was waiting patiently. Just as she went past the door, a horse whinnying nearby made her come to a dead stop with her blood freezing over in her veins.

"Yngvild was right, that was nae a lame horse," Gunnvor mumbled and inched over to the door. With trembling fingers, she managed to unbolt the door and hold it ajar just enough to look out, fearing she'd find the terrible Huldra, the Keeper of Souls, or worse- trolls.

What she saw made her rue the decision to open the door at all: a horse, a black stallion, stood outside the hovel, not ten feet away from the door. It was no regular horse, but a three-legged creature with eyes like pools of fire, and dark, thick blood seeping down its black flanks and from its muzzle. "Oh Great Freya, the Helhorse!" Gunnvor cried and hurriedly slammed the door shut.

After frantically working the bolt, she scurried away from the door and into the center of the hovel where she clutched her head and rocked back and forth. "Great Freya... Great Freya I call upon you to save my guest and I from the..."

Only then did Gunnvor realize that the woman she had known as Leika Asmannasdottir had been transformed- gone were the beautiful features, replaced by decaying skin that had turned black and dark gray; gone were the perfect teeth, replaced by two rows of rotten stumps; gone was the tall, graceful build, replaced by a plump, troll-like body that nevertheless exuded a chilling menace. All that remained of Leika were her bright blue eyes that shone as grotesque pools of azure in the dark gray visage.

"Gunnvor Thorleifsdottir," the blue-eyed being said in a hoarse voice that seemed to come from all sides at once. She rose to her full height and held out her hands that had turned as dark gray and gnarly as the rest of her. "I have come. The Dark Traveler has come."

Gunnvor fell to her knees and turned her face away to hide the view of the hideous creature standing before her. "Fie thee, vile creature! Be gone from my humble abode!" she said and spat three times on the floor at the Traveler's feet, but her breaking voice rendered her curse less than effective.

The Traveler leaned her head back and let out a cackling laugh that sounded like a thousand cats being skinned all at once. "Och! Ye pitiful curse will nae work with me, silly child. Now rise and face death with the same dignity and spirit you faced life."

"M- my death? A- are ye nae here for the ill?" Gunnvor said and bumped back down on her rear. Large tears ran down from her eyes, leaving wet streaks across her cheeks before they slipped off her quivering chin.

"Nae, child!" the Traveler said and rolled her eyes. "Have ye nae heard any of the stories told here tonight? I dinnae think you were that thick."

"But why!? I'm young and fit... I'm healthy... I cannae die already!"

"Oh, ye cannae die, can ye? Child, die you can, and die you will," the Traveler said and moved closer to Gunnvor in a menacing slide. "I come for babes, maidens, wives, mothers and old crones. I come for all men, I come for all women. All will die, and die like all you will."

Gunnvor buried her face in her hands and started to cry; the Traveler took the opportunity to turn back to the benches. Once she reached them, her blue eyes shone with fire and she was transformed back into the shape that had called herself Leika Asmannasdottir.

"Now," she said in her silky smooth timbre, "I'm in good spirits on this eve. Aye, in good spirits. Call me weak in the head if you will, but I have always had a soft spot for redheads. Aye, 'tis true, 'tis true, Gunnvor... redheads were

always my weakness. That is why I would like to propose a challenge," she continued, sitting down on the wooden bench she had used earlier.

"A ch- challenge?"

"Aye, a challenge. You are a storyteller, and what better way to challenge a storyteller than to make her tell stories. Aye. Three stories, in fact. One story that will make me roar with laughter. One story that will make me shed a tear... and one story that will make me..."

When the Dark Traveler didn't continue, Gunnvor sat up and wiped her eyes with the back of a trembling hand. "Wh- what?" she whispered, dreading what she just knew would be a gruesome final challenge from the hideous creature.

"... make me fall in love with you," Leika said in a voice dripping with mirth and honey. A smile creased the Traveler's lips as she leaned back and crossed her legs. "For a storyteller as good as you, nae a problem you will have I'm sure."

"B- but... fall in love with me... I cannae do that, Leika. I am already married to Haldor Sigurdsson... it would nae be proper," Gunnvor stuttered with cheeks that had already begun to flush red.

"Och, sweet child..." Leika groaned and threw her arms in the air. "I know you have nae much experience in the field of love, but tell me you have nae felt a sizzling pang when you bewitnessed a strapping lad or lassie going about his or her business even after you were married to Haldor Sigurdsson... go on, tell me so."

"I... I cannae without making a liar of me," Gunnvor stuttered, ducking her head down between her shoulders.

"There, you see? Now, like I said, tell me a story that will make me fall in love with you," Leika and leaned forward to lock eyes with the young redhead.

Scrunching up her face, the Traveler's entire demeanor changed again and her voice changed with it, growing into one tinged with dark, haunting menace. "But if you fail one or if you fail all, I will claim you. Now."

The hard stare pinned Gunnvor to the ground with the strength of seven oxen, and she could hardly breathe from the intensity of the bright blue gaze. All she could do was nod frantically, so she did. "A- and if I succeed? If I can make you roar with laughter, shed a tear and f- fall in love with me?"

The Traveler's menace disappeared like the morning dew and she returned to the charming Leika. "Then I shall grant you a reprieve. Aye. You have my word, child. And I always keep my word."

Gunnvor gulped and reached for the water-filled dipper to try to get her nerves under control. Some of the water ended up dribbling off her flushed cheeks because of her trembling hands, but a fair portion of the invigorating liquid made it to her lips, wetting her suddenly bone dry mouth and throat in preparation for the three most important stories she had ever told.

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"I..." Gunnvor croaked, looking like someone had doused her fire with a wet rag. "I... need a moment to gather my wits. I'm nae much good at... at..."

Chuckling, Leika held up her hands and made herself comfortable on the wooden bench by putting her left boot up on the seat, showing off her well-shaped, svelte leg. "Think nae of me, child. I'm only here to enjoy myself," she said and leaned her head on her knee so she had a clear and unrestricted - if slightly crooked - view of the young redhead.

"I... all right." - Clearing her throat, Gunnvor shuffled back and forth near the hearth while she tried to sort through the funny stories she had in her collection. When she found one that she hoped would suffice to bring laughter to the lips of the vile being before her, she nodded to herself and gulped audibly. "Sv- Sveinnsthorp is a quiet place these days with our husbands away, but this past Einmonth saw a commotion the likes of which our little settlement had nae witnessed since two of our strongest men chased a hairy troll and the troll's wife and their three ugly children back into the dark forest from where they had come. The mere utterance of two little words was enough to strike fear into the hearts of even the bravest warriors, aye, that it did. Aye, this commotion had a name that we, the daughters of Frigg, are only allowed to utter in a whisper: bathing day." - the last words were delivered in a stage whisper that drew nary a response from the Dark Traveler.

Furrowing her brow, Gunnvor shook it off and continued, "If proof was needed, ye neednae look further than at the reactions of the four brothers Thorolf, Gunnar, Ranulf and Gendarr; all wider than the base of the tallest oak, all tougher than the soil in winter, all meaner than the stag when the deer are in heat, and what did they do...? They ran! Aye, they ran! Ran like their mothers and their fathers had been rabbits! If they had nae been stopped, they would have kept running, I'm sure, running until they had found the vast waters in the west where they would have met Aegir, the great God of the Sea and pleaded with him to take them on his back and swim to Lindis where they would finally be safe from their insisting wives as it is an isle where only men are allowed."

Gunnvor paused to recapture her breath and to take a sip from the dipper. While she did that, she sneaked a glance at Leika Asmannasdottir who seemed interested, but not exactly ecstatic. Worried, Gunnvor licked her lips and put the dipper back down into the bucket.

"If that had been all it would already have been enough, but as we who were there to witness the events know, it was nae all. Nae, nae, far from it. In fact, the worst was yet to come. And come it did! When the four brothers Thorolf, Gunnar, Ranulf and Gendarr had already bathed, when Sveinnsthorp's maidens, wives and old crones had already bathed, when even the youngest newborns and the yet unborn babes still in the bellies of their mothers had already bathed... the worst finally came... it was time for Tryggvi the Bear to bathe."

The story's development seemed to make Leika's lips crease ever so slightly so Gunnvor jumped on it at once and took off at full speed.

"Now, when Tryggvi came to our settlement, we said, och, we cannae tell... are you a man or a bear? When Tryggvi spoke, the elders said, och, we cannae tell... are you a man or a bear? When Tryggvi undressed and stood as proud as a stallion in the spring ready to mount his wife on the night of their wedding, his wife said, och, I cannae tell... are you a man or a bear! A man he was! Aye, a man so hairy we couldnae tell where the hair ended and Tryggvi began. 'Tis all true, I nae spin long yarns when I say this. If I tell lies, may Odin strike me down with a- ...uh, uh..."

Gunnvor looked up, suddenly realizing that what she had been about to say could come true if she didn't take care - Leika was merely smirking.

"Uh... may Odin... och, fie that," Gunnvor mumbled and shook her head. "And now it was time for Tryggvi the Bear to bathe. The Bear saw the great tub with the bathing water, he smelled the cleansing herbs and the freshness of the others in the air, he heard the splashing of many legs of many fair maidens frolicking at the edge of the tub... and Tryggvi the Bear fled! Aye, like a big Shetland horse with his wild mane and hair flowing behind him he fled, fled until he couldnae flee any more... then he fell to the ground, whimpering, crying, wetting his pants and the ground

he had fallen on! Aye, Tryggvi, the man, the bear wet his pants and the ground. Afraid of the water was he, aye, afraid of that most invigorating of all liquids, water."

Leika Asmannasdottir looked slightly bored, so Gunnvor decided to go all out and introduce the age old remedy for bored listeners - the mention of bare skin.

" 'Tis all true, I nae spin long yarns when I say that seven naked virgins could nae lure him to the tub, seven mature women with their voluminous breasts bared could nae seduce him to the tub, and seven strong warriors with sweat pouring from their bodies could nae drag him to the tub, nae! Nae, it took seven naked virgins, seven women with seven pairs of mature breasts and seven cursing, sweating, groaning warriors working together to carry the Bear to the tub!"

This colorful description finally garnered a reaction by the Traveler who sat up straight and puckered up her lips.

"At the tub," Gunnvor continued with her right arm gesturing wildly and the left resting on her hip, "he resisted bravely, aye, he resisted like an oxen sent to the slaughter, but it was to no avail. His carriers dumped him in the water where he splashed, he squealed, he nearly drowned... and then he laughed, aye, he laughed, he frolicked in the water! Can ye imagine that? Aye, after all the madness, Tryggvi the Bear actually enjoyed the water!"

Gunnvor panted from the performance that had come to a close. When she looked up at her guest with the dipper held ready at her lips, she saw to her great horror that the Dark Traveler's face had returned to its regular stoic expression.

"Uh... uh..." Gunnvor stuttered, racking her brain to come up with a humorous punch line that would make Leika roar with laughter - as the challenge called for - when the original ending of the exaggerated tale apparently hadn't been able to.

"Uh... Tryggvi's wife suddenly came to the tub. She was nae upset by the seven naked virgins washing her husband's rear, nor by the seven half-naked mature women washing her husband's front... nae, she was upset over something markedly different, though what, we others only discovered when Tryggvi stepped out of the tub. The wife stood at the edge with her hands akimbo and her face the color of a thundercloud in Solmonth. She looked at her husband and then looked again. When she had looked twice, she looked at him a third time to make sure Loki was nae trying to pull the wool over her eyes, 'What have ye done?!' she cried with her fists clenched, 'That is nae my husband! Fie that vile, ill-nourished youngling, I need my Bear back!' Aye, she even tore out her own hair at the sight of the clean, bare man who stood before her in all his naked glory. You see, his wet hair stuck to his body, his wet beard stuck to his body, his wet mane stuck to his body all the way up and down and left and right... revealing that he was in fact nae a hulking bear of a man at all, nae, he was a mere seven stone weakling with nary a muscle anywhere on his body,

and..."

When Gunnvor realized the story didn't touch Leika in the least, she let out a deep sigh and bumped down on her rear in the middle of the hay-covered floor. "I give up," she croaked with a throat as dry as the inlet at low tide. "I cannae make you roar with laught-"

In the few seconds where Gunnvor had taken her attention away from her vile guest, the eyes of the tall, dark-haired Traveler had begun to sparkle, and she soon let rip with a cackling belly laugh that nearly made straws of thatch rain down from the roof of the hovel. "Child! That was priceless!" the Traveler said and slapped her pants-clad thigh. "Aye, 'twas! Och, can ye imagine what went through the wife's head at the sight of a skinny puppy of a husband? Priceless!"

"Fie me..." Gunnvor croaked and buried her face in her hands. "That took ten summers out of my life, that did..."

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On Gunnvor's way back from checking up on her two patients and helping the elderly sister to a sip of water, she briefly looked out of the front door to see if the Helhorse was still there - an angry whinny followed by a few flashes of fire from its eyes proved that it was.

'The second part of the challenge is to make the Dark Traveler shed a tear,' she thought as she paced the hay-covered floor, 'but how can I make death shed a tear? Nae with a story about death, that's for sure. Nae, it would need to be about... about life. Aye, life and... and... love. And a reunion. Aye!'

Gunnvor stopped pacing and took a long look at the graceful figure relaxing on the wooden bench. She had to admit that of all the shapes the Traveler could have chosen to appear in, the one calling herself Leika Asmannasdottir wasn't the worst one imaginable. "Leika, I am ready for the next part of the challenge."

"Then off you go, child. I await your story with bated breath," Leika said and made a flowing gesture with her hand.

"All right," Gunnvor said and cleared her throat. She pulled a wooden chair over to sit on, but changed her mind almost at once and stood up straight so she had room for a performance on the hay-covered floor between the benches and the hearth.

"Two score and- oh..." Gunnvor said, interrupting her tale when she realized her guest's bright blue eyes were shining so intensely they nearly took her mind off the important matters. Grunting, she pulled the woolen belt off her dress and tied it around her head. Once it was in place and covering her eyes perfectly, she cleared her throat and got set.

"Two score and seven years ago, Bjarni Thorsteinsson and Sigríð Svantesdóttir, a husband and a wife, a proud woodsman and an equally proud seamstress, received word from the wife's homeland on the fair isle of Funen that the wife's mother and father had fallen gravely ill. Distraught, the wife packed a knapsack with food and dry clothes on the same day. The woodsman was distraught, too, for he loved his wife dearly, and yet he couldnae leave his task behind and escort his Sigríð as the pair dinnae have children who could take over the job of felling for the King's navy, the work that provided silver in his pocket and food on his table. The very next morn, Sigríð set off after assuring Bjarni that she would return before the sun set for the tenth time and that she would love him until Ragnarok would ravage the earth."

"The tenth morn came and Bjarni was as excited as a young colt seeing the meadow for the first time. During the absence of his beloved Sigríð, he had nae slept well, he had nae eaten well and he had nae uttered two words to anyone. The tenth morn went and Bjarni put on his best boots to walk to the coast to wait for the boat that would bring his Sigríð back to him, walking there with a spring in his step and a merry song on his lips. The tenth eve came and he arrived at the coast, watching with expectancy at the empty berths where he knew the ferryman would arrive with their passengers after the forty-hundred strokes needed to cross the belt between the mainland and the fair isle of Funen. The tenth eve went, the glorious sun set, the torches were lit, and ultimately, the darkness of the night fell upon Bjarni as he waited for his beloved Sigríð who had nae come back yet, despite her promises of returning before the sun set for the tenth time."

"Others waiting for loved ones had joined Bjarni at the berths, but they dispersed when it appeared the ferries would nae arrive. Bjarni stayed, for he loved his Sigríð dearly and wouldnae dream of leaving her stranded like that if she came during the darkness of the night. Alas, the eleventh morn came without word from Funen. As the glorious sun rose above the horizon, Bjarni scouted out over the belt and could see nae man nor beast nor ferries, though there was a peculiar pale gray haze over the fair isle on the other side of the belt. Worried, he stayed at the berths hoping that someone could bring him some news."

"The eleventh day fell to darkness without news, and by now, Bjarni was worried that he would never see his beloved Sigríð again. No ferries had returned to the berths at all, and he knew it could nae be for a good reason.

When a knarri heavily laden with crates and pigs finally arrived at the berths late on the eleventh day, Bjarni ran down to it, grabbed hold of the captain and demanded news from Funen. Alas, the captain had nae come from Funen but from Heithaby so he could nae tell Bjarni news. Distraught, Bjarni went into a small stretch of forest nearby, took the axe he had made himself and applied his skills the entire night, chopping, cleaning, smoothing the trunks he felled until he had so much wood he could build a shed to live in while he waited for news."

"On the thirteenth day, he finally received news from Funen, but it was nae the news he had hoped for. A warlord from Scania had raided the village Sigrig had visited, killed many and had taken even more as thralls to be sold at auctions. Out of his mind with grief and rage, Bjarni took his axe and cut off his beard, aye, his glorious, braided beard, and he took his axe and cut off his hair, aye, his glorious, braided hair, and he cried to the sky, cried to Odin and to Frigg that he would stay and wait for his beloved Sigrig to return until his beard and his hair would grow so long that birds would nest in it, that toddlers could play in it, and that the Goddess Freya, the great Huntress, could stage an entire wild boar hunt in it! Aye, that he did!"

"Bjarni Thorsteinsson kept to his word. As he waited for his beloved Sigrig, the seasons changed around him. Aye, summer begot autumn, autumn begot winter, winter begot spring and spring begot summer, over and over he watched the seasons change. He froze in the winter, he suffered in the summer, he watched how the spirits rose among the spry young men and fair maidens in the spring, and he watched how the leaves colored and ultimately fell in the autumn... but he was determined to fulfil his promise for he truly loved his Sigrig."

"Bjarni's hair had become so long a sparrow had used it to nest in. Bjarni's beard had become so long that a young pup of a boy had used it to play hide and seek with his mother while they waited to go on a ferry, and one night, Bjarni heard the great Huntress Freya herself ride her steed through it, chasing the fanged wild boar, shouting with glee at the strange, grayish-red forest she found herself in... aye, Bjarni Thorsteinsson had kept to his word."

"Then one morn... one glorious morn, a ferry approached with a ferryman and but a single passenger. A woman, an old crone dressed in a coarse, black dress that reached to the ground, with gray hair that was so long she needed to hold it up with her hand so she would nae fall in it. The ferry swept up to the berth, and once the ferryman had secured it to the bollard, the old crone stepped out and set off in a fast stride, determined to get home to the husband she had left behind some two score and seven years earlier."

"She made it nae further than the sandy shore. Her eyes fell on the old, wooden shed built just inland and recognized the craftsmanship of her beloved husband. Confused and with a trembling heart, she strode closer to the shed, worried that her ancient eyes had been stricken with an illness that made her see things that were nae there at all. She knocked upon the door, but dinnae get a reply. She opened the door and looked inside and saw to her heart's unbridled delight that the shed had truly been built by her husband... because he was right there, snoring loudly in the earle of the morn with a hair and a beard long enough for a bird to nest in it! Aye, by Odin! Aye, Sigrig Svantesdottir had returned from the fair isle of Funen! Returned after her ordeal and now she was there, at her beloved husband Bjarni's side after all those years."

"She gently awoke Bjarni who could nae believe his eyes. 'My Sigrig, is that really you?' he said, running his ancient fingers over his wife's ancient face that carried so many furrows he could nae fully recognize her... until she smiled. Aye, when Sigrig smiled, all doubt was cast from Bjarni's mind... this was his beloved Sigrig, back at his side after all those years. He had turned gray, as had she. His hair was to the ground, as was hers. They were together at last, and they loved each other just as much as they had when they had bid each other farewell some two score and seven years earlier."

"If ever there was any doubt, the kiss they shared proved the naesayers wrong as it was a kiss only two people who love each other very much could share. 'Sigrig, my beloved Sigrig,' Bjarni said, weeping over his wife's reappearance, 'I will never let you go again. I will remain at your side until you nae want me there anymore.' - 'Och, Bjarni,' Sigrig said, 'that will be the day where I take my last breath. Come, let's travel home. I have so much I need to tell you.' And travel home they did, spent their lives together they did, and love each other so dearly nothing can come between them ever again, they still do!" Gunnvor said and took a bow.

Breathing heavily, she reached up and removed the blindfold with a trembling hand. She found herself turned away from the Dark Traveler, and at first, she didn't dare look at the blue-eyed being out of fear of what she would find. Gulping down her terrors, she slowly turned around and prepared for the worst.

She needn't have worried - Leika Asmannsdottir sat still with her cheeks glistening from the large teardrops she had wept. As the two women locked eyes, Leika reached up to wipe her cheeks and eyes, and then stared in disbelief at the crystal tears that had transferred to her fingers. "Och... Gunnvor Thorleifsdottir, I have grossly underestimated you... you have made the Dark Traveler weep..." Leika said in a strangely choked-up whisper.

A short while of rest and recuperation later, Gunnvor glanced up at the Dark Traveler who had settled down after the tears she had shed. *'Now I have to make her fall in love with me... nae, not 'her', a creature of the underworld. A woman she may appear to be right now, but I saw the true blackness of her heart and her body and it was horrible,'* she thought, shivering from remembering the Traveler's disfigured form and decayed, dark gray skin.

"Nae, child," Leika suddenly said, spooking Gunnvor quite badly, "my true form that nae was. I have nae true form, I am simply here, there, everywhere, and at all times."

"Y- you can hear my thoughts?" Gunnvor stuttered, clutching her hands to her bosom.

"Aye, I can. What you behold here is what you wanted to see. Aye, the face you make right now is proof enough," Leika said with eyes that sparkled with glee from the look of shock and guilt on Gunnvor's face. "Is it possible that Gunnvor Thorleifsdottir, respected minder of the ill in Sveinnsthorp and devoted wife of Haldor Sigurdsson has a thing for blue eyes set in a female visage? Nae to mention the rest of the way Frigg has put together the female body?"

"It goes far deeper than the mere body, Leika... but I'm different from the other women here, I know," Gunnvor said quietly.

"Nae, child, they are different from you."

Gunnvor furrowed her brow trying to figure out what her guest had meant by that. When nothing came to her, she sighed and made herself ready for the third and final part of the challenge.

Blushing, she unbuttoned the two shoulder clips holding her dress in place and let the coarse cloth pool on the floor by her bare legs. The undergarments soon went the way of the dress and left her standing like the day she was born.

Twisting slightly to the side so she wouldn't be so exposed, she put her hands across her stomach and tried to let her natural grace guide her through the awkward situation. The orange flames from the fire reflected in the very light sheen of nervous perspiration that covered her smooth planes and tender curves, and created quite a spectacle that would make it impossible for the being from the underworld not to fall in love with her, or so she thought.

At the sight, Leika closed her left eye and studied the naked form of the young redhead with her right, moving from the top to the toe. "Gunnvor, I feel we have spoken past each other. I nae mentioned I wanted to take you, I am quite certain of that. Put your dress back on."

"B- but..." Gunnvor said and grappled around for her undergarments with tears springing to her eyes when she realized she may very well have failed the final part of the challenge. "B- but, the elders and my m- mother have always told me that... that... my hus- husband would... that I needed to..."

"Gunnvor, in Bjarni's and Sigrid's story," Leika said and rose from the wooden bench to move over to the blushing redhead, "what was the driving force behind them? It was nae raw lust, was it?"

"Nae... it was love," Gunnvor whispered.

"Aye, it was love," Leika said and held up the woolen dress so Gunnvor could button the shoulder clips. "There, all good and new. How did your husband court you? Were you nae in love with him before you got married?"

"Nae, we... my father and my mother, and his father and his mother took care of all the details even before Haldor and I met for the first time. In fact, I dinnae see him at all until three days before the ceremony."

"So you are nae in love with him?" Leika said sharply, moving Gunnvor's red hair free of the collar of her dress.

"I care for him a great deal! He's a kind and gentle man, Leika. If I could only provide him with an heir, everything would be-"

"How strange," Leika said and abruptly moved away from Gunnvor.

"Strange? Wh- what is strange?"

"That someone so inexperienced in the art of love can make a cynical old crone such as myself fall in love with you. The first time I clapped eyes on you, I became infatuated," Leika said with those very eyes sparkling and reflecting the fire. "I dinnae come here for you at all, but for the two ill beings in there. Though when you looked so delightful I simply had to try my luck. Thus the idea of the challenge was born. When you spun your humorous yarn, it only grew worse, that feeling you created in me... and when you told the tale of Bjarni and Sigrid, I realized I had been smitten, that I had completely and utterly fallen in love with you."

Gunnvor's jaw fell further and further down her chest until she had such a slack look on her face a crow could have flown in and out of her mouth without her noticing a thing. "I beg for forgiveness, Leika... I must be mistaken... did you just say you dinnae come here for me at all... and that you have fallen in love with me?"

"Aye!"

"But... but the challenge? It was all for naught? Will I live and nae die?"

"You will live... for now," Leika said with a blinding smile that revealed her perfect teeth.

"I... I cannae believe it... I cannae believe a word of what you're saying! None of it was necessary? You were merely playing a sick and cruel game with me? Aye, you truly are an evil, vile creature with the blood in your evil veins the color of the blackest pitch!" Gunnvor suddenly barked with her fists firmly clenched, finally spitting three times on the floor at Leika's feet.

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Leika took a large step closer to Gunnvor and forced her taller frame into the shorter woman's space. "Be mindful of what you say, Gunnvor. I have been known to change my mind on a whim."

"Be gone, Hel! For are you nae Hel herself? You cannae have me now!"

"Hel I am, but do nae tell me what I can or cannae do," Leika said menacingly and put a hand on the left side of Gunnvor's face.

Gunnvor moaned in pain as a deathly chill permeated her entire being, spreading a horrible, tingling numbness from her cheek and further into her body.

"Nae..." Leika said and removed her hand with an angry growl. "It is nae your time. Wretched woman, I cannae have you... but I dinnae come all this way from my realm to yours to go home empty-handed. I shall have what is rightfully mine, the two frail beings in there."

"Och, nae..." Gunnvor croaked, clutching her face where the tingling would not go away.

"Och, aye!" Leika said and stomped across the hay-covered floor to get to the berths at the other end of the hovel.

Behind the arguing women, someone suddenly thumped repeatedly on the door to get the bolt to release. After the third thump, the door flew open and Jórunn, Brynn and Dagrún rushed inside followed slightly more sedately by Ragnhild Skallgrímsdóttir.

"Gunnvor! Take care, the Helhorse is outside! She's nae who she seems to be!" Jórunn cried, pointing at the tall, beautiful woman with the bright blue eyes.

"I know, Jórunn," Gunnvor croaked, rubbing her cheek to get the sense of dead flesh to go away.

Leika clenched her fists and growled from the base of her throat. Her eyes shot blue fire as she looked at the four women who had come to rescue their friend. "Foolish, wretched women! What do you think you are doing? I shall claim you! I shall claim you all!" - with those words, the beautiful Leika Asmannsdóttir disappeared for the last time and re-emerged as the hideous, disgusting Dark Traveler in all her decaying, black and dark gray ugliness.

"Oh Sweet Freya, come," Ragnhild cried with her hands pointing at the sky, "Come and save us from the-"

"Praying to Freya will nae save you, foolish old crone," the Traveler growled on her way over to the berths, spitting venom with her two rows of rotten stumps, "for my father is Loki, the great trickster, and my brothers are the Fenriswolf and the Midgard Serpent and none of us need to bow to any of those you can pray to! We are all above those you can pray to!"

Brynn - still somewhat tipsy from the mead she had consumed earlier in the evening - rushed forward with a sword in her hand, waving it at the plump and troll-like, yet menacing Traveler. "Gunnvor! Fear the Traveler nae, we shall" - *hicst* - "all protect you!"

"Brynn, nae!" Jórunn cried and grabbed hold of her sister-in-law's collar before she could do anything stupid, making the tipsy woman lose her balance and end up on her rear end right in the middle of the floor.

The Traveler looked with some amusement at the drunken wannabe warrior and her motley group of female companions. Shaking her head, she locked her bright blue eyes onto Ragnhild's paler blue ones and shot the settlement elder an intense glare that made even she who had seen most things in her fifty-seven years look down. "Ragnhild Skallgrímsdóttir, one fine day, your heart shall stop while you're overseeing the work in the field. You shall die. Jórunn," the Traveler said with quiet menace as she moved from one woman to the next, "your death shall be quicker. A bull you're shackling shall trample you and crush your chest. Aye, you shall die, too. Brynn, your death shall be messy and painful. A babe cut out of your belly and a skull cleaved in two shall be your punishment for becoming pregnant with the wrong man. Aye, death will claim you. Dagrún, your son shall die before you-"

"Nae!" Dagrún whimpered, clutching her hands to her face.

"Aye. One glorious morn, he shall be gray and lifeless as you wake up."

"Nae!" Dagrún cried and tore out of the hovel.

"Aye, he will," the Traveler whispered menacingly with an evil smile creasing her dark gray lips. "Then she will enter the bog and drown in the murky water. Aye, they shall both die. And you, Gunnvor, you shall die, too. But nae will I tell you when, nor how, nor why. Nae, all you can do is wait for me... wait for the Dark Traveler to return and take you below to the nine worlds under the roots of the tree Yggdrasil where you and I shall spend the rest of time together."

A few tears escaped Gunnvor's green eyes, but she clenched her jaw and stared defiantly at the black and dark gray abomination, determined to maintain her dignity for as long as she could.

"Mmmm! Now stand aside and let me do what I came for," the Traveler said and began to shuffle closer to the two berths. All of a sudden, the hideous creature disappeared almost like a hole had been made in the air.

A brief moment later, both Ragnhild's elderly sister and Yngvild, the young woman who had suffered a miscarriage, screamed in unbridled terror at the other end of the hovel.

"Yngvild!" Gunnvor and Jórunn cried as one and hurried down to the berths - they were too late. Ragnhild's sister and Yngvild were both dead, lying twisted and frozen in terror with gaping mouths and vacant eyes.

"Och, fie that wretched creature! They dinnae deserve that! Look at them!" Jórunn said, reeling at the grotesque sight. Burying her face in her strong hands, the blacksmith's daughter turned away from the berths and ran back into the central part of the hovel.

Sighing, Gunnvor moved over to her departed friend and put a hand over the young woman's blind stare to close the eyelids. Behind her, Ragnhild came to do the same with her sister, and Gunnvor quietly left the berths to give the settlement eldest some privacy.

"Gunnvor Thorleifsdottir, are you all right?" Brynn slurred once Gunnvor came back to the hearth. "I mean, you are nae dead, are you?" she continued, trying to focus her somewhat blurry eyes on the young redhead.

"Nae, Brynn, alive I am... but Yngvild Eyricksdottir is nae, the poor girl," Gunnvor said with a resigned shake of the head. Sighing, she went over to her friend who was still sitting in the middle of the floor, and put out her hand.

In a mighty heave-ho, the scrawny Gunnvor managed to drag the heavier Brynn to her feet, but the drunken woman could only stagger four steps before she fell down again - fortunately, she landed safely on the wooden bench that she had just barely reached in the meantime.

"Brynn, you fool," Jórunn growled, using plenty of water from the dipper to wash her face so no one could see that she had been weeping over Yngvild's death.

The sounds of a baby boy who was most decidedly unhappy with being awoken in the middle of the night heralded the arrival of Dagrún and her son. Flushed and upset, Dagrún came into the hovel carrying a reed basket where her child was crying and grappling around in thin air with his little fingers and toes. She looked in bewilderment at the flaked-out Brynn before she sat down on the wooden chair by the hearth and put the basket in her lap.

"Aye, by Thor!" Brynn suddenly slurred, chuckling drunkenly, "I know the woman who conquered Hel, the" - *hicst* - "Goddess of Butt Ugly!" she cried, waving a hand in the air at the woman in question, Gunnvor.

"Brynn," Jórunn said and threw the dipper back down in the bucket where it made a mighty splash, "I swear to Odin and every other God I can think of that if you nae keep from uttering such tripe and trash, I will thump you so hard your eyes will close and nae reopen until the sun has set three times! Sister-in-law or nae!"

The threat finally seemed to get through to the drunken Brynn, and she huffed and made herself comfortable on the bench.

"Jórunn, please," Gunnvor said and put a calming hand on the strong woman's shoulders. "Brynn is nae an evil person... she just cannae take the mead as well as the rest of us can. We shouldnae have a fight between us. We know too much now to fight. Is that nae right, Jórunn?"

"Mmmm," Jórunn said, nodding to the young redhead. With a wistful smile gracing her features, she reached out to pull Gunnvor into a tender hug. "Aye, we know too much," she whispered into the red locks. When the two friends separated, Jórunn's eyes slowly traveled down and came to a rest on the bard's pink lips that seemed to give her permission to-

The sweet kiss came as a complete surprise to Gunnvor, but she wasn't about to complain. The contact was brief but highly effective, and as the bard and the blacksmith's daughter moved apart sporting tingling lips and a blush or two, they gave each other's hands a life-affirming squeeze that held a promise of an even closer friendship in the future.

Behind them, Ragnhild came shuffling back into the central part of the hovel and sat down with drooping shoulders and cheeks glistening from the tears she had shed over her departed sister. "My companions," she said, and as usual, everybody stopped talking and paid attention to her. "My friends, we have work to do. Aye. The ancient rituals must be followed. I... I have already begun weaving a shroud for my sister. It's at home. I knew death would nae be long in coming for her, though I had hoped we would have more time. But Yngvild needs a shroud, too."

"Aye," the others all said, nodding somberly.

Later, four of the five women present - Brynn had finally succumbed to the mead and the lateness of the day and was snoring merrily on the bench - operated the large loom by feeding the weft and woof threads from two reed baskets filled with wool, and moving the shuttle across the surface.

"Thank you for carrying the loom here, Jórunn," Ragnhild said and put an old, frail hand on the younger woman's much stronger arm.

"It was my honor, Ragnhild Skallgrimmsdottir."

Behind them, Dagrún's son let out a sudden, cheery babble that made all the adults laugh and coo at him.

Standing at the center of the loom, Gunnvor looked around at her friends who had all been told how they would die and yet tried to go about their business as if nothing had happened. She knew the subject hovered just below the surface and that she needed to address it before it could come between them - and what better way to address it than with the very thing she had done to touch Hel herself: tell a story?

"Brynn who cannae hear me, Dagrún, Jórunn and Ragnhild Skallgrimmsdottir..." she said and nodded respectfully at the settlement eldest who smiled in return, "as we weave the shrouds that will help keep our sisters warm on their journey to the great halls where they shall feast with their families until Ragnarok shall ravage the Earth and reunite us all, please allow me to spin a yarn. Aye, a yarn which in I tell the tale of five friends and a young boy who knew they would die, but who insisted... aye, insisted! On living life to the fullest until their final moment would come..."

When the others nodded or grunted their approval of the story, Gunnvor cleared her throat and went off spinning a yarn of friendship and love, of humor and darkness, of life and ultimately of death - and doing so with a gleam in her eye and a smile creasing her lips.

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THE END of FEAR THE DARK TRAVELER

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TAYLOR MACKENZIE & THE WRATH OF LADY ALICE

by Norsebard

A quarter to midnight on October Thirty-First, the graveyard on Forsythe Road on the outskirts of Redmond was dark, quiet and very foreboding. A faint north-westerly breeze that rustled the bare trees and blew the fallen, dead leaves around the graves and headstones was the only sign of life.

A few moments later, the quiet was shattered by distant yells and laughter, and the sort of crass, vulgar language so typical of a group of late teens from the wrong side of town.

As the group of five teenagers - three young men and two women - walked along the deserted suburban road, they passed through the cone of light from the only fully working street lamp in the entire neighborhood. All five were dressed in hip street clothes; sneakers with loose shoelaces, baggy cargo pants in various camouflage-patterns, and hoodies advertising well-known brands of sports equipment.

On their way past the old metal gate that led to the graveyard, Robby Norton, the natural leader of the group because of his nineteen years and six-foot-two frame, put a half-empty bottle of vodka to his lips and took a healthy swig before passing it onto his heavily made-up girlfriend of the week, Jessie Martin - neither bothered to take a second look at the ornamental gate from the mid-nineteenth century they were going past.

"Yo, Robby, take a look at this, bro..." Nicholas Walters, the self-proclaimed number two of their little gang said, pointing at the gate. "Yo, Robby! We can siddown in there, bro... they've got benches and shit."

"Yeah?" Robby said and stopped walking. When Jessie didn't, he wrapped his arm around her shoulder and pulled the seventeen-year old brunette to a stop.

Nicholas wiped his nose with the back of his hand and nodded hard, making his hoodie bop up and down. "Yeah, bro... check it out. A graveyard for Halloween, bro, it's feckin' perfect."

From her position at the back of the group, Taylor Mackenzie, the youngest at a tender fifteen who - despite her mother's protestations - was trying very hard to fit in with the rowdy bunch, pried the hand of her drunk admirer, Jake Azzopardi, off her chest and stepped up to the metal gate. "It's closed," she said, giving it a good shake.

Robby came back to the gate and began to size it up. "We're the Gangsta Krew, nothing is closed for us," he said and gave the lock an almighty kick. The first impact made the old, rusty hinges creak and groan, but the gate stayed in

place. "What the feck? Piece of feekin' shit... I'll feekin' show it who's the boss around here," he continued and really put weight behind his next attempt.

"Wait, Robby! It's a graveyard... you can't just kick-" Taylor said and tried to grab Robby's sleeve, but her words had no effect on the determined leader.

The next kick was successful, sending the gate crashing open and nearly falling off the old hinges.

"Awright, bro! You da boss and we da Gangstas!" Nicholas shouted, reaching for the bottle of vodka. When Robby wouldn't let him take it, Nicholas' hands quickly fell down his sides.

Turning around, Robby took a large swig of said bottle, creating two small rivers of vodka that ran down his cheeks until he wiped them off with the sleeve of his hoodie. "Yeah!" he shouted. "Time to par-tay!"

Taylor grimaced and rubbed her chin, not feeling particularly ecstatic over the prospects of partying on somebody's grave.

The others members of the small group had fewer inhibitions and hurried through the opened gate with Robby and Jessie taking the point. In the excitement, Jessie attached her lips to his, and they were soon necking so hard it looked like she was devouring his face.

A few minutes later, the noisy, unruly group of teens arrived at a small, paved recreational area in the center of the graveyard where the park authorities had put up a stone bench, a mesh waste disposal bin and a winter-proof faucet where the visitors could get water when they wanted to tend to the graves.

High above the stone bench, a single street lamp had been erected to keep the area well-lit during the evening hours, but like so many other things in the slightly run-down part of Redmond, it had been neglected to the point of only working in an on-off pattern.

The stroboscopic effect created by the blinking lamp sent Nicholas into a wild state, and he jumped up onto the stone bench and tried to perform a zombie-like shuffle. "Whaaa! Look at me, bro! Look at me, I'm a feekin' zombie!" he shouted, trying his best to shuffle around on the flat slab of stone.

The others duly laughed at his antics, except Taylor who was so creeped out by the foreboding location that she - of her own free will, for once - clung onto Jake who didn't seem to mind the attention.

"Zombie! Yaaaaaah!" Nicholas yelled, nearly falling off the top of the bench as he made a pirouette at one of the corners.

Chuckling, Robby reached down and gave Jessie's buttocks a good squeeze. "Baby, before that fat putz falls down and breaks his neck, why don'tcha go up there and show him what a zombie shuffle really looks like... huh?"

"Okay, Robby. I got a better idea... join me," Jessie said, grabbed Robby by the front of his pants and dragged him behind her.

Climbing up onto the slab of stone, Jessie pushed Nicholas down off it and began to perform a highly provocative routine that was closer to a lap dance than a zombie shuffle. Robby quickly followed her up on the table to experience the full effect of the wiggling teenager, grinning like a Cheshire cat through the whole act.

Taylor felt her cheeks burn at the vulgar show and looked away, glancing out over the deserted graveyard. The graves weren't well-kept anymore, but she remembered her mother telling her that from its consecration at the turn of the last century, it had been one of the biggest graveyards in the county. The deceased had been laid to rest from a fairly simple chapel, but it had burned down in a thunderstorm in 1999. After that, the city council had decided to stop using the graveyard, but kept it in fairly good condition.

As Taylor let her eyes roam across the headstones, she couldn't help but shiver at the thought of being so close to so many dead people - unfortunately, Jake misinterpreted her shiver and began to grope her chest again.

"Gettin' inspired by the dance, huh? Wanna neck?" he said, but his booze-laced breath in her face made her turn away rapidly and elbow him in the ribs. "Owch! Whaddafeck you do that for?" he continued, nursing his side.

"You stink, man!" Taylor sneered, shying away from her drunk admirer.

"Whaddafeck'a you know? Stupid little..."

"Get fucked, sonny boy!" Taylor said, throwing him a gesture that simply could not be misinterpreted.

Up on the table, Robby shot the two of them - mostly Jake - a dirty look before going back to enjoying his girlfriend's dance.

Nicholas was quick to take advantage of the situation and moved back to wrap an arm around Taylor's slender shoulders. "Hey, hey, hey... I'm always ready and willin' if ya lookin' for a new stud, babe."

"Yeah?" Taylor said, snuggling up to the overweight Nicholas to spite Jake.

"O-yeah."

"I'll think about it."

"You do that... hey, bro! I got myself a new girlfriend, bro!" Nicholas said, thumping his chest.

Rolling his eyes, Robby removed his hands from Jessie's hard-dancing rear end and jumped off the stone bench. "Yeah, right... is she your first?"

"Uh... naw, bro..." Nicholas said in a voice that tried to be cocksure, but a slight tremble betrayed him - as did the blush that crept up his cheeks.

Robby leaned his head back and emptied the bottle of vodka in a single gulp. "Come on, Gangstas! Let's have some fun! Woouooooo!" he shouted and threw the empty bottle into the darkness where it promptly shattered against a headstone. "Let's go feckin' mental!"

Mental was the only word that could describe the vandalism that followed. Not wanting to be part of it, Taylor stood in wide-eyed shock and witnessed her fellow Gangstas kick down headstones and the bushes surrounding the graves, tear up the sparse vegetation lining the aisles and even throw around the very few flowerpots and bouquets that had been put on some of the most recent graves.

All Taylor could do was to cover her mouth with her hands as she felt her heart hammering away in her chest at the awful sight. Deep down inside, she felt like a creep for not doing anything to stop the vandalism, but at the same time, she doubted that she could have made her so-called friends stop no matter what she would have said or done -

save for calling the police. However, that wasn't even an option as her mother had taken away her phone for a week as a punishment for running with the wrong crowd.

Once the worst of the berserker rage had left Robby and his cronies, he dug into his hoodie and grabbed a spray can that he proceeded to shake thoroughly. "We're gonna give 'em a little fix-up!" he shouted. "Yeah, man... a feckin' fix-me-up in red, man!"

The first several headstones he came across were simply smeared with red doodles, but when he found a larger headstone that Nicholas had kicked over, he got down on his knees and gave the can a strong shake to make it work longer. "Suck... my... dick...!" he said out loud as he sprayed the words onto a dark headstone that was in remarkably good shape despite being situated in one of the oldest parts of the graveyard.

Beautiful, golden letters meticulously carved into the stone proclaimed that this was the final resting place of Lady Alice Cunningham née Seymour, 1904-1936, but Robby didn't care - the red paint went everywhere, covering every letter.

As he sprayed the final K in 'dick', the can ran dry and he simply chucked it over his shoulder. Leaning back on his thighs, he observed his work of art. Finding it to his liking, he nodded and let out a jubilant whoop as he jumped to his feet.

Taylor took a few staggering steps down the aisle with the vandalized headstones. While Robby and Jessie did their worst to gnaw their faces off behind her in a vodka- and rage induced rush, Taylor looked at the ruined golden letters and felt so bad that tears began to sting her eyes.

Knowing that her friends would bully her mercilessly if they caught her crying, she sniffed angrily and assumed a tough, detached pose. Suddenly, as she looked at the name on the headstone - lit up by the infrequent blinking of the street lamp at the recreational area - a thought she couldn't quite connect to anything flashed through her mind.

'Lady Alice Cunningham... why do I know that name...?' she thought, scrunching up her face in deep thought. *'There's something about that name... something Mom has told me... but what...? God, she was only thirty-two when she died... brrrr. Creepy.'*

"Yo, Taylor, you coming or what?" Nicholas said from a million miles away.

"Uh... whut?"

"It's midnight, babe. Listen," the portly Gangsta said and pushed back his hood so he could put his hand behind his ear in a cartoon-like pose.

Taylor pushed her own hood down - revealing her spiky, honey-blonde hairdo that had caused her no end of grief with her mother - and listened to the distant church bells heralding the arrival of the witching hour. A shiver ran down her spine and she hurriedly put her hood back up, hoping that the thin fabric would be adequate protection from the ghouls and ghosts that were bound to come out now.

"You feckin' coming or what, Taylor?" Nicholas said, once again dragging Taylor away from her own little world.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm coming," Taylor said and shoved her hands into the pockets of her hoodie. "For what, anyway?"

"For what... feck, for the jimmies, babe! Jesus, the feckin' kids today!" Nicholas said and began to shuffle back to the stone bench where the others had already assembled.

"Oh... b- but I don't smoke..."

"You wanna belong to da Gangsta Krew, don'tcha? Gangstas smoke jimmies. Take it or leave us, babe. Don't mean feck to me," Nicholas said and upped the tempo to get back to the others before they could snatch all the best marijuana cigarettes.

Taylor gulped audibly and briefly slowed down, but her need to be accepted by the group was stronger than her fears, and she continued on.

Fifteen minutes later, all the Gangstas were sitting around the stone bench smoking jimmies. Robby - already on his second cigarette - was playing with his Zippo, constantly flicking it open and shut.

When he got bored with that, he casually reached over to ignite a rectangular flower decoration lying next to them on the bench that Jessie had taken from one of the graves - within seconds, the bone dry flowers were burning merrily.

"Oh man, that's creepy," Jessie said around a deep whiff of her cigarette.

"What is?" Robby said.

"Look at that..." she said and pointed at the burning decoration. "It says, I'll Love You Forever... and we're burning it..."

Robby took another whiff of his own cigarette and broke out in a weird snicker. "Burning hot love... that's what I got for ya right now, baby. Wanna see it?"

"Yeah," Jessie said in a matching snicker.

"You really wanna see it?"

"Yeah...!"

Robby snickered even more weirdly and began to unbuckle his cargo pants.

Sitting at the other side of the bench next to the snickering Jessie, Taylor didn't want to see anything of what Robby had to offer so she hurriedly closed her eyes. She had barely touched her jimmy, but the weed was so strong and the air so thick with smoke it had already begun to play tricks with her inexperienced mind.

Even with her eyes closed, she was able to see the graveyard as clear as day, sensing all kinds of weird colors float in and out of reality. Large purple drapes fell on all the Gangstas, enshrouding them in grotesque, colorful shadows. The voices of the others became slower and more distant, alternately rising and falling in pitch, and ultimately ceasing altogether.

When she realized she couldn't hear the others speak anymore, Taylor opened her eyes and looked around, only seeing odd, discolored patches of light where the other Gangstas should have been.

Her jumbled mind began to struggle against the intoxicating smoke, working at fever pitch to tell her that she needed to get out of there at once while she still could. Struggling to her feet, she took a step backwards but promptly fell over the bench she had been sitting on.

A strange, rolling sound reached her ears and she realized it was her so-called friends mocking her. Feeling her gut burn from the intense smoke and the even more intense guilt, she climbed to her feet and staggered off into the graveyard itself to get away from everything.

Twenty paces on, she fell again, ending up on her hands and knees at one of the graves. Her mind was going at a million miles an hour to compute all the illogical, psychedelic things she was imagining, but she felt reality slowly slipping away from her, and that frightened her so badly that she couldn't stop a stream of tears from running down her cheeks.

Crawling like a toddler, she moved ahead until she could feel cool, moist soil under her palms instead of the coarse crushed stones in the aisle. She tried to look up, but couldn't focus at all - though she sensed more than registered that the grave she had found was the one with the red graffiti; Lady Alice's final resting place.

Through sheer willpower, she managed to turn herself around and sat down with a bump on the outside of the grave. Feeling helpless and alone, she looked up at the blurry, purple sky and cried out for help in a voice so weak it didn't even carry back to the stone bench.

The thought had barely left her foggy mind before the soil on the grave began to shift right in front of her. At first, she just stared at it, thinking that it was another hallucination, but then a pale hand became visible through the top soil.

The pale hand was quickly followed by an equally pale arm that slowly dug its way out of its clammy prison, but the head that eventually became visible was anything but pale - it clearly belonged to a woman who had a full head of pitch black hair.

By now, Taylor was staring at the horrible scene with eyes as wide as saucers, but she was still too influenced by the effects of her laced cigarette to truly comprehend what was going on.

Her limbs were so heavy she couldn't move an inch, she had trouble breathing properly and her heart was hammering away in her throat as she witnessed the darkly clad creature stretch up and show itself fully.

The creature in the grave sensed Taylor's presence and turned around to look at her through a pair of bottomless, cobalt blue eyes that flickered like they were made of hellfire. Using very little effort, the creature pulled itself out of the grave and crouched down on top of it like a big spider with its two long legs suspended on either side of the small pile of soil it had pushed aside.

"Taylor," the she-creature said in a raspy - yet crystal clear - voice that echoed in and out of Taylor's mind. "You shouldn't have desecrated my sacred home."

"I d- didn't! Th- that was Robby! Wh- who... what are you?" Taylor croaked in a tiny voice.

"Lady Alice."

"La- Lady...? I re- remember you!" Taylor croaked. "Mo- Mom told me about you... fr- from the lib- library! She to- told me you we- were a..."

"A sorceress, yes," the creature said in Taylor's mind. "The narrow-minded people back then thought a stake through my heart would kill my spirit as well as my body... it did neither. I have merely been sleeping. Until now," the dark Lady continued, looking at her ruined headstone.

Taylor tried to get up but found that in her weakened state, gravity was still too tough an opponent so she bumped back down with a groan. "It wasn't me..." she said quietly.

"Will you show me who it was?" Lady Alice said and creased her lips into something approaching a demonic grin - however, all it did was to give Taylor a bad case of the shivers. "These bad people you mingle with... are they friends of yours?"

"Fr- friends? They're... they're not my friends... only Jessie," Taylor said darkly, running her filthy hands across her face that felt as rubbery as a basketball.

"In that case, you wouldn't mind if we played a little with them, would you?" the strange creature said and rose to her full height.

"P- played with them? Wh- what do you mean?" Taylor said. From her position near the ground, the creature seemed to be seven foot tall and she had to lean her head back to take in the entire devilish apparition.

"Make them suffer," Lady Alice said with such icy detachment that Taylor's heart nearly stopped beating.

"I don't want them to suffer... I'm not a bad person..." Taylor said in a tiny voice, leaning forward to clutch her throbbing head in her hands. "I'm just trying to fit in... but they always treat me so bad... except Jessie... she really is my friend..."

At first, the creature cocked its head, but ultimately shrugged and slid silently off the grave.

Moving like a shadow, Lady Alice slid over to the next grave and knelt down in front of it. After putting her hand on the damp soil, she took a gliding step back and waited for the first of her companions to arrive - she didn't have to wait long.

A few moments later the soil began to shift, and before long, a vaguely humanoid - yet undeniably demonic - figure had finished digging its way out of the grave. Standing at six-foot-three, the gray-white, hairless demon had a human-like body but a face that was anything but. It had two large eyes and a nose, but instead of a normal mouth, the beast had two fully exposed rows of shark-like teeth.

Its first thought was to show its undying obedience by kneeling in front of the dark Sorceress.

"Rise, my old friend," Lady Alice said, putting her hand on the other creature's bald head and caressing it tenderly.

As the toothy beast got on its feet, the dark Sorceress ran her fingers down its cheek. "Wait here until I summon our old companions."

Grunting, the creature nodded and stepped back into the shadows.

Taylor had been watching the demonic proceedings with wide, frightened eyes, but as the gray-white beast stepped back and the dark Sorceress moved over to the next grave, an unnatural calm fell over her and she simply settled down to observe the otherworldly scenes with a strange curiosity that surprised even herself.

Three minutes later, two further demons had joined the dark Sorceress and the toothy beast - the first was a faintly red humanoid with piercing yellow eyes, and the other was a shorter and far skinnier creature that moved slower and that didn't seem to be as mutated as his fellow demons, save for a pair of unusually large hands.

At first, Taylor couldn't understand what the skinny demon could do compared to the others, but when it opened its mouth and let out a stream of insane, high-pitched giggles, goosebumps broke out all over her young body.

Stepping behind her companions, Lady Alice raised her arms in the air, straining the coarse, dark robe she was wearing to breaking point. "Denizens of Hell!" she said in a raspy voice that echoed through Taylor's mind. "The time for retribution has come! They have defiled our homes... we shall defile them. Onwards, my brethren! And spare no living soul!"

With that command, the three demons jumped into action, headed straight for the group of unsuspecting Gangstas who were still sitting at the stone bench, smoking their jimmies.

On its way there, the red demon briefly turned towards Taylor, but a raised hand by Lady Alice made it change its mind. Grunting, it carried on towards the bench.

Taylor felt sick to her stomach - even in her foggy state, she knew exactly what was about to happen. As the red demon had eyed her, she had forced herself backwards into the low vegetation that separated the graves, but now she climbed back out and staggered to her feet, supporting herself by holding onto the vandalized headstone.

She tried to rub her face again, but the odd, rubbery feeling persisted. All around her, garish colors, shrill sounds and the demonic creatures came together in a nightmarish cocktail that scared her witless - and yet she had somehow known deep in her heart that the dark Sorceress would intervene before the red demon could do anything to her.

Lady Alice slid silently back to Taylor and put a cold, pale hand on the young girl's shoulder. "You should watch. It'll be the last time you'll see them," the Sorceress said in a raspy hiss.

"No! Jessie is my friend! Please spare her!" Taylor howled and tried to shake her head, but the movement worsened her condition and she nearly keeled over from the strain. Sobbing, she let go of the headstone and slipped to her knees.

"Mmmm," Lady Alice said and turned her attention back to the stone bench and her fellow demons. With a faint nod of her dark head, she set the inevitable events in motion.

At the table, Nicholas stubbed out the last remains of his second marijuana cigarette and looked around at his fellow Gangstas. The jimmies had been far stronger than usual, and even the experienced user was heavily affected by the laced weed.

Suddenly feeling a pair of hands around his portly waist, he thought that Jessie was finally going to reward him for being such a studly Gangsta, but when he looked to his right, he saw her slumped over with her head resting on her arms. "What the...?" he slurred and tried to get up, but discovered that something was pinning him to the bench.

Looking down, he spotted a pair of scaly gray-white hands. The information had a hard time getting through to his fuzzy brain, but he finally realized that he was in trouble.

At the other side of the stone bench, Robby stared at the bald, toothy demon that was standing directly behind Nicholas, seemingly poised to inflict pain on the chubby Gangsta. Not believing his eyes, Robby did the only thing he could in that situation - he pointed at the demon and began to laugh; an insane, drug-induced cackle that grew in intensity until it became so violent he could hardly breathe.

The laughing tore Jessie from her slumber and made her jerk upright. Looking around in a daze, she stared wide-eyed at the three demons that had surrounded them. She opened her mouth to scream, but the only sounds she was able to produce were grotesque gurgles.

Then everything happened at once. The pandemonium sent the toothy demon into a frenzy and it opened its mouth fully to wrap its two rows of teeth around Nicholas' skull. With a gruesome crunch, it bit the back part of his head clean off, sending a cascade of blood and brain matter all over the stone bench and the people sitting there.

That pushed Jessie over the edge and she clutched her head and began to scream, shrieking so fiercely that the toothy beast grunted and shied back from her in surprise.

Seeing his friend fall forward with only half a head made Robby scramble to his feet and try to get away - still cackling like a maniac - but he bumped into the skinny demon before he had made even a single step. Robby's insane laughing was matched to the note by the demon that calmly reached up and put its large hands on the sides of his face.

For a few moments, a hysterical cackling match of insane proportions was fought between Robby and the odd creature - but in the end, the skinny demon won comprehensively when it crushed Robby's head between its hands as effortlessly as squashing an overripe melon.

Jessie and Jake knew they had to escape before they'd meet a similar fate to their friends, so they scrambled from the stone bench and took off in a frantic run.

The toothy demon was too slow to follow them, but the red creature and the giggling beast did their best to keep up with the madly rushing teens as they sprinted across the graveyard, shrieking at the top of their lungs.

"God, no..." Taylor croaked, once again trying to get on her feet. "They didn't deserve to die...! Wh- why did you kill them?"

Lady Alice cocked her head and shot Taylor a puzzled look. "You ask why? What a strange question. They were bad people. Look at what they did to my headstone. They desecrated my home, Taylor. I cannot let that go unpunished."

"W- will you kill me too?"

Grunting, the dark Sorceress put a cold hand under Taylor's armpit and helped her up. "Why should we kill you? You told me you didn't do it. Did you lie to me?"

"N- no... but Jessie didn't do it either! I know her m- mom, and... and... it would... c- could you at least spare her...? Please?"

"Why?" Lady Alice said coldly, looking away from the young, sobbing girl and out over the dark, foreboding graveyard where her demonic companions had managed to drive the last two Gangstas into a corner.

"She's my friend! Please...!" Taylor said, trying to stand on her own.

The only reply she got from the dark Sorceress was a brief wave of the hand that made the chasing demons stop and look back at her. "Hmmm. Come," Lady Alice said, suddenly dragging Taylor with her.

The two mismatched figures quickly crossed the graveyard from the vandalized headstone to the small cul-de-sac where Jessie and Jake had been trapped, with Taylor stumbling along the gravelly aisles and Lady Alice seemingly gliding above them.

All three remaining Gangstas looked like they were ready to fall apart; their faces drawn, pale and haggard from the horrors they had lived through and the aftereffects of the laced cigarettes. When Jessie saw that Taylor was alive, she let out a heartfelt sob and tried to reach her, but the red demon intercepted her before she could make contact.

Again, Lady Alice waved a hand slightly, silently telling the demon to withdraw.

Once Jessie was free, she stormed forward, wrapped her arms around Taylor and began to sob inconsolably, mumbling nonsensical words through her hoarse crying and appearing much younger than her seventeen years.

Taylor didn't know what to do so she just began to rub her hands up and down Jessie's back and returned the nonsensical whisper, looking at the dark Sorceress who was watching them with an unreadable, icy expression on her face.

After a short while, Lady Alice's lips creased in a brief smile and she reached up to point at the crying Jessie. "Is she the one you wanted me to spare?"

"Y- yes!" Taylor croaked.

"Mmmm. And him?" Alice continued, turning around to point at Jake who was still so drunk from the alcohol he had consumed prior to smoking his jimmy that he didn't know what was up or down.

"I... I d-... I don't care," Taylor whispered, closing her eyes as she kept her firm grip on Jessie's back.

"Mmmm," Lady Alice said again, waving her hand.

A split second later, the red demon jumped forward and attacked Jake, forcing him backwards into the tall hedge that surrounded the cul-de-sac. With an earsplitting howl, it set itself alight.

The red, demonic fire quickly transferred to Jake's clothes and his body, and soon, he was burning like a candle, flailing his arms madly as he tried to douse the flames.

Jake's unrestrained screaming made Taylor open her eyes wide and stare at the cruel, gruesome scene. Shying back, she and Jessie tried to use their friend's shocking death to slip away, but Lady Alice was too quick for them and grabbed hold of Jessie's hoodie.

"Halt. I have not yet decided on her fate!" the dark Sorceress growled in her raspy voice.

Taylor broke out into an angry sob and tried to yank Jessie back towards her, but the she-demon was far too strong. "You promised!" she cried angrily. "You promised you would spare her!"

"I did? You are mistaken," Lady Alice said and grabbed Jessie around the neck, causing the teen to cry out in pain and reach for Taylor with wide, frightened eyes. "You are gravely mistaken," Alice continued and started to twist her wrist.

Crying out in terror, Taylor grabbed Jessie's hands and arms to pull her out of the demon's grip, but before she had time to try anything, Jessie's vertebrae snapped with an audible crunch. As her head lolled grotesquely to the side, her hands became limp and fell from Taylor's grasp.

"No! No! No!" Taylor screamed, but it was already too late for her friend.

Lady Alice let go of the dead teenager and watched with interest as the body slumped to the ground and landed in a boneless heap. "She will never desecrate anyone's home again..." she said with an evil smirk.

"You m- you monster! You promised...!" Taylor cried, clutching her head.

"Girl!" Lady Alice barked, clenching her fists to bring forward her three demonic companions. "You shouldn't call others what you are yourself. You had the choice to save your other friend, but you let him burn. What are you, little girl? We. Are. Alike."

"No!" Taylor screamed and spun around to run away, but the toothy demon had snuck up behind her and quickly slammed its hands down on her shoulders to pin her down.

The dark Sorceress came up to stand very close to Taylor and began to caress her cheek with her pale fingers. "Mmmm, yes we are. I came because I recognized a kindred spirit. You. You killed your friends. We were merely your subjects, carrying out your bidding."

"No... no...! NO!" Taylor screamed and began to struggle to get away from the pack of demons.

When her struggling proved futile, she let out a pained moan and tried a different approach - by twisting and wiggling, she was finally able to break free of the toothy demon's grip.

As soon as she was free, she set off running back towards the place where it had all started, the vandalized headstone. With her young brain short-circuiting from all the terrors she had witnessed, she threw herself onto the moist soil and began to rub her hands on the red paint, hoping that if she could remove the graffiti and bring the luster back to the dark headstone, the demonic creatures would disappear and her friends would return to life.

Unfortunately, all she succeeded in doing was to get her hands filthy and bloodied. Soon, her blood was smeared all over the headstone, adding a diabolical, crimson sheen to the golden letters. When she noticed, she started sobbing but didn't still her frantic movements - instead, she went at it twice as hard.

The dark Sorceress slid silently up to stand at her own grave. Observing Taylor's frantic rubbing, she cocked her head and allowed a brief smile to crease her dead lips. "I always reward those who show me respect by offering their blood. Come, Sister. Come home with me... you'll fit right in," she said as she reached out towards Taylor with a cold, pale hand.

Suddenly jerking upright, Taylor looked around the deserted graveyard with eyes as wide as saucers. Everything was deathly quiet, save for a distant police siren and a church bell that struck one a.m. Coughing, she looked towards the starry sky and was relieved to find it black instead of purple. Her throat was so raw that she had trouble breathing, and the coughs that came as she staggered to her feet were very painful.

The headstone she had been leaning against was dedicated to 'Lady Alice Cunningham née Seymour, 1904-1936' and the red graffiti that Robby had smeared on it was still there, but there was no sign of her blood.

Her hands were sore, but when she checked them for cuts, she only found little pebbles from the aisle and cakes of dark, moist soil. After cleaning her hands on her pants, she began to rub her arms, freezing to the core from the low temperatures and the horrible images she had seen in the bad trip.

Sighing deeply in relief over the fact that it had all been a drug-induced nightmare, she began to move away from the grave and staggered across the gravelly aisle to get back to her fellow Gangstas at the stone bench; her sneakers leaving indents in the loose, crunchy gravel.

When she realized that her friends had left her all alone in the scary graveyard, she let out a groan and scrunched up her face in disappointment. '*Feck... they didn't give a shit about me... I coulda frozen to death back there. A-holes,*' she thought, rubbing her arms to combat the chill that was sneaking up on her. "I don't want nothing to do with them... buncha feckin' A-holes!" she mumbled as she turned around to get back to the metal gate at the entrance to the graveyard.

"Oh, I might as well go downstairs and make myself some warm milk," she mumbled as she got off the bed and snatched a satin kimono from a chair next to the nightstand.

Once she had swept the kimono around her sleeping wear - a tank top and boxer shorts - she tied the belt and shuffled down the stairs to get to her kitchen.

Twenty minutes later, Beatrice was no closer to finding rest. The strange sensation in her stomach had grown worse, and she absentmindedly ran her hand back and forth across her belly to try to get it to calm down - it wasn't the first time she had experienced such pains, but it had been a long while since they had been so persistent.

Crossing the linoleum floor with a second glass of warm milk, she sat down at a small table overlooking the street. She briefly moved the curtains aside to peek out and found the street as deserted as she had expected.

The sensation in her stomach grew stronger and she was worried she'd eaten something that didn't agree with her - maybe in the salad she'd quickly slapped together after coming home late from work - but even as those thoughts went through her mind, she knew it didn't stem from something as simple as that.

Out on the street, a dark shadow that moved into her line of view from the left caught her eye. Moving the curtains aside again to see better, it didn't take her two heartbeats to recognize the black and white pattern on the side of the vehicle that trickled very slowly past her lawn; it was a police cruiser, and although the lights weren't flashing, it was clear they were looking for something.

The split second the cruiser came to a stop in front of Beatrice's house, the uneasy sensation in her gut exploded into a burning pain, and she felt like someone was stabbing her with a glowing poker.

Forgetting all about her warm milk, she jumped up from the kitchen chair and raced into the living room. Just as she tore open the front door, the two officers stepped out of the cruiser and looked at her.

The somber look in the eyes of the two officers told Beatrice all she needed to know: they had come to her house to tell her something bad had happened to her sister. The pain in her gut grew so strong that she doubled over and let out a groan; clutching her stomach, she took a staggering step sideways but was soon intercepted and held steady by a pair of strong hands.

Beatrice looked up into the bluest eyes she had ever seen to offer a brief thanks, but not even the soothing nature of the female police officer's eyes could stop the waves of pain that rolled over her.

"Miss Caine?" the woman with the blue eyes said. When she registered the faint nod Beatrice sent her, she guided the distressed woman over to a couch in the living room. "I'm Officer Sarah Kelso, this is my partner, Officer Joseph MacNiff."

"Good evening, Miss Caine," the other officer said, holding his cap in his hand.

When Beatrice didn't seem to fathom what was going on beyond another faint nod, Sarah moved around so she was face to face with the young blonde. "Miss Caine, it's with deep sadness that we must inform you that earlier tonight, your sister Belinda Caine was fatally injured in a hit and run on Winter Road. Please accept our sincere condolences."

"Oh God, no..." Beatrice croaked, doubling over on the couch. Her chin started quivering but the tears didn't come.

"I'm afraid so," Officer Kelso said somberly.

"She's in pain..."

Sarah Kelso sighed deeply and ran a hand through her dark hair after shooting her partner a sideways glance. "No, Miss Caine, your sister is in a far better place. The first assessment from the coroner is that she died instantly. Most likely, she never felt a thi-

"She's in pain! I know she is... because I am!" Beatrice shouted and jumped up from the couch. Moving surprisingly quickly, she hurried over to a sideboard where she grabbed a picture of herself and her sister.

The picture wasn't new, but it had been their favorite. In it, the two sisters were playing to the camera by posing next to a mirror, pretending to be each other's reflections - the joke was created by the two women wearing identical expressions but different clothes.

"Something's wrong with her! I kn- know it... the terrible pain... we get it when the other is... is... in tr- trouble. Ever since childhood!" Beatrice croaked and moved back to the couch where she gave the photo to the officer with the ice blue eyes.

Sarah took the picture frame and looked at it. She had to do a double take when she realized that Beatrice and Belinda were identical twins. She had heard of the special, near-mythical connection between twins, but she hadn't been willing to believe it. *'Looks like I may need to reassess my opinions...'* she thought - "Look at this, Joe," she said out loud, holding up the frame for her partner to see.

After looking at the photo and at the pale, drawn face of the surviving sister, the other officer grunted and put the frame back down on the sideboard.

Beatrice suddenly took a deep breath and forced herself upright. "Where is she? Where did they take her? I need to see her... I need to be with her. Now."

"Look, Miss Caine," Sarah Kelso said and rose from the couch. "Your sister was taken to the city morgue, but I cannot stress enough that you shouldn't go there. Your sister was very badly injured and it's not their job to... well, to make her presentable. Please, Miss Caine, don't expose yourself to that. You'll only torture yourself."

Beatrice sighed so deeply it sounded like the weight of the world was on her shoulders. "I appreciate the concern, Officer Kelso, but it's something I need to do. I... I won't get rest unless I do," she said, clutching her burning stomach.

._*._*._*

Twenty-five minutes later, the police cruiser pulled up to the gates at the city morgue. Rolling down the driver's side window, Sarah Kelso put her arm on the windowsill while she waited for one of the security guards to come to them.

Looking to her right, Sarah could see by the stoic yet vaguely terrified look on the young blonde's face that the news hadn't yet sunk in fully. The blonde was still clutching her stomach, but Sarah didn't know what to think of that.

The nightwatchman was slow in coming to them, so Sarah cast a glance in the rear view mirror at Joseph MacNiff who had volunteered to sit in the back. His face also told a story, though it was one of disgust - after all, the back seat of a police cruiser wasn't the world's most inviting place.

When the security guard finally lumbered up to the police cruiser and started debating with Sarah about the finer details of arriving at that time of night, Beatrice tried to get her mind to function. The pain in her gut was as intense as ever, but she couldn't work out why that would be. *'Unless the police have made a mistake... maybe it isn't Belinda in there at all... maybe she was in the accident but they haven't found her yet... maybe it's Belinda's friend...'*

oh, what was her name... Sandy? Maybe it's her. Ma- maybe it's Sandy... oh dear God, please let it be Sandy, Beatrice thought as the cruiser rolled into the inner courtyard of the city morgue.

Sarah quickly found somewhere to park and walked around the cruiser to open the door for their passenger. "Miss Caine, it's not too late to reconsider," she said quietly. "We'll take you back home and see to it that a female psych officer will spend the night with you. Then tomorrow, your sister will be released to an undertaker of your choice, and-

"No, Officer Kelso!" Beatrice said strongly as she stepped out of the police vehicle. "I need to know for sure."

Sarah took a step back and studied the dark look on the blonde's face. Though she was concerned about the surprising lack of tears, she was experienced enough to see that regardless of the validity of her own arguments, this was one battle of wills she wouldn't win. "All right. But I'll go in with you. You'll need some support. Joe, would ya mind waiting here?"

"No problem, Sarah," Joseph said and hurriedly opened the door to get away from the horrible back seat.

The mood in the endless, monochrome corridors inside the city morgue was cold and hostile, and it didn't help Beatrice's general state of mind that everything was bathed in a hard, high-contrast light that shone down from the many strip lights in the ceiling.

Here and there, numbers and arrows painted on the walls at intersections acted as guides and proved there actually was a human element to the otherwise oppressively impersonal morgue.

At one of the arrows - showing the way to Examination Room 03 - Sarah Kelso put her hands on Beatrice's shoulders and steered her down the next hallway until they were standing at a frosted glass door clearly labeled ExRm 03.

Beatrice came to a slow stop. No matter what she did, her legs wouldn't carry on, and the large aluminum door knob ahead of her seemed to mock her with its detached passiveness.

"Beatrice, it's still not too late," Sarah said quietly. "We can turn back now if you want."

"No. I appreciate that you give me the option to pull out, but... but I need to..." Beatrice said in a voice that trailed off into nothing. She sighed deeply and tried to stuff her ice cold hands down into her jeans pockets, but even that simple task proved too much for her. Swallowing a choked-up sigh, she reached for the door knob instead.

The room was smaller than she had anticipated and smelled vaguely of a chemical detergent, no doubt to keep down the inevitable stench of decomposition. Five biers had been wheeled into the deathly quiet room, though only two were in use. The two bodies were covered by white sheets that didn't reach all the way down, leaving two pairs of bare, sickly pale feet sticking out at the bottom.

From the many crime dramas Beatrice had watched on TV, she had expected to see a luggage tag tied to their big toes, but that had been replaced by a small plastic strip containing a barcode.

The inanimate lumps on the biers nearly made Beatrice lose the little content she had in her stomach, but she was determined to see out the gruesome task. One of the two bodies was clearly a larger man so she went over to the other on legs that were so numb and trembling she could hardly feel if her shoes were actually touching the white tiles on the floor.

Swaying, she had to grab hold of the edge of the bier which prompted Sarah to jump to her side and give her support. The gentle knock on the bier had made the sheet shift a fraction, and Beatrice stared with uncomprehending eyes at a small tattoo on the right ankle of the body under the white sheet - it was a rose, identical to the tattoo Belinda had had made to distinguish herself from her twin.

Faced with the gut-churning truth of the body's identity, Beatrice moved up to the covered face and slowly moved away the sheet. Moments later, she had her worst fears confirmed when the familiar features of her beloved sister came into view.

As the extent of Belinda's horrific injuries became clear, Beatrice's face lost all color and she staggered back from the bier with a terrified gasp escaping her lips. Behind her, the sheet fluttered down to reveal that - though bloodied and bruised - Belinda's face was mostly intact, but a large section of her skull from above her right eye to well behind her left ear had caved in like a crushed Styrofoam cup.

A single heartbeat later, Sarah grabbed Beatrice and pulled her away from the hideous sight. While she held onto the hyperventilating, trembling blonde, she used her long reach to grab the sheet and pull it back up. "Jesus Christ," she mumbled, thinking that the harsh light had made the corpse look far, far worse than when she and Joseph had found it at the side of Winter Road.

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Outside Examination Room 03, Sarah placed the trembling Beatrice against the cool, white tiles but watched helplessly as the young woman slipped down to the floor. She still hadn't cried over her sister, and by now, the experienced officer was worried over the bereaved's mental state.

"Do you know how it happened?" Beatrice croaked in a voice that was so tiny Sarah had to strain her hearing to understand it all.

"No, but I have a theory," Sarah said and knelt down next to the trembling blonde. "Joe and I found her on Winter Road just after the triple traffic lights... do you know where that is?"

"Y- yes."

"Because of the extent of her injuries, it was evident from the start she was the victim of a hit and run... we also recovered several fragments of glass and clear plastic, no doubt from the car that hit her. We found her left shoe near the crosswalk at the last of the three intersections, roughly eighty feet from where her body was at."

"She must have flown through the air..."

"Yeah," Sarah said and put a comforting hand on Beatrice's shoulder. "Beatrice, I'm almost positive she didn't have time to feel any pain. From the injuries to her legs and head, I'd say the vehicle hit her on the left. She was probably thrown head-first into the windshield. Death would have been instantaneous."

Beatrice sighed and clutched her stomach that still felt like someone was prodding it with a red hot poker. She tried to open her mouth to speak, but she couldn't get a sound across her lips.

"We came to you because you were listed in Belinda's wallet as her next of kin. Are your parents still alive?"

Sighing again, Beatrice offered the friendly police officer a faint nod. "Yes. They live in Florida," she croaked. "I n-need to call them..."

"Beatrice, it's half past four in the morning. Let's give them a good night's sleep. We both know it'll be the last one they'll have for a while," Sarah said and held out her hand.

Beatrice stared at it like she'd never seen a helping hand before. After a few seconds, she nodded and took the offered hand that dragged her to her feet. As she rose, the pain only grew worse in her stomach.

Ten minutes later, Sarah closed her phone and cast a long glance at the sorry figure sitting in the cruiser's passenger seat. The young blonde was trembling and she was leaning her forehead against the cool glass, but she still hadn't cried.

"Beatrice," Sarah said and put a gentle hand on the blonde's elbow, "my Watch Sergeant has okayed my idea. I'll spend the rest of the night with you until the professional crisis counselors arrive at work at nine... or whenever. Okay?"

An inarticulate grunt was all Beatrice was capable of delivering, but it seemed to be enough for Sarah as the police officer nodded and stepped out of the car to bring her partner up to speed.

For a few seconds, Beatrice watched the police officer walking away, but the excruciating pain in her gut soon rendered her incapable of anything beyond focusing on getting relief. *'There must be a reason... Belinda must be in trouble somehow... but there's nothing I can do to help her... and that means there's nothing I can do to stop the pain... how can we establish contact? How can I reach out to Belinda?'* she thought, staring into the gloomy darkness outside the city morgue.

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CHAPTER 2

Three days later - the day of the funeral.

Beatrice had gone through her sister's funeral and all the grief and sadness that went with it in a trance, but now she was at the end of her tether. The pain in her gut hadn't receded, and she had barely slept a second since receiving the news of the accident.

Looking more like a walking dead than a human being, she staggered over to a chair in her sister's kitchen and let herself bump down on it. Her rented mourning dress was tight, warm and uncomfortable, but she couldn't even muster enough energy to take off the black gloves.

She could still hear her mother's crying from the living room where the post-service arrangement had been held, and the sound cut through her soul with the strength of a machete.

Movement at the swinging door to the kitchen made her look up, right into the bluest eyes she had ever seen.

"Hi," Sarah Kelso said quietly as she made sure the double doors weren't swinging too wildly behind her. The tall police officer was wearing a black, highly starched dress uniform - with a skirt - that enhanced her eyes even more. "It was a beautiful service. Very life-affirming. Your sister must have been a real character."

"She was. Thank you for coming, Sarah," Beatrice said in a dry, raspy voice.

"You're welcome. It was the least I could do," Sarah said and fiddled nervously with the edges of her starched sleeves. Walking over to the table, she pointed at the other chair. "May I?"

"Of course."

Nodding, Sarah sat down carefully and began to study the blonde's haggard features. "We still don't have any leads on the whereabouts of the car that hit your sister. That's not unusual, though. Sometimes, these things can take weeks to clear up."

"I'm not sure I have that long..." Beatrice croaked, looking like she meant every word.

"You're still in pain?"

"Mmmm."

Sarah leaned in towards the harrowed blonde and took her gloved hands in her own. "Beatrice, you need someone to look after you. The service is winding down in there... just now, I heard your mother say that she doesn't want to spend another minute here. That means you'll be all alone. Frankly, you're not ready for that."

"No, but..."

"Hey," Sarah said and gave Beatrice's hands a squeeze. "Listen to me. I don't want to have to tell your mother that she's lost her other daughter, too. You're on the brink of disaster as it is, that's clearly etched into your gray, lined face. You need a friend. Please allow me to spend the night here. The sofa-bed is just my size."

"I can't ask that of you, Sarah... we hardly know each other."

"You don't have to ask 'cos I'm volunteering."

Beatrice leaned back on the chair and furrowed her brow. The look on the tall, beautiful officer's face was sincere, and the offer would remove a few of the hurdles that kept tripping her up - i.e. anything beyond her basic needs - and yet, she felt that she still didn't have all the details.

However, given her present condition, she couldn't really give two farthings about the details. "You're on," she said and returned the squeeze.

Later that same night, Beatrice had to admit that having someone else in the house with her was soothing. As she lay down on her sister's bed and crept under the unfamiliar covers, the sounds of Sarah doing the dishes in the kitchen helped her slip into a shallow slumber. Her last cognitive thought was that it felt good to have someone to lean on.

In the end, the exhaustion proved too strong, and Beatrice entered a deep state of sleep where she immediately ventured into a realm that saw her explore a dark, inhospitable cavern.

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She wasn't alone, she could feel that at once. The cavern was cold and menacing, with jagged stalactites hanging down from the roof and pools of an unidentifiable - and putrid - liquid scattered across the rocky floor.

"Belinda?" she said out loud; her voice echoing grotesquely through the hard walls of the cave.

Somewhere ahead of her, she could hear a fair voice humming a silly song that she and her sister had written when they were young teenagers. Despite their best efforts, the song's supposedly cool lyrics had been awfully goofy, but there was no denying the bouncy beat. Beatrice found herself humming along to the song as she stepped forward to get closer to the source, occasionally mumbling some of the lyrics when she remembered a word or two.

Moving into a darker part of the cavern, the temperature dropped considerably, and she wrapped her arms around her body to keep warm - doing so, she was surprised to see and feel that she had bare feet and was wearing a loose, white robe. "Belinda?" she whispered, looking everywhere for evidence that her sister was there.

'Beatrice? Beatrice, is that you?'

"Belinda!" Beatrice shouted, stopping dead in her tracks and clenching her fists in front of her chest. Mortally afraid that her abused, dead tired mind was merely playing tricks on her, she strained her hearing to try to ascertain where the voice had come from.

'Beatrice, I'm here!'

Beatrice briefly buried her face in her hands to calm her wildly beating heart, but soon took off deeper into the cavern. She realized the path she was on was well-trodden, but she didn't have time to think about what that might mean. "Belinda? Belinda?"

'Here, Beatrice!'

Beatrice finally turned the last corner and found herself face to face with a woman who was her exact double in every possible way. Gasping loudly, she put her hands on her mouth out of fear of frightening the other woman into disappearing.

Also dressed in a loose, white robe, Belinda was sitting on the edge of a small crater with her legs dipped into a pool of crystal clear water. Initially she was frolicking in the water, but when she looked up and locked eyes with her sister, she stopped playing. "Hello, Bea."

Choking up quite badly from hearing her pet name, Beatrice began edging closer to the edge of the crater with slow, faltering steps. "Belinda, is it really you?" she whispered, reaching out ahead of her to try to make physical contact.

"Yeah," Belinda said and intercepted her sister's hand to guide her towards her. When the two women were close enough, they fell into each other's arms and gave each other a strong, comforting hug.

"You're d- dead," Beatrice croaked, clutching her aching stomach as she pulled back.

"I know. And I need your help."

"H- how?"

"They won't let me move on. Not before the man who killed me has been brought to justice."

"But that's unfair!"

Belinda chuckled darkly and began moving her legs around in the water, creating little ripples in the formerly calm surface. "Yes, but there isn't anything I can do about it."

"Do... do you remember anything?" Beatrice said and sat down next to her sister.

"Not much. It was a dark gray sedan. An expensive, foreign one. I should have checked the street better before I went out into the crosswalk, but..."

"Oh, Belinda, it wasn't your fault..."

"No. I heard him hit the gas just as he came up to the first of the three traffic lights. Two seconds later, he hit me. My body was crushed but my soul... or spirit... or whatever you want to call it remained there for a little while. Long enough to see that the car came to a screeching stop but soon took off again."

"I'll kill him!" Beatrice cried with clenched fists.

"There's more, Bea. The car continued along Winter Road but made a frantic left three streets further down. The engine stopped almost at once."

Beatrice furrowed her brow and took a good look at her sister. The carefreeness of eternity played on her face, even if it was tinged with sadness for not being allowed to enjoy the fruits of the afterlife she found herself in. "Three streets down... one of the first houses?"

"I believe so, yes."

"I swear to God I'll kill him!"

"Beatrice, no... just bring him to justice. Promise me. That's all I'm asking," Belinda said and put out her arms.

"I p- promise... Belinda... I'll do what it takes." - With a quivering chin, Beatrice mirrored her sister's actions by reaching out.

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Just as the two sisters touched each other, the shadowy realm disappeared and was replaced by the dark bedroom. "Belinda!" Beatrice cried loudly, bolting upright in bed.

Five seconds later, the bedroom door was flung open and Sarah stormed inside with a lit flashlight. "What the hell?! Are you all right?"

"Belinda... oh, Belinda," Beatrice croaked, slipping back down on the pillow. Harsh reality caught up with her and she buried her face in her hands.

Sarah sighed and clicked off the flashlight. After putting it on the nightstand, she sat down on the edge of the bed and pulled the tortured blonde into a comforting hug. "Hush, Beatrice, it was just a nightmare. Go back to sleep if you can. I'll sit here the whole night."

"Nightmare- no, it wasn't a..." Beatrice started to say, but realized how crazy the real story would sound. Nodding, she wiped her bleary eyes on the sleeve of her pajamas and eased back down on the pillow. "I can't ask that of you."

"It was a statement of fact, not an offer," Sarah said and pulled the covers back up to Beatrice's chin.

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When the morning came, Beatrice opened her eyes and discovered to her great surprise that she had actually managed to sleep for several hours. She still suffered from sleep deprivation after not resting for several days, but at

the same time, she felt a certain energy in her bones - an energy that had even managed to dampen the ache in her gut.

Determined to get started on the peculiar task of defending - perhaps exonerating would be a better word - her dead sister, Beatrice moved the covers aside and swung her legs over the side of the bed.

A gentle snore from the other side of the room made her turn her head and look for the source. The sight of the long-limbed Sarah sitting in a highly uncomfortable position on a chair that was really not built for someone as tall as her made the first hint of a smile for nearly a week play on Beatrice's lips.

The tall officer's neck had a very clear crimp in it that would take a great deal of muscle balm lotion to get under control, and the way her right leg was cocked and pressed up against the underside of the armrest had to mean the knee joint had frozen solid during her sleep.

Beatrice suddenly felt an urge to see Sarah's bright blue eyes again, and she rose from the bed and padded over to the sleeping officer on bare feet. Kneeling down in front of Sarah, she put a warm hand on the sleeping woman's left thigh and waited for her to come back to the world.

"Oh," Sarah said and smacked her lips several times. "I musta fallen asleep... are you all right? Do you need someth- Ouch! My neck!" - Hurriedly reaching up, she started massaging the right side of her neck that had taken the brunt of the physical abuse overnight.

"I feel better today, thank you. You didn't need to sit here all night, you know."

"Oh, I... yeah, I did. When I comforted you after your nightmare, you looked so lost and scared I didn't want to leave you. Ugh... maybe I should have slept on the floor instead," Sarah continued, rubbing her knee joint that made an audible crunching sound when she tried to stretch it.

Looking at the young blonde who got up and walked over to one of the closets in the bedroom to find something to wear, Sarah could sense a change in her. She had been ordered by her Sergeant to keep Beatrice under close scrutiny for a couple of days - 'suicide watch' were the exact words the Sergeant had used - but it appeared her assignment would be cut short.

Grunting, the tall officer got up from the small chair and stretched her arms above her head, feeling every single joint in her back send out a loud protest over the way they had been treated. "Beatrice, would you mind if I grabbed a quick shower?" she said with her hands firmly ensconced on her hips.

"No of course not, Sarah. Help yourself. I'll just..." - she pointed at the closet with her thumb - "...and then I'll start thinking about breakfast. I think I could eat something today."

"That's great news. If you want to talk about the past few days or your sister in general, please do. Don't forget, I'm here to support you until you feel able to move on. Okay?"

"Okay, Sarah. Thank you."

As Sarah walked out of the bedroom to get her shower, Beatrice turned back to the closet to peruse her sister's clothes. She knew she needed to make a list of what she wanted to keep and what could be given to a charity, but the nocturnal events had made such a mark on her she hardly paid attention to the clothes she was shifting through.

"Should I tell Sarah about the dream?" she mumbled, glancing at the door to make sure the tall officer didn't suddenly return and catch her talking to herself. "Did it even happen? What if it was a psychotic episode or something...?"

Finding a high-quality forest green shirt she had given Belinda for her birthday the previous year, she slipped it off the coat hanger and brought it over to the bed. "But the details seemed so real," she continued as she sat down and held the shirt to her face in the hope of finding a faint whiff of her sister's favorite perfume. "Expensive car... three streets on from the last intersection... one of the first houses... it must be possible to find... it simply must!"

The familiar sound of water splashing down on the tiles in the bathroom made her snap out of her stupor and go to work. Her first task was to get out of the pajamas and put on the high-quality shirt and a pair of her sister's blue jeans. She had a promise to fulfill.

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Armed with a phonebook, a map, her iPhone, a notepad and a ball point pen, Beatrice went into the living room that still bore the signs of the post-funeral celebration from the day before. She only allowed herself a brief moment of reflection before she dumped the entire pile onto the pinewood coffee table and sat down on her sister's cherished brown-and-green checkered couch.

A faint, tired chuckle escaped her lips when she remembered the argument she'd had with Belinda when it became evident just what the pattern she had ordered looked like. Apparently, it had been created by a star designer from San Francisco, but Beatrice had always thought it looked like something you had stepped in.

Sighing deeply, Beatrice leaned forward and opened the map of the city onto the correct page.

Fifteen minutes later, she had compiled a list of phone numbers connected to the first six houses on each of the three streets that were south of the final intersection.

She had decided she'd go through all eighteen numbers in reverse order of importance in the hope that she'd be able to flush out the rat who had killed her sister, but even as she took her phone to punch in the first number, the insanity of the situation caught up with her and she let her hand bump back down on the coffee table.

With the cache of energy she had received in the dream almost depleted, the fatigue and pain returned, and all she could do was to look around the living room that - apart from the placement of a few chairs and a few black ribbons - stood exactly how Belinda had left it the night she died.

At that moment, Sarah entered the living room from the hallway with a tray loaded with toast, jam and two coffee mugs. "I noticed you hadn't made breakfast after all, so I whipped something together. I didn't know if you preferred tea or coffee in the morning so I brought both... hey, are you all right? You're much paler than you were before."

When Beatrice didn't answer, Sarah quickly put down the tray - spotting the mess on the table - and sat down next to the young blonde. "Beatrice, please tell me what's on your mind. I can't help you if you don't."

Beatrice sighed and looked down at the police officer's legs that were so much longer than her own it almost bordered on the comical. "Last night," she said quietly, "before you comforted me, I didn't have a nightmare. I had a... a... vivid dream. About Belinda. I met her in a cavern and she told me a few details about the accident."

"It's your mind trying to come to terms with what's happened, Beatrice."

"I'm not so sure. Ever since we were little, Belinda and I have shared a special bond... I don't want to call it telepathy or hypersensitivity or any of those mumbo-jumbo terms, but the bond has always been there, Sarah... it was undeniable. I... I believe she tried to reach out to me in my dream."

"Beatrice..."

"Let me finish, please," Beatrice said and put a surprisingly strong hand on the officer's knee, "Belinda told me the car that hit her was a dark gray, expensive sedan... a foreign one... and that it went to the left into the third street from the intersection. What if we-"

"Beatrice, you are very, very tired. It's been a couple of awful days for you. After breakfast, I think we should go home to your own house so you can get some rest. I have a phone number for a Doc I use on occasion... I'm sure he won't mind coming over to give you a sedative."

Staring at the woman she had believed was a confidant, Beatrice felt a surge of anger bubble up inside her. She slammed her mouth shut in order to not speak her mind, but the emotions were raging too hard and she couldn't keep it inside. "I don't want a sedative, dammit! I wanna catch the son of a bitch who killed my sister! And since you cops aren't doing what we pay you to do, I'm just gonna have to do it myself. I know the street, I know the car, all I have to do is to find out who was behind the wheel! And then I can bring him to justice... Belinda will never find rest until I do... she told me."

The way Sarah rubbed her brow told Beatrice all she needed to know about how the tall officer felt about the whole thing, and she shot up from the couch and began to pace back and forth between the coffee table and the television set.

"Beatrice," Sarah said in a tone that revealed - with much clarity - what she thought of the dream, "I've been a beat cop for close to ten years. I've seen death and happiness in equal measure, but I have never seen anything that would back up the statements you've just made about the connection you had with your sister. Hell, I have a half-sister, but I don't have any kind of special connection with her..."

"It's different with twins," Beatrice said surly.

"Well, perhaps so, but the long and the short of it is that I feel you need to take a step back from all this and accept that your sister is gone. It's wonderful that you keep her in your heart and that you dream of her, but that's all it was, Beatrice. A dream."

Beatrice stopped pacing and looked at Sarah with an embittered look on her face. "If that's how you feel, then I'd say your job here is done, Officer. You don't have to be my mother hen anymore since I'm perfectly capable of taking care of myself. Thank you very much for your assistance, but it's time I spread my wings and took flight."

"If that's how **you** feel..." Sarah said while she looked at the untouched breakfast tray with a great deal of disappointment etched into her face. She inserted a pause to offer Beatrice a chance to reconsider, but when she realized the angry blonde wasn't about to back down, her shoulders slumped and she shuffled out into the hallway to collect her things.

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CHAPTER 3

Later the same day, Beatrice crossed out the fourteenth name on her list. She only had four to go, but she wasn't nearer to finding the man who was responsible for her sister's death.

With a sigh, she picked up her phone and punched in the next set of numbers. While she waited, she absentmindedly checked the last three names she had found in the phonebook. There was something nagging her, but she couldn't

quite put her finger on it until she realized there were four houses left on the map, but only three further numbers on her list - either the last house didn't have a phone, which was unlikely, or it was an unlisted number.

The pain in her gut suddenly returned with such strength that she let out a tormented groan and fell back against the backrest of the gaily colored couch. The phone forgotten, she clutched her stomach with both hands until the latest wave had receded enough for her to breathe again. "Belinda... are you trying to tell me something?" she said through clenched teeth. "Is it the last house? The one with the unlisted number? Please, Belinda..."

When she didn't get a reply from the Great Beyond, Beatrice reached for her iPhone and accessed the yellow pages for the local area. She quickly found the street and the last name of the owner: "Mr. Lambert, Theodore, chief of accounting at the deputy mayor's office," Beatrice mumbled as she read from the display. "Chief of accounting... expensive car... Belinda, do you think it could be him?"

Groaning, she got up from the couch and moved into the hallway, to the small table near the front door where she knew Belinda had always kept her car keys.

Once the keys to Belinda's Honda Civic were in her pocket, she leaned her forehead against the inside of the front door and sighed deeply. "I... I need to... to see for myself... he could be the one."

With that, she quickly put on a pair of her sister's sneakers, locked the house and staggered down the garden path to get to the Honda that was still parked in the driveway.

Through a miracle, she was able to drive the six blocks without damaging herself or the car. As she came to a halt at a red light at the last of the triple intersections, her eyes didn't leave the crosswalk ahead of her.

The traffic police had done a good job of cleaning up the broken glass and the plastic fragments Sarah Kelso had talked about, but Beatrice still sensed an eerie, unnatural tremor in the air. Even if her sister's body had been thrown through the air for another eighty feet, this was where her life had ended.

The traffic lights turned green above her, and she took her foot off the brake to make the Honda trickle forward. The car behind her honked twice before overtaking her with a roar, but Beatrice couldn't care less. Her eyes were firmly glued to the side of the street, searching for the exact spot where Belinda had landed.

Ultimately the spot was easy to find for Beatrice as someone had put flowers and a purple wake-lantern on the strip of grass between the road and the sidewalk. Overcome with emotion, Beatrice's hands began to shake but she forced herself to look at the small shrine for several seconds before driving on.

A few minutes later, she drove onto the street where Belinda had told her the car that had hit her had stopped. The narrow street was fairly steep so the buildings on either side had been built in a stepped pattern where the closed garage was half a floor below the main house.

Beatrice quickly parked the Honda in front of one of the houses she needed to check out and remembered to turn the steering wheel to the left so the car was jammed up against the curb in case it was going to roll backwards.

The first two garages were open so she was able to discard them without too much effort - the first held a Saturn and the other an old, full-sized Buick landyacht from the 1970s.

When she walked up to stand in front of a closed garage door, the pain in her gut made its presence felt and she had to put a hand on her stomach to calm it down. "Is this it, Belinda? Is this where he lives?" she whispered to herself, glancing left and right to make sure no one was watching her. An overweight man wearing a black Nike jogging suit was walking his dog fifty yards further up the street, but the steepness meant that he was quickly closing the distance to her.

Beatrice realized she needed to approach the man with the dog in order to look less suspicious, so she screwed on the best smile she could muster and held up her hand. "Hi! Do you live around here? I sort-of had an appointment with Theodore Lambert, but... no one comes to the door."

The man - in his late fifties and sporting a comb-over, a beer gut and several double chins - gave her a thorough check before apparently deciding she was harmless; humorously, his dog did the same. "I'm not surprised," he said in a rumbling voice. "Teddy's been living in a bottle the last couple-a days. Red eyes, bad hair, the whole nine yards. I saw him through the curtains yesterday. I figured he got kicked out by a girlfriend... maybe he was, huh?"

"Oh? Living in a bottle? Are we talking about the same Theodore Lambert?" Beatrice said, trying to act as neutral as she could.

"Yeah. Teddy Lambert from the deputy mayor's office. A real smart fella in a real smart car. I shoulda known he'd be a player, too," the man said and ran his eyes up and down Beatrice's body.

"Oh, you see right through me," Beatrice said, smirking though everything inside her was churning mercilessly, "it was his car that convinced me to give him a try. I don't know anything about cars, though... he owns a Cadillac, right?"

"Naw, a BMW. Big one. Gray, real smart, the latest model... though I've actually not seen it for... huh... three or four days now. Anyhow, it's right in there," the man said and tapped his knuckles on the closed garage door they were standing in front of.

"Thanks," Beatrice said in a voice that had suddenly turned croaky. "I'll give the door bell another shot. I think he's too good to let go."

The man in the black jogging suit chuckled knowingly before he dragged his dog further down the street and out of Beatrice's sight.

'If I keep my finger on the bell, he's bound to come to the door sooner or later,' Beatrice thought and looked around for the little button. Once she'd found it, she pressed her index finger down on it and kept it there.

More than two minutes went past where a non-stop, infernal buzzing could be heard from beyond the pale gray front door. The door had a window, but it was covered by a net curtain so Beatrice was unable to look inside.

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, somebody shuffled through the hall and grabbed hold of the door handle on the other side. *'Yeah, yeah, yeah, for God's sake... get your finger off that fuckin' bell...'* a coarse male voice shouted, seemingly ready to open the door.

Beatrice took a step back and clenched her fists across her chest to stop her heart from beating quite so wildly. Blowing hot and cold at the prospect of potentially meeting the man who killed her sister - and dreading what she would face on the other side - she watched with bated breath as the door handle was slowly depressed.

Then the door opened fully. Theodore Lambert held up a couple of dollar bills, but that was the only regular thing about him. Instead of the smart man the neighbor with the dog had mentioned, Teddy was a basket case. In his late thirties, he had bare feet and he wore PJ bottoms and a filthy, formerly white undershirt that was half-hidden

underneath an even more filthy striped bathrobe. He had a four-day stubble, an unhealthy pallor and a pair of eyes that were so bloodshot it was nearly impossible to see that his irises were originally brown.

"Fuck, you're quick, man... I just called you ten minutes ago. Where's the pizza box?" he said in a broken voice that revealed the amount of alcohol he had consumed over the past few days.

Only then did he notice it wasn't the delivery boy from the local pizza restaurant, but a woman. Looking up and trying to focus with his bloodshot eyes, his face suddenly lost the rest of its natural color and became pale as a sheet.

A grotesque, inarticulate gurgle rose up from his throat that evolved into a terrified, broken scream. His eyes popped wide open as he took in the sight of the young, blonde woman standing at his door.

Frightened out of his wits by the appearance of the woman he had killed, Theodore tried to slam the door shut in her face, but the belt of his bathrobe snagged on the door handle and prevented him from closing it. His foggy mind couldn't cope with the shock, and he took a staggering step backwards to get away from the angel of death at his door.

As he ran away, the belt not only made the door fly open again, but it held him back in his escape. Screaming even more insanely, he wiggled free of the bathrobe, but the resulting sudden release made him fall flat on his face in the hallway. Groaning and clutching his aching rib cage, he struggled to his feet and ran into the living room.

All throughout the man's insane response, Beatrice hadn't been able to get a word across her lips. She'd had no way of knowing if the message Belinda had sent her in the dream had been real or simply a figment of her tired, abused mind, but Theodore Lambert's reaction was unmistakable - he was the one.

She buried her face in her hands and allowed herself to let out a quiet sob before she stepped inside. Her heart was hammering so hard in her chest she could hardly breathe, but the chance of bringing her sister's killer to justice was too important to be stopped by something as trivial as her health.

Moving through the hallway, Beatrice noted that Theodore's kitchen was a mess with plenty of open, empty cupboards, spent pizza boxes everywhere, and a week's worth of dirty dishes piled up in the sink.

The living room was even worse with empty bottles all over the floor - some erect, some toppled over - a large, wet stain on and below a three-seater couch that Beatrice hoped had been made by alcohol and not urine, and a coffee table where the entire top was covered in ash and cigarette butts.

The air inside the living room reeked to high heaven of smoke, stale booze and old sweat, but Beatrice felt the pigsty-like conditions were perfect for the man who was sitting on the carpet, cowering up against a chair and looking like he was about to soil his PJ bottoms.

Theodore clutched his ribs that had taken quite a hit in the fall but managed to coil himself up into a fetal position. His pitiful whimpers soon turned into real crying that came without Beatrice speaking a word.

Beatrice crinkled her nose in disgust at seeing a thirty-something man behaving in such a disgraceful, cowardly manner, but at the same time, she felt that he deserved every last ripple of terror that rolled across his body. "Why?" she said hoarsely, clenching her fists and shaking them at the man. "Why? WHY?!"

"I d- didn't see you!" Theodore whimpered from his spot on the carpet, "you w- were just there! Oh God, I'll never forget the horrible sound wh- when your head hit the windshield..."

"And you shouldn't!"

"I tried to forget it ever happened, but now you're back to get me... I'd been drinking heavily... the lights were turning red... I hit the gas but I was looking at the radio... I looked up and you were right there... too late... it was too late to do anything..."

"Why didn't you stop and call for help, you miserable coward?!"

"I did stop! The airbags all blew in my face! But I'd been drinking... the cops would have arrested me!" Theodore whined as he groveled on the floor to get the furthest away from the frightful, avenging demon. "And I couldn't risk that... my career is too... I'm an important man at the deputy mayor's office!"

"I don't give a shit about your career! Justice must be served!"

"Wait," he said and crawled over to his pants that were hanging across the armrest of a chair. He reached for the back pocket with wildly shaking hands and apparently found it very difficult to pick up and open the leatherbound wallet. "Look... four hundred dollars! That's all I have here!"

Beatrice shook her head slowly at the pathetic man. "You're trying to buy me off with four hundred dollars? You could offer me four billion and I'd still say go to hell!"

"Wait! Can't we cut a deal?" Theodore whined, dropping the four one-hundred dollar bills from his trembling fingers. "I don't wanna go in the electric chair! I don't wanna die!"

Beatrice's gut churned ceaselessly at Theodore's cowardly ways, and she knew she had to get away at once or else she'd kill him with her bare hands. Unable to speak from the fiery anger and the storm of queasiness that raged inside her, she spun around and stomped back out of the living room.

On her way through the hallway to get back outside to fresher air, she stopped at another open door that she hadn't had time to explore when she came into Theodore's house. A narrow staircase went downward, and through the smells of rubber and faint exhaust fumes that wafted up from below, she had a strong hunch it led to the garage. With the cowardly man's unrestrained, pitiful sobbing ringing in her ears, she clicked on the lights and began to descend the stairs.

As she had surmised, the staircase allowed her access to the garage, with the last few steps curving to the right to gain a good view of the room and the two vehicles parked there: a gray car and a colorful off-road motorcycle.

The garage was nothing out of the ordinary, equipped as it was with a wooden work bench, a wall-mounted calendar with the ubiquitous buxom beauty in a thong bikini on the cover, a few brand name power tools, a high-pressure steam cleaner and finally a lawn mower - but Beatrice's breath hitched when it dawned on her she was looking at the expensive, dark gray sedan Belinda had mentioned in the dream.

The right-side headlight housing of the BMW seven-series was smashed and there was a big dent in the hood, but it was nothing compared to the crystal-like pattern that had spread all over the right side of the windshield. The safety glass had held up like it was designed to, but the central part of the impact zone had collapsed which had allowed Belinda's blood and strands of her fair hair to seep in between the hundreds of glass fragments.

The blood had long since dried, but the gruesome sight of tufts of blonde hair so much like her own trapped in the cracks in the windshield was enough to make Beatrice relive the moment when she had been told by Sarah Kelso that Belinda had been killed.

Leaning against the wall for support, Beatrice found her iPhone and powered it up. Once the camera was ready, she snapped several pictures of the smashed headlight, the dented hood and the crushed windshield, simply to have something tangible to present to the police in case Theodore came to his senses and got rid of the car.

She edged along the gray car to get to the closed up-and-over garage door to make her escape to freedom, but before she activated it, she turned around and took a picture of the rear license plate. As she turned off the phone and shoved it into her pocket, she felt a strange calmness fall over her - through her actions, justice was about to be served and Belinda would be allowed to continue in her afterlife; all she had to do was to call Sarah and explain where she was and what she had found.

"The big question is... how will she react? God... I was a real bitch this morning. Before I go on, I better apologize for the things I said," Beatrice mumbled as she activated the garage door to get back outside.

*

*

CHAPTER 4

Unlocking and getting into Belinda's Honda, Beatrice retrieved her phone from her pocket and started punching in 9-1-1. Sobering, she realized that she needed to talk to Sarah before doing anything else, so she deleted the entry and accessed the yellow pages to find the number for the watch desk at the precinct Sarah had mentioned she came from - the one-seven.

The line was busy so Beatrice put away her phone and started the car. After a slightly stuttery three-point turn, she trickled down the steep street until she reached the intersection at Winter Road.

Back in Belinda's driveway, Beatrice turned off the engine but suddenly felt so dead tired she couldn't get out of the Honda. She looked at the iPhone on the passenger seat with heavy, bleary eyes, but didn't even have enough energy to reach out for it.

She briefly glanced at herself in the rear view mirror, but before she could register her pale gray skin and dull, lifeless eyes, she had fallen into a deep slumber brought on by the fatigue.

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She found herself in a grand hall of some kind. The floor and walls were made of dark green marble that was cold to stand on. Looking down, she could see that she was once again barefoot and wearing the same loose, white robe she had worn in the cavern where she had met Belinda.

Apart from being surprisingly narrow, the grand hall was of gargantuan proportions, reaching far into the sky and extending endlessly on either side. Niches had been carved into the marble walls for every ten feet or so; most offered a tantalizing glimpse at a pale blue sky dotted with fluffy white clouds, but some showed a fiery red inferno instead.

Beatrice swallowed nervously and ran over to one of the niches that overlooked the pale blue sky. "Belinda? Belinda, are you here? Belinda, if you can hear me, please give me a sign!"

When no answer was forthcoming, Beatrice wrapped her arms around her chilled body and looked around, hoping to find a clue what the dream was about and how she would be able to proceed.

A faint sound soon caught her attention: a distant echo of a woman crying in torment. She knew at once it was Belinda's voice, so she moved away from the niche with the pale blue sky and ran out into the center of the grand hall.

"Belinda! I'm here! Please don't cry, I'm here!" she shouted, but all that came back to her were echoes of her own words.

The sound of crying suddenly seemed to come from all the niches overlooking the fiery inferno, and Beatrice was filled with a sense of dread of what she would find there. Covering her mouth with her hands, she inched back toward the wall, zeroing in on one of the red niches.

Beatrice finally found her sister. Belinda was suspended ten inches above the red and black ground, strapped to a boulder like a slab of beef with her arms and legs spread out in a big X. Her white robe was bloody and torn, and there was a steady flow of blood coming from the left, hidden side of her face.

'Good souls suffer when cowards prevail,' a strange female voice said in Beatrice's head. Just as the last words had petered out, Belinda turned to lock eyes with Beatrice, revealing that her hideous, fatal headwound had returned.

The sight was too much for Beatrice and she let out a blood-curdling scream-

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"NOOO!" Beatrice screamed, jerking around so hard that she whacked her head against the driver's side window of the Honda Civic. "No... no, no... no... I m- must bring h- him to j- justice... I must," she stuttered, grappling for the iPhone with trembling fingers.

She made several mistakes before she managed to find the number she had already tried once, but after what felt like a frustrating amount of time, she was finally able to put the phone to her ear.

'Seventeenth Precinct, this is Sergeant Kulic.'

"M- my name is Beatrice Caine. Is it possible to get to talk to Officer Sarah Kelso? Sh- she's recently been working on the hit and run out at Winter Road."

'Not directly, Miss Caine, but I can give her a message to call you. Does she have your number?'

"I d- don't know... no, I don't think so..."

After a little pause where the line was silent, the Sergeant came back on with: *'Well, if you tell me, I can relay it to Officer Kelso...?'*

"Oh... of course," Beatrice said and told the Sergeant her telephone number. Another little pause went by where Beatrice simply listened to the sounds of activity at the police precinct.

'All right, the message has been sent, Miss Caine.'

"Thank you, Sergeant. Thank you very much," Beatrice said and closed the connection.

Sighing, she leaned back in the seat to get a little more comfortable, but tried to keep her eyes open so she wouldn't return to the horrid nightmare.

Ten minutes later, Beatrice was so exhausted she didn't notice the black-and-white police cruiser driving up to park behind the Civic. Only when a car door was slammed shut did she realize that Sarah Kelso had paid her a visit instead of calling.

"Beatrice, are you all right?" a uniformed Sarah said as she quickly opened the driver's side door of the Honda and took a look at the deathly pale woman inside.

"I'm... I feel awful, but at least I've found him... I've found the man who killed my sister, Sarah," Beatrice said and reached for her phone.

Sarah sighed and stood up straight. It was clear to see from the dark expression on her face that she thought the frail woman had finally snapped. Rubbing her brow, she leaned back down to help Beatrice out of the car, but the young blonde had other ideas.

"Look," Beatrice said and found the first photo of the dented BMW. "Proof enough? If it isn't, move on to the next few. The look of the w- windshield should tell you all you need to know. Theodore Lambert, Sarah. That's his name," Beatrice said in such a tired voice that it sounded like she could hardly get the words across her lips.

"How the hell did you get these pictures? Please, please tell me you didn't break in!"

"I didn't. I rang the door. He answered it and told me everything. After we had talked I went into the garage and took them."

Sarah opened her mouth to speak but couldn't get her brain wrapped around the sheer madness of the situation, so all she could do was to shake her head. "Do I want to know how you got the address?"

"My sister told me what I needed to know to find it," Beatrice said matter-of-factly. "Last night. Like I told you this morning be- uh... before I started acting like a bitch. I'm really sorry about snapping at you like that," she said sheepishly.

"Oh, that's all right... I've heard worse when we've been doing demonstrations at our local kindergarten," Sarah said and went over the pictures one more time. "Beatrice, there's enough here to get a search warrant."

"Good. He thought I was Belinda. He thought I was the angel of death and that I had come for him," Beatrice said with a bitter chuckle.

Sarah responded to the chuckle with one of her own before she temporarily put the iPhone in her shirt pocket and reached down to put a hand on Beatrice's arm. "You need to lie down. C'mon, I'll help you inside..."

"Will you keep me informed...? Please?" Beatrice said and clambered from the car. Once she was standing, she needed a moment to stop swaying from the fatigue that threatened to bowl her over.

"I promise. C'mon," Sarah said and guided the stunned Beatrice up the garden path to Belinda's house.

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Some time later, Beatrice was awoken by the rattling sound of a helicopter flying low over Belinda's house. It didn't hang around for long, but it had been there long enough for her to be stirred from a dreamless sleep that had gone some way to recharge her batteries.

The sound made Beatrice curious so she swung her legs over the side of the bed and quickly swept the forest green shirt over her bare shoulders. She had to stop and let out a chuckle when she remembered the surprised look on the

otherwise stoic police officer's face when Beatrice had whipped off the jeans and the shirt without hesitation - at that point, she had been beyond caring who saw her flesh-toned underwear.

At the window, she literally just caught the tail end of the helicopter and identified it as belonging to one of the news networks. She chewed on her cheek and ran her hand over her stomach that had settled down somewhat, though it still wasn't fully back to normal.

Beatrice could feel the tension rise as she connected the dots and came to the conclusion that the helicopter had roughly been on a course that would take it to Theodore's house near Winter Road - in other words, something was going on.

Turning around, she grabbed her jeans intending to hurry into the living room and turn on the television, but she stopped when she found a piece of paper torn out of a notepad resting on the right pant-leg.

It read, '*Beatrice, I got the okay from my Sergeant to take Mr. Lambert into custody and to secure his car. I still don't get how you did it, but thank you regardless. I'll be in touch. Sarah.*'

Looking towards the heavens, Beatrice clutched the note to her heart and let out a long, heartfelt sigh. It wasn't the tension-breaker she had prayed it would be, but it would have to suffice until Theodore Lambert was behind bars.

The television was tuned to the station - Channel64HD - broadcasting live from the scene just a short mile up the road from where Beatrice was. At first, the helicopter she had seen above the house only transmitted blurry pictures from high in the sky, but it soon zoomed in to show the activity on the ground.

Four police cruisers were parked haphazardly across the steep street Beatrice had been on earlier in the day. Several of the neighbors had come out of their houses - the man in the black jogging suit among them - and were lined up two- or three deep at two barriers, gawking at the events and occasionally pointing at the helicopter or at the two police officers who were guarding the garage.

Even with the camera zooming in on them, the images were too distant for Beatrice to see if Sarah Kelso was one of the two, but she hoped she wasn't - "She deserves to be the one who arrests Belinda's killer," Beatrice mumbled, absentmindedly chewing on her fingernails.

A scrolling text at the bottom of the screen proclaimed in bold letters that the event was **BREAKING NEWS**, that a sharp-eyed citizen had alerted the police of the discovery of a vehicle used in a hit and run, and finally that the identity of the suspect was one Theodore Lambert, thirty-eight, Magna Cum Laude from an Ivy League university, father of one, divorced, chief of accounting at the deputy mayor's office, and Chairman Emeritus of the City Hall bowling team, affectionately known as the 'Big Wigs'.

Just as someone in uniform started walking out of the front door of the house, the producers switched from the heli-camera to a ground unit. The cameraman immediately zoomed in on the police officer, and Beatrice recognized him as the one who had come with Sarah on the fateful night.

Gesturing, Joseph MacNiff cleared the way for the two people who followed him out onto the street: a scruffy man in a filthy bathrobe, and a tall, beautiful female officer with a no-nonsense look on her face and an iron grip on the scruffy man's shackled arms - the scrolling text at the bottom immediately changed into ***BREAKING NEWS suspect Theodore Lambert apprehended, taken into custody, Channel64HD LIVE at the scene.***

When Theodore caught a glimpse of the camera, he tried to break free of Sarah's grip but she was far too strong for him. Undeterred, he shoved his unwashed, unshaven face into the lens and began to scream that the angel of death had been in his house and that she had worn the face of the woman he had killed.

Over and over, he shouted that he had done it and that he was sorry for the drunk driving and for leaving the dead woman behind, finally becoming so obnoxious and screeching that Sarah advised him that she had already read him his Miranda and that he had a right to remain silent.

Beatrice was too choked up and too teary-eyed to see much of the unfolding events, but she just barely managed to register that the scrolling text changed once more, this time displaying *BREAKING NEWS suspect Theodore Lambert apprehended, openly admits to DUI, vehicular manslaughter of the twenty-six year old secretary Belinda Caine and leaving the scene of an accident.*

Soon, Sarah pushed Theodore into the back seat of her squad car and slammed the door shut in his face. After gesturing to the crowd to disperse ever so slightly so she could get the car turned around, she and Joseph MacNiff got into the cruiser and began a laborious three-point turn not unlike the one Beatrice had performed earlier on.

The producers changed back to the heli-camera that followed the two cruisers as they went down the steep street and onto Winter Road, with Sarah's 17W09 ahead of a car marked 17W07. The helicopter followed them for a little while, but Channel64HD soon cut to a commercial that Beatrice didn't have sufficient nerves left to watch, so she turned off the television and fell back against the backrest of the chair she was sitting on.

Every last part of Beatrice was trembling, but most of all her heart. The week's events had taken a great toll on her, and she was aching terribly - from her tired, abused mind to the murmur of pain that still resided in her gut.

Restless and needing to do something - anything - to get her mind off the dark thoughts concerning the horrific vision she had seen of her sister in what could only be described as some kind of purgatory, Beatrice got up from the chair and shuffled over to the patio door that overlooked the back garden.

Belinda had never been much for gardening, but she did have a patch of beautiful red roses that she loved and that she cared for so much that Beatrice had at times thought it bordered on the obsessive - right now, though, Beatrice was glad that her sister had nurtured the rose bush. Looking through the patio door, she could see that some of the tall, graceful flowers were in full bloom.

Suddenly eager to feel the silky smooth leaves and inhale the characteristic scent, Beatrice hurriedly found the keys for the door and practically ran down the short flight of stone steps until she was standing at the rose bush where some of the stems were taller than her.

A particularly impressive rose hung heavily at the perfect height for her to sniff it. Leaning in, she let her senses be filled by its warm, slightly sweet scent that prompted so many memories of her sister that she was powerless to stop a tormented sob from escaping her lips. "I don't care what I have to do, I'm not getting rid of these roses..." she mumbled, stroking her quivering chin, "if I need to sell my own house and move here, I will... oh, I wish Belinda could see them now. So strong and beautiful... so much like her... so much like Sarah..."

Surprised by the connection her mind had made, Beatrice cocked her head and caressed the bright red, silky smooth leaf as she thought of the tall, fascinating police officer who was the owner of the bluest eyes - and the most charming smile - she had ever seen. "I wonder if Sarah would be interested in coming over for a chat when this is all over... I hope so. It couldn't hurt to ask..."

A slight breeze rustled the rose bush and Beatrice took a step back to see the flowers in all their glory. At that exact moment, the sun broke free from a cloud it had been hiding behind and bathed the back garden in a strong, golden light that immediately sent a wave of warmth and comfort through Beatrice's body.

Gasping, she spun around and looked at the sky. Shielding her eyes from the rays of the sun, she could see the fluffy white clouds against the gloriously blue sky had a perfect resemblance to the vision she'd had when she had looked into one of the good niches in the grand hall.

6) No, it just isn't as much fun as it was in the old days... the fans ask the stupidest questions... and it's too expensive, anyway... so... uh, next week, I'll pre-book the hotel room for the 2014 GhoulsRulz Convention.

Until next time...

Eternally Yours,

Norsebard

THE END of THE BOOK OF CHILLS, Volume IV

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