

HAUNTING SHADOWS



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Credits

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Hunting Party	4
Storms	13
Stain	22
Riding Shotgun	32
Inheritance	43
Questions Largely Unanswered	51
Duality	61
Scratch, Scratch	70
Mixtape	79
Author Biographies	87



JOSEPH NASSISE

“Are you ready for this?” I asked.

My companion nodded nervously, unable to take his gaze off the gaping cave entrance a few feet to our left. I didn’t blame him; staring into the mouth of Oblivion isn’t an easy thing to do, even for an experienced Labyrinth diver like me. As a first-timer, he was probably shaking in his boots.

I snapped my fingers in front of his face to pull his attention away from the entrance and back to me.

“Just remember what I told you,” I said, as I began tugging on the straps of the spare breastplate I’d lent him, checking to be sure that it was on securely and wouldn’t rattle while we walked. “Keep your eyes and ears open and your sword at the ready at all times. Just because it looks like a solid wall doesn’t mean a Spectre won’t pop out of it the minute you let your guard down. Expect the unexpected. This is the Labyrinth, and in the Labyrinth, anything goes.”

I wasn’t sure my usual pep talk had any effect; Drummond knew enough to recognize that what we were about to do was just this side of insane, and I could tell he was starting to second guess his decision to accept my offer of employment. I needed to get us underway before he decided to cut and run.

Normally, before going on a hunt like this, I’d search the Shadowlands for a newly arrived *Enfant*, cut it loose from its *Caul*, and press it into service in exchange for having set it free. Male or female didn’t matter, as long as they could wield a sword and keep the *Spectres* off my back, I was happy enough. A newly arrived *wraith* didn’t know enough about life on this side of the *Shroud* to understand that deep diving into the Labyrinth was something even a legion of *wraiths* would think twice about trying, never mind a lonely duo like ourselves. But this time I’d been struck by a peculiar sense of urgency, a feeling that if I didn’t move quickly I’d miss my chance to finally track my quarry to her lair, and had instead recruited my current companion from the streets of the local *Necropolis*, paying

HUNTING PARTY

him a couple oboli for a few days' worth of his time and service. At the sight of the coins, he'd been more than happy to accept.

We were about to find out if that decision had been a good one.

My time in the U.S. Army had pretty much defined me while alive, and in death I'd seen no reason to lose that part of me. I was dressed the same way I'd been the moment I'd been gunned down in that shitty little alley in Fallujah, in BDUs of desert camouflage with well-worn boots on my feet. My body armor hadn't crossed the Shroud with me, though, so instead I was wearing the armored breastplate, greaves, and shin guards fashioned from soulsteel that I'd been issued as a member of the Grim Legion, armor I'd neglected to return when I'd decided to desert my post. I didn't regret that decision; the armor had kept me alive in the days and nights since, and I was thankful for the protection it provided. The breastplate I'd lent Drummond was made of the same material but was much thinner and lighter than the set I wore. Beggars can't be choosers and all that. Besides, he was lucky to get that; it was the only spare armor I had.

Enough dithering; it was time to get the show on the road.

This particular entrance to the Labyrinth was a cavern mouth that reminded me of a flesh-stripped skull of black stone jutting out of the sheer cliff face behind it, its gaping jaws stretched wide as if mere seconds from slamming shut on unsuspecting prey. Deep pools of shadow a few feet above the entrance resembled eyes that watched me with hungry intensity, eyes that took on added detail and became more substantial every time I looked in their direction, as if my attention was giving them the power to solidify into existence.

I did my best not to look at them.

I didn't want to find out what would happen if I stared at them too long.

Satisfied that we were as prepared as we could be, I took an extra second or two to gather a few loose stones and slip them into the pocket of my tactical pants. Drummond caught me doing so and raised an eyebrow in my direction.

"What are those for?" he asked.

"Insurance," I replied.

"Against what?"

"You'll see," I told him and would say no more.

Picking up my relic spotlight, I flicked the switch, sending a wide cone of yellowish light arcing out ahead of us. It was dark in the Labyrinth, so dark that without some kind of illumination you'd have a hard time seeing where the walls ended and the floor began, never mind spotting that lingering Nephwrack hiding in the corner, waiting to rip your throat out with its talons. You didn't enter the Labyrinth without a light source, it was that simple. My spotlight had been retooled to run off a soulfire crystal about the size of my fist and would last for several days, provided I was judicious in its use.

With the spotlight lighting the way, we began our descent.

At first, the going was easy. The passageway was high enough that we didn't have to stoop and wide enough that we didn't brush against the walls as we walked. It started fairly level, with occasional changes of gradient of no more than a few degrees; nothing too strenuous. But I'd been down this road before and knew that there were more challenging passages ahead.

Never mind more Spectres than I could count, every one of which would be happy to eat us alive – literally – if given the chance.

We'd deal with them when and where necessary.

HAUNTING SHADOWS

It was a fact of Labyrinthian geography that it was constantly shifting and changing, but I'd been down in the dark often enough to have mapped out certain sections that tended to mostly hold their form. The closer to the surface we were, the more stable the land around us remained. Once we got down deeper, that would change, but for now I could be reasonably confident in what to expect as we descended.

We'd been traveling for about twenty minutes when ahead of us the tunnel forked. The left-hand passage was slightly wider than the one we were in now and would allow us to walk side by side if we desired to do so. Opposite it, the right-hand tunnel narrowed drastically. Taking it would require us to lie down on our bellies and squirm along like snakes, pushing our gear ahead of us as we went. There was also the small issue of the fact that it sloped downward at a forty-five-degree angle.

Drummond, naturally, turned to the left, but I stopped him before he set foot in the new passage.

"We're going that way," I said, pointing at the narrow tunnel on the right.

"You can't be serious."

"Oh, but I am. You don't want to go the other way."

"Why not?"

In reply, I took out one of the rocks I'd put in my pocket at the start of our trek and tossed it down the left-hand passage. It bounced on the floor once but never completed its second hop as the walls on either side of the passage suddenly slammed against each other, crushing everything between them before returning to their former positions.

Drummond stood there in stunned silence, staring at the slowly sinking dust that was all that was left of the rock that I'd just thrown.

"We go that way," I repeated, pointing again to the right. He didn't argue.

I slipped off my pack and pulled a hammer, a spike, and a coil of rope out of it. Setting the first two items on the floor of the tunnel, I tied one end of the rope around Drummond's waist.

"You'll go first," I told him, ignoring the look he gave me in response. "I will support your descent with the rope, and then I'll follow along behind you. The passage goes down about fifty feet before poking through the roof of another chamber below us. When you reach that point, take a good look around before entering the chamber. You don't want to make yourself an easy target for anything that might be waiting down there. Once it is clear, lower yourself into the room, untie the rope and then give three tugs on it to signal that you're ready for me to come down."

"How am I supposed to see anything? You've got the only light."

"There are veins of bloodfire running through the sides of the tunnel about ten feet in. They'll provide you with enough illumination until I can join you with the spotlight."

That seemed to satisfy him, and he turned toward the entrance, only to have another thought occur.

"What do I do if I'm attacked once I get down there?"

"Fight."

Ask a stupid question...

As he sat on the floor and prepared to lower himself into the hole, I cleared my throat to get his attention.

"You might want to go down head first. That way you can see what might be waiting there for you on the other end."

HUNTING PARTY

His expression was priceless, but he took my suggestion to heart. Getting down on his belly, he stuck his head into the tunnel mouth, with his arms out in front of him to help pull him along.

“You got me?” he asked over his shoulder, his voice muffled by the rock on either side of him.

I sighed, saying, “Get on with it, Drummond. We don’t have all day.”

And down he went.

When he reached the bottom and sent back the requisite three tugs, I set the rope down, picked up the tools I’d left nearby, and hammered the spike into the floor near the entrance to the tunnel mouth, putting the hammer back in my pack when I was finished. Hooking the rope around the spike, I tossed the other end down the hole, giving myself two lines to use as I descended. After that, it was simply a matter of sliding into the hole feet first and lowering myself one foot at a time down the length of the tunnel, using the rope as support.

I knew I was in a vulnerable position, hanging there on a rope in the dark without any way of defending myself, so I didn’t dawdle. The tunnel was narrow, but there was room enough for me to descend without too much difficulty.

Thankfully, there wasn’t anything waiting for us at the bottom.

I hauled down the rope by pulling on one side until the rest came slithering down the tunnel, then coiled it up and put it back in my pack, doing my best to ignore the whispering that seemed to come from it as it went back into the darkness.

Retrieving my spotlight from its place on my belt, I flipped the switch and, with a nod at Drummond, we got under way.

As I’d anticipated, the deeper we went, the more things began to change and the stranger the tunnel around us became. The black rock gave way to a succession of oddities; tunnels of living tissue cut through with thick veins of purple-black blood that pulsed like some living, breathing thing; catacombs full of strange skulls whose empty eye sockets seemed to watch us with hungry intensity; rivers of shimmering plasma that cut across our path like liquid silver. Some of it I had encountered on my previous trips into the depths, but much of it was new, proof that the Labyrinth was forever changing. Some said it was in response to the minds of those who descended into it, but I wasn’t convinced of that. At least not entirely. I’d seen some things down here that couldn’t possibly have come from my mind, or even my Shadow’s for that matter.

We’d been down there for about three hours, creeping along the dark and thankfully empty passages, searching for any trace of Kate, when Drummond broke the silence.

“What’s so special about our target, anyway?” my companion asked, as he tramped along behind me. “I mean, it’s not every day that a pair of Domslayers are sent to deal with a single Spectre, right?”

I stopped and spun on my heels so abruptly that Private Drummond nearly walked right into me. He stumbled to a halt, his incessant chatter no doubt silenced by my glowering expression.

I got right up in his face, my gaze locked on his.

“Tell me something, Private. When was the last time you descended into the Labyrinth?”

He glanced nervously about, as if hoping a different answer might present itself on the walls of the tunnel around us. When one didn’t appear, he cleared his throat, looked back at me, and said, “Ah...um...never? Sir?”

“Is that a question, Private? You don’t know if you’ve ever entered the Labyrinth before?”

“Yes, sir. I mean, no, sir. It’s not a question, sir. I do know, that is.”

HAUNTING SHADOWS

“And?”

“And this is my first time, sir.”

“So you’ve never set foot in the Labyrinth? Never chased a Spectre into the maw of Oblivion? Never fought for your unlife in a place where the very air wants to make sure you never set foot in the Shadowlands again?”

“N-n-no, sir.”

“Then don’t you dare call yourself a Doomslayer. Not yet. Not until you’ve descended into the dark, fought those bastards face-to-face, and returned to tell the tale. Is that clear?”

“Sir, yes, sir!”

He was practically shouting and I waved a hand to get him to lower his voice.

“Stop calling me ‘sir.’ I’m a sergeant, not an officer. And there’s nothing special about the Spectre we’re chasing. We just do what we’re told and don’t ask questions, understood?”

“Yes, si...Sergeant!”

“Good. Now get your ass out in front and walk point for a while.”

Drummond eased around me in the narrow space, eyes downcast as if afraid to look at me, and headed off down the tunnel in front of us. As I stepped in behind him, my other half spoke up in the back of my head.

Nothing special? Oh, that’s rich.

I didn’t respond.

What’s the matter, Stokes, afraid to tell the poor bastard what you’ve gotten him into?

I gritted my teeth, but still didn’t say anything. No need to encourage the son of a bitch.

Oh, and nice job, by the way, using all that trumped-up anger to distract him from the issue at hand. Couldn’t have done it better myself.

Shut up, I snarled back silently, unable to contain myself in the face of that final comment.

To my surprise, he did as he was told.

Last thing I needed right now was to be second-guessed by my own Shadow. Especially when he was right. The quarry we were after wasn’t just some ordinary Spectre, not by a long shot. But I wasn’t about to tell Drummond that.

The less he knew, the better.

The Labyrinth was home to hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of Spectres but I didn’t care about any of them except one. And contrary to what I’d told my temporary partner, we weren’t on some Hierarchy-backed hunt; this was personal. Deeply personal. I’d gone down into the darkness more times than I could count, and I’d keep doing so until I found her.

Kate.

Or rather what Kate had become.

The way I figured it, I owed her that much. After all, the hunt had become my guiding light, the thing that kept me going when the whispers of my Shadow became almost too much to bear.

I shrugged off my introspection and hustled to catch up with Drummond.

The first of the Labyrinth’s inhabitants found us about an hour later.

We were traversing a narrow rock bridge overlooking a deep chasm that dropped away on either side of us when a faint sound caught my attention.

Drummond was barely a foot in front of me, moving slowly and cautiously, taking care to avoid the loose rock underfoot, and so it was a simple matter to reach out and grasp his shoulder, bringing him to a halt.

“Sssshhhh.”

We stood there in silence a moment, listening, until I heard it again.

The faint sound of a long eerie howl echoed down the tunnel behind us. It would have frozen my heart in my chest if it had still been beating. Seconds later that howl was answered by another.

“What the hell is that?” Drummond asked, his voice quavering in fear.

I didn’t waste time answering his question. “Keep moving,” I told him instead. “We need to get off this bridge.”

“But what is—”

“Move!” I bellowed, doing everything I could to resist the urge to push him out of my way. If they caught us here our little excursion was going to be over before it had really gotten started.

Thankfully the urgency in my voice communicated itself to Drummond, for he turned and hustled forward without another word. Gone were his slow, careful footsteps; he was practically racing for the far side of the bridge, with me right behind him.

Behind us, the howls sounded again, closer this time.

They were coming fast.

Here doggie, doggie, doggie, my Shadow called inside my head, but I didn’t waste any time answering.

When we reached the far side, I grabbed Drummond and handed him the spotlight. “Keep it focused so I can see what I’m shooting at,” I ordered. I unslung my rifle from my shoulder and spun back around, facing the way we’d come. Settling down on one knee, I brought the butt of the rifle to my shoulder and sighted along its length, waiting for the first of our enemy to appear.

I didn’t wait long.

The lead vulpine came racing out of the darkness, jaws slavering at the sight of us crouched there on the other side of that bridge, its claws clicking on the stone as it charged forward.

Much like the barghests used by the Legions, vulpines are Spectres Moliated into roughly canine shapes and gifted with savage hunger for a wraith’s Corpus. The multiple rows of teeth that were set in their powerful jaws were their primary weapons, but their claws could do plenty of damage on their own if you let them get in close enough.

I had no intention of letting that happen.

My M4 automatic rifle hadn’t seen fit to accompany me into the Shadowlands, much like my military-issue body armor, but I’d snatched a relic Lee Enfield from a fellow Legionnaire the night I’d gone over the wall in the midst of the Maelstrom that had ended my association with the Grim Legion. I’d gotten pretty good with it in the days since.

As the first of the vulpines started across the bridge toward us, I shouted at Drummond to keep the light trained on the beast, put the sight of my rifle on the center of its chest, and pulled the trigger.

The bullet left the barrel with a scream pitched so high it was more felt than heard, the last battle cry of the soul that had been used to forge the projectile at the hands of the Renegade Artificer I’d paid to create them. It struck the lead vulpine about an inch lower than the spot I’d aimed for, but it did the job. The creature yelped in pain and slipped off the narrow bridge, dropping away into the darkness below.

I worked the bolt, slammed another bullet into the chamber, and fired again, and again, and again, sending each successive beast to its death far below.

By the time I'd exhausted the clip, the final vulpine had crossed the distance and was upon us. It charged into me without stopping, knocking the rifle from my hands and sending me over backward onto my ass with it on top of me. I managed to wrap my hands around its throat, doing everything I could to keep those snapping jaws away from my face. I could feel its claws raking either side of my torso, trying to find purchase, but my armor held up against the assault and kept it from tearing into me.

As I struggled to hold it at bay, I shouted for Drummond above the creature's excited snarls.

"Kill it, man! Kill it!"

Thankfully, he did as he was told, skewering it through the head with his soulsword.

The beast collapsed atop me, leaking Corpus through the wound in its skull. I threw it off me and staggered to my feet, frantically searching the area around us.

"What's wrong?" Drummond asked, noting the intensity of my search. "Are there more coming?"

No, not in the sense he was thinking, at least. There was one thing I knew that Drummond didn't. Packs of vulpines didn't operate alone. They needed a handler to direct them.

That's when I saw her, standing in the opening of the tunnel on the other side of the bridge, dressed in the same tattered dress that she'd been wearing the day we'd found each other here in the Underworld. That night I'd been stationed at a lonely outpost on the edge of the Tempest, ordered to defend it along with my comrades against the hordes of Spectres that high command expected to attack in the midst of a lesser Maelstrom looming down upon us. Until that moment I'd had no idea that she hadn't gone on to her final rest, and seeing her come over the wall in the midst of that Spectral war party nearly undid me on the spot. We'd managed to fight them off and weather the storm but seeing her was all the motivation I'd needed to desert my post and take up the hunt.

Now, here in the depths of the Labyrinth, our gazes met once more, and I thought I saw recognition in her eyes. It was only there for a heartbeat before disappearing beneath the glossy sheen of the madness that ruled her, but that one glimpse was enough to renew my determination to see to it that she wouldn't spend the rest of her days, no matter how short, a prisoner of Oblivion.

Kate turned and ran.

Without a moment's thought, I gave chase. Drummond's footsteps echoed behind me.

I crossed the bridge and charged down the tunnel in front of me, doing what I could to catch up with Kate. She always seemed to be one step ahead; I'd turn a corner and get a glimpse of her disappearing around a bend at the other end. Right, left, right, right, left... it didn't take long for me to lose track of the turns as she led us deeper into the Labyrinth, but I didn't care.

This time I was going to catch her.

Except the Labyrinth had a surprise in store for us.

One minute I was running down that narrow stone tunnel, Drummond at my back, and the next we were standing on cracked and dusty linoleum at the end of a dimly lit hallway. Banks of fluorescent lights hung overhead, some intact, others gone dark and dangling from their support wires. Those that were still working seemed to hiss and spit as the electricity flowed through their circuits, seeming to speak in an electronic tongue that I couldn't understand. In the flashes of light that they produced, I could see doors on either side of the corridor stretching out as far as I could see, all of them closed and locked.

With one exception.

HUNTING PARTY

The door at the far end stood open, bright light from inside spilling out into the hallway.

I made my way toward it.

Kate always had a bit of a melancholy side, but it hadn't ever been anything I'd worried about. She'd get down from time to time but would always bounce back up pretty quickly, and I'd written her moods off as just one facet of the incredible person she was. We all have flaws, right? Little things that keep us grounded in our humanity, that help us remember that we aren't perfect, no matter how hard we might try to be.

Maybe if I'd paid more attention to that side of her, I might have seen what was coming.

It wasn't enough that Kate had to deal with my loss; no, Fate had to drive the knife in deeper and twist it back and forth in the wound, oh so slowly, by taking our unborn son within months of my death as well.

It had been that second loss that had driven her to her final, irrevocable act.

Just before reaching the doorway, I looked back to check on Drummond. He was a few feet behind me, his sword in hand, alert and ready.

Satisfied that we wouldn't be surprised by an attack from behind, I crept forward the final few feet and peered around the edge of the door.

On the other side was a hospital room.

There was a wheeled bed with metal side rails pushed up against the far wall, close to a curtained window. I knew without looking that if I pulled that curtain back, I'd see the base where I'd been stationed during my last, and final, deployment. Overhead, bright fluorescent lights threw everything into stark relief, including the mirror hanging in the small bathroom on the far side of the bed, the mirror with the haunting word *Why?* written on it in what appeared to be blood.

It was the hospital room that Kate had been in when they'd told her that she'd lost the baby.

But I knew that. I'd figured that out the last time I'd been here.

Wait, I thought, in a moment of confusion.

The last time?

I could feel something looming there in the back of my mind, something vital, some important revelation that I needed in order to fully understand what was happening, but as I mentally reached for it, a hand wrapped itself around my ankle and yanked me off my feet.

I crashed to the floor, slamming my head against the linoleum beneath me in the process, but years of combat experience sent my reflexes into overdrive and I was scrambling back to my feet seconds later, just in time to watch Kate rise through the floor in front of me like some kind of avenging angel hellbent on evening the score.

We smiled at each other, wraith and Spectre, and then slammed together in a fury of blows, each trying to get through the other's defenses. It was my soulsteel sword against her Moliated hands and teeth, all savage weapons in their own right, and it wasn't long before we were both covered with a plethora of wounds. Somewhere in the midst of it all Drummond joined the fray, thrusting and stabbing with his own weapon whenever the opportunity presented itself.

It should have been enough to overcome her, but it wasn't. Fueled by Oblivion's rage, Kate could afford the damage that she was taking, but I could not, and I knew if things went on any longer the way they were going, I was going to be in serious trouble.

It was time to play the ace card I'd been holding up my sleeve.

Gathering my strength, I reached deep into the well of Pathos inside me and used it to project the deepest, darkest memory I had – the moment of my own death – onto Kate.

HAUNTING SHADOWS

Just as I'd hoped, she froze as she watched my memory of stepping out from behind that Humvee and looking up to my left at the sudden light that flashed from the depths of that second-story apartment, instinctively knowing what it was even as the sight registered in my brain and the bullet found a home in my skull.

That hesitation caused her arms to drop slightly and gave me the opening I needed.

As I thrust my sword forward to deliver the fatal blow, my Shadow woke up and shouted full force inside my head.

Stop!!!

My arm froze in mid strike, as if my flesh and bones had transmuted into concrete and steel in the blink of an eye. Try as I might, I couldn't get it to move, no matter how hard I strained.

My Shadow had seized control.

You need to listen to me, Stokes. You don't want to do this.

Let me go, I replied.

You can't kill her.

Of course I can't. She's already dead, you idiot! Now let me go!

I struggled, to no avail. He was firmly in charge for the moment. And he wasn't done pleading his case.

No, listen! What if she's the only reason you're still here?

What?

You heard me. Your Fetters are gone. There's nothing on the other side left unfinished. Your wife is dead. Your child is dead. Your family, estranged though they might have been, have long since passed away.

So?

So what if the only thing keeping you here is your desire to set Kate free? And when you do that, what happens then? Huh? Have you thought about that?

I hadn't, actually. And I'm sure he knew it.

Are you ready to give it all up?

At any other time, I would have said Hell yes. The idea of spending the rest of eternity here in the Shadowlands wasn't my cup of tea. Somebody asks if that's how you want to spend your afterlife and of course you say no.

But those kinds of questions are usually rhetorical, aren't they?

Here and now, faced with the very real possibility that I would be giving up what little "life" I had left if I carried out my intentions, I wasn't so sure that was what I wanted after all.

It might not be the greatest of existences, but at least it's yours, right?

Right.

And with that, I made my decision.

As my Shadow relinquished control and the world around me sped back up to normal speed, I reached back, grabbed Drummond by the collar, and thrust him out in front of me, right into the buzzsaw of Kate's flashing claws.

He screamed in agony, but I didn't listen. I'd already turned heel and was racing back the way we'd come, determined to live long enough to find my way out.

I'll get her next time, I tell myself as I race for the exit.

Next time.

Somewhere in the back of my mind, I can hear my Shadow laughing.



JACKIE CASSADA

Ramona felt the wind whip her long hair as the small sailboat responded to her direction and sped along the coastline toward the outcropping of land that held the worn and abandoned lighthouse cradled in its rocky grasp. The back of her neck tingled.

“A storm’s coming,” she remarked to her companion, the stern-looking Centurion who was her superior officer. Artus nodded, a small smile playing at the corners of his mouth.

“You’ve paid attention to your instructors,” he replied.

“You taught me well, sir,” she answered, knowing that most times formality wasn’t necessary, but this would be one of the last opportunities to use the title.

Artus nodded. “Bring her into the cove,” he said. “Mind the rocks.”

Ramona nodded. She had already begun the task of tacking the sails gently into the wind to bring the sailboat into the small harbor hidden within the cove. A few minutes later, she had drawn alongside the small pier and tied off the boat.

She stepped onto the dock and stood looking down at Artus, who was still aboard the ship.

“Here’s where I leave you,” he said. “Moriah should be waiting for you inside.”

“I just hope we get along,” Ramona said as she started up the stone-marked path to the lighthouse that now loomed over her. When she received no response, she turned around. The dock was empty, with no sign of the sailboat. Feeling a little regret, she wondered how he could have left so quickly. Must be one of his powers, she thought.

Or else you hallucinated him and you’re still stumbling around lost in the Shadowlands, the inner voice that she now recognized as her Shadow chided her. *You stupid girl. You don’t even remember how you got here.*

“I got here on a sailboat that belongs to my superior in the Legion of Fate,” she said aloud. “And the reason I was stumbling around in the Shadowlands was because I died.”

She hoped that rebuke would quiet her Shadow enough for her to get on with her assignment.

"I realize that," a low-pitched feminine voice answered her from just up ahead. With a laugh, she added, "We're both dead. Imagine that!"

Ramona had to join her in a laugh that was partly from relief and partly because it just felt good.

"I haven't laughed—"

"—in a long time?" Though the older wraith's words sounded like a question, the amused look on her weathered, pockmarked face implied that she already knew the answer.

Ramona joined Moriah as the two proceeded up the steepening path toward the lighthouse. The silence between the two women felt comfortable, and Ramona finally felt that her decision to accept the assignment to this lonely outpost was right. About halfway up the path, she stumbled on a large boulder. She stopped to recover her balance and as she did, she looked out toward the sea. A sharp wind blew in from the water, carrying with it the suggestions of salt and mist and animal life, all bleeding through the Shroud from the Skinlands. The sight of endless water, rising, swelling into waves, then breaking and rushing to the shore of the small, sandy beach, would have taken her breath away, if she had been alive again.

The ocean called to her in ways that the Stygian metropolis did not. She sometimes wondered if one of the reasons she bore the marks of Fate had to do with her need for the stark solitude more easily found in places like rocky beaches — and steep cliffs, such as the one she was now climbing.

Ahead of her, Moriah had stopped as well.

"Out there lies the Tempest," Moriah's voice was flat, factual.

"I know," Ramona answered, raising her normally soft voice to pitch it over the constant pounding of the ocean's waves against the nearby rocks and the steadier *slush* as the water met the sand along the cove. "How far out, do you know?"

Moriah shook her head, "No one is sure. It changes."

"At least something does," Ramona replied.

Moriah made a half coughing sound, almost a scoff. "Everything changes here," she said. "Even in the still places, change happens. It just takes a long time to see it."

Moriah turned back to the path ahead, and Ramona followed her the last few yards to the lighthouse door. Moriah took out a key from the pocket of her wrap-around skirt and unlocked the heavy wooden door.

"I don't know what this is supposed to keep out," she remarked. "Things, I guess." She backed up against the door to let Ramona enter the lighthouse, now her new home, before her.

Ramona looked around at the interior. A large room with a few furnishings, couches and chairs, and a large table covered in maps and charts in the center.

"Are those relics?" Ramona asked, moving toward the charts.

"Yes, most of them," Moriah said. "Some were recovered from shipwrecks, others look like they caught fire and burned."

Ramona reached out to touch the reconstituted paper and, in some cases, painted and waxed cloth. It had been some time since she felt a substance that did not whimper or cry out at her from the souls Moliated into the objects. She listened hard to the interior of the lighthouse. All she heard was silence inside.

Moriah seemed to read her mind. "I don't think anything here is made from soulstuff," she said. "We don't need currency here, and the furniture is all salvage that made it through the Shroud."

“And the books?” Ramona asked, hopeful for the first time since she died.

“Salvage,” Moriah said. “Some of them are very old.”

Ramona wandered across the room to the tall bookcase. She ran a hand across a row of books, taking in the titles as she did so.

“A lot of history here,” she said, “And ships’ logs?”

“Yes,” Moriah said. “Where they could be salvaged, the ships’ logs were a priority for what we could learn about the sea lanes in the Skinlands. Some of them are still usable here. Others are just Tempest-wracked.”

Moriah led the way up the spiral staircase in the middle of the lighthouse to other rooms, one to a floor.

“There’s really no use for the kitchen,” she said as they passed the room just above the ground floor. Ramona noted that it looked a little shabbier, somehow a little less “real.”

The bedroom, just above the kitchen, was as strongly delineated as the living area. She raised her eyebrows in an unasked question.

Moriah laughed a little. “Sometimes it’s just nice to lie down, not because I’m tired, but because it helps me remember that I’m not just a walking corpse.” A shudder ran through her. “I don’t spend a lot of time thinking about that. You probably won’t either.”

“Onward and upward?” Ramona asked.

“Yes,” Moriah responded. “You’ll like this.”

The topmost accessible floor was the “lighthouse room.” It held the tower supporting the lantern, which occupied its own window-filled room.

“This room holds the controls. It’s where you can switch the lighthouse on or off,” Moriah said. “Most times we just leave it on, since it’s hardly ever what you might call ‘day’ here.”

“That bothered me at first,” Ramona confessed. “I missed the sunlight.”

“You get used to it eventually,” Moriah said. She explained some of the various instruments and dials on the tower and elsewhere in the room. Ramona grasped the information quickly.

“Just don’t let the view distract you too much,” Moriah said. “You might miss something important, something you might want to pass along to Stygia or to the nearest Necropolis. What I’m trying to say is, don’t miss the forest for the trees.”

“How do I do that? Send something.”

“It’s our secret,” Moriah said. She went to one of the windows and opened it, making a cooing sound as she did. A few seconds later, Ramona heard an answering “coo,” and a bird flew in to land on Moriah’s outstretched arm.

Ramona looked at what was obviously a pigeon, but its soft colors, grey-blue body and pink throat and chest, did not resemble the pigeons she knew.

“Is that a passenger pigeon?” she asked.

“Good for you,” Moriah said. “Most of us believe that animal souls don’t make it over here, but it seems that in some cases, like when a species goes extinct, some of the last ones find their way across the Shroud. This is Cooper, and we sometimes use him to transit messages to the Legion. It’s one of our secrets.”

Ramona nodded. Delighted, she stretched out her own arm and marveled when the bird stepped from Moriah’s arm to hers. The two women spent some time making sure that Cooper felt comfortable with his new handler and that Ramona knew the commands that would send the bird to his destination. She found out that even the ink and paper used to prepare the messages came from salvaged materials.

HAUNTING SHADOWS

Several days passed during which the two women, one the teacher, the other the student, transferred the knowledge of how to run the lighthouse and all the details, large and small, about existing on the edges between land and sea.

"In many ways, the lighthouse runs itself. You can leave it alone for a little while," Moriah said one day, after a long period of silence during which Ramona read some of the log books in the library, and Moriah moved through the lighthouse, touching first one item and then another. *It's as if she's saying goodbye to everything*, Ramona thought.

She probably doesn't believe you can do the job, her Shadow wheedled. *She'll probably report you. You should silence her for good*. At some other time, Ramona might have seriously considered her Shadow's insinuation, but she mustered the confidence she had developed over the past few days. "*You don't know anything about anything*," she thought back at her evil twin.

"What did you say?" Ramona asked, realizing that she hadn't quite registered Moriah's comment.

"I said that you don't have to monitor things here every minute. You can take walks outside, start a collection of things that wash ashore."

"That's nice to know," Ramona said. She waited for a moment before she asked the question that had occurred to her. "Is your Shadow stronger out here?"

Moriah looked at her carefully. "Do you mean because we're a lot nearer to the Tempest than in Stygia, or on the island?"

"Yes," Ramona said.

"Not really," Moriah said. "Your Shadow is your Shadow, and you are the one who determines how much sway it has over you." A few minutes later she added, "I understand you received the services of one of our Pardoners before you came out here."

Ramona nodded. She didn't feel the need to say anything.

"And you were vetted before your superiors decided to send you here. Did you know that?" Moriah asked.

Ramona shook her head. "No," she said. "I mean I was interviewed about what I wanted to do with myself. I just answered their questions."

"That was their way of determining whether or not you could handle the lighthouse. We need loners who are strong within themselves for a job like this. Were they wrong?"

"No," Ramona said. "I thought all the noise was going to drive me crazy," she said. "Not just all the people, but the moans and the whispers—"

"And how have you felt in the last few days?"

"It's quiet and peaceful here," Ramona replied. "I like it."

"It's not so quiet when there's a storm," Moriah said. "But the tumult sometimes seems like a welcome break from the solitude," she laughed. "Don't tell anyone I said that," she remarked quickly.

"Said what?" Ramona said.

Both women heard a noise outside the lighthouse.

"What's that?" Ramona asked.

"That would be my ride to my new assignment," Moriah replied.

"Do you know what that is?"

Moriah shook her head. "No, but it will probably be another lighthouse. At least I hope it will be."

STORMS

Ramona followed Moriah down the stairs, where the older woman stopped to pick up a small piece of luggage, one that looked as if it had come off a shipwreck. Moriah turned in the doorway. "I can take it from here." She extended her hand for Ramona to shake.

"Perhaps we'll meet again," Moriah said. "I'm leaving this place in capable hands."

Before Ramona could react, Moriah turned and moved quickly down the path to the waiting vessel, a larger one than the one that had brought Ramona here. Without hesitating, she boarded the ship, and a minute or so later it cast off. Standing in the doorway, Ramona waved goodbye. She thought she saw Moriah return the wave, but it might have been the glint of the dim light reflecting off the water. When the vessel was no longer in sight, Ramona closed the door and went upstairs to the top room of "her" lighthouse.



Ramona grew used to the routine passage of time, not so different from time in the Skinlands, except there was no sense that her days were counting down. What do you do when there's nothing to do? Do nothing, and enjoy it.

She took her time reading the books in the library, again feeling no urge to hurry. She cleaned what little there was to clean; occasionally when she tracked in sand from walks on the beach, she took a broom and swept it back out the door.

Her biggest joy came from watching the ocean through the windows in the lighthouse room. The ocean proved ever-changing, yet never changing. She marveled at the constant ebb and flow of the waves along the sand, sometimes with a little more force than others, but always with a regularity that comforted her.

At least twice a day, she called Cooper to her to familiarize the bird with her. She never tired of feeling the softness of his feathers and listening to his gentle cooing.

On the fourth day by herself, she noticed a change in the weather. The air was heavy, so heavy she could almost feel it weighing her down. By mid-day, she could hear a distant rumbling that heralded a full-fledged storm. This was not a normal storm, though, she realized. Something foul seemed to come to shore along with the quickening wind. The growing noise she heard meant that part of the Tempest was drawing closer.

She ran upstairs to make sure that all was in order, making sure the lighthouse's lantern was set on its highest setting to penetrate any fog that the storm might throw out in front of it.

While she was busy, she heard the unexpected noise of hoofbeats. Then she knew what she was hearing.

Equitaes! she realized. These were elite knights sent in to fight the Spectres in the Tempest. They must have been sent by one of the Oracles who had noticed something unusual about this weather event.

She peered at the horses as they galloped past her and straight into the water, or rather onto the water. She guessed some sort of Underworld powers gave the horses the ability to surf the waves.

She had once or twice caught a glimpse of the notorious Stygian steeds. A few had wandered ashore on the Lady of Fate's Isle of Eurydice before being sent to the appropriate Legion's Equitaes. And once she thought she glimpsed the white steed that belonged to the Lady Herself. The sight of those mighty beasts had brought her to tears then, and she felt them streaming down her cheeks now.

She knew then that she'd always loved horses as a girl, and that she still loved them. She realized that her worries as she watched the knights ride into the distance, toward the storm, had more to do with the fate of the horses. The knights knew what they were doing, but did the horses realize what was waiting for them? Did any horses used in battle know,

for that matter? She marshaled her thoughts and shoved them to the back of her mind. Worry would do her no good. Instead, she sat at one of the windows and watched — and waited.

The time passed slowly, more slowly than she could have imagined. For its part, the storm acted like most any storm. The wind grew louder and wilder, whipping the surf up to furious, frothy mountains as it broke, pounding the sand and bringing the water level higher and higher. Thunder sounded almost simultaneously with lightning, a sign that the storm — if not the actual Tempest — was right over the lighthouse. She made herself stop wincing at every flash of lightning. I'm already dead, she told herself. I can't be struck by lightning.

How do you know that, idiot? her Shadow taunted.

"You'd like nothing more than to drag me out into that," she scoffed. "Just go away and leave me alone!" She must have done something right, she thought, for her Shadow instantly retreated into quiescence.

The storm seemed to surge on, intensifying when it should have peaked and receded. Some of the lightning was truly magnificent, streaking across the sky in harsh jagged lines, punctuated now and then by powerful balls of energy that exploded above the water.

Suddenly, out of the darkness, she saw a darker figure emerge from the storm, headed straight for the lighthouse. She felt a thrill of terror as she imagined one of the Spectres making it all the way to the shore to attack the lighthouse. Then she saw the figure coalesce into a horse. One of the knights' horses, she realized. The steed ran with purpose, she had time to notice, not as if it were fleeing from the Tempest, but as if it were heading directly for the lighthouse.

She ran downstairs, doubling and tripling the steps as she hurried. When she reached the ground floor, she unlocked and threw open the door, intending to run outside and bring the animal inside. Instead, she threw herself backward to avoid being trampled as the horse ran inside the lighthouse and stopped, its flanks heaving in and out with real breath. This was one of the rare live ones, she realized, that could travel back and forth between the Skinlands and the Shadowlands. He towered over her, his withers just higher than the top of her head, and his head even taller. She reached toward his head to quiet him, making sure she approached him from the side, so as not to startle him. Instead, he jerked his head away from her, and pointed it toward the door.

He's trying to tell me something, she thought. "What are you trying to tell me?" she asked. This time the horse looked at her with his deep brown eyes. She reached up again and touched his nose, gasping at the soft, velvet texture and the warm breath on her hand. Along with the contact, she saw images flash in her mind: the other knights and horses faded into the background as he and his rider threw themselves into the Tempest. Spectre after Spectre came out to meet the pair, and his rider slashed at them with his sword. The horse was no slacker, either, rearing and kicking out with all his hooves, causing as much damage as his rider, if not more.

The last image was hard to see. A Spectre dragged his rider off. Before he let go of his mount, the knight yelled out to his horse. She could only read his lips. "Lighthouse," he seemed to say.

"You're here," Ramona said, still touching the animal. "Now what?" The horse placed another image in her head, this time one that was awkwardly shaped, as if the horse himself had tried to communicate on his own. "You want me to come with you?" she said, hardly believing what she thought she saw. The horse nodded his head fiercely up and down.

She noticed, for the first time, that the horse wore no tack, no saddle or bridle. "I don't think you'll let me ride you," she said, "but somehow we'll find a way to make it there and back, I hope." She ran upstairs to her bedroom, where, as Moriah had said, she enjoyed just lying down from time to time. In a drawer, she kept her one weapon, the sword she had

been given as a member of the Legion of Fate. She disliked it, though, because she could hear the souls that went into its forging as they moaned continuously, a sound that barely broke the barrier of audibility, like a whisper cracks the silence.

She thrust it through the belt of her relic-jeans, a recent find that made her feel strong just by wearing them, and hurried back to where the steed waited. He was magnificent, his color a brown so dark it might as well be black, and his long mane an even darker color mixed with a color she thought of as gun-metal gray.

"Now what," she said as she followed the horse outside, where he stopped to drink some rain-water that had collected in a rock pool near the front door of the lighthouse. She reached up to touch the horse once again, and saw a picture of what she thought might be her hand tangled up in some long, dark strings.

"If you say so," she said, as she grabbed the horse's mane. Before she knew it, they were speeding off toward the water. Argos — she remembered the name of the power that enabled the horse to travel so quickly on the surface of the water, carrying her along beside him.

Later, she could not describe the journey into the Tempest. She only knew that she and the horse flew — or seemed to fly.

"Equitaes!" she screamed once they reached the battle, which was still going on. It occurred to her that she had no idea what else to call him. As she called out, the horse beside her whinnied so loudly it could only be the equine equivalent of a scream. Without a thought, she followed the horse inside the Tempest itself, one hand wrapped in the animal's mane, the other clutching her sword, swinging it at anything that came toward her. She knew she connected with something that howled at her, so she hit it again. She caught sight of something so horrific and malignant, all teeth and skull and bloody bones, that she knew she would not enjoy peace for a long time.

This is what it's really like, her Shadow said, its voice soft and cajoling. *Forget about what you thought the afterlife was all about. This is the truth!*

"No," she screamed back at it. She grasped the horse's mane even more tightly, shoving her nails into her palm so that she could focus on the pain. "This horse is real. My sword is real. You're nothing. Now get out of my way and let me do this! The horse kicked out at the Spectre Ramona faced, and it screamed in anguish and retreated.

Something else grabbed the wrist of her sword hand. She screamed in surprise and tried to jerk her arm away without letting go of the horse. A man came out of the Tempest attached to the hand.

"I knew it!" The knight said, swinging himself up effortlessly on his horse's back. As Ramona looked around her, she noticed that the Tempest, just as a natural storm, had abated. The rest of the knights gathered, and Ramona realized that all of them were there, though many were in need of serious healing. "I'm Dillon," the knight she'd rescued said to her, as he drew her up effortlessly until she sat behind him on his horse. "I don't think Storm will mind at all carrying you back to the lighthouse," he said.

"I hope not," she replied. "I'm Ramona."

Dillon nodded, looking back at her. "Legion of Fate?" he asked, obviously seeing the Lady's mark on her, just as it was on him.

"Seems we have something in common," she said into his ear as they galloped toward the lighthouse.

"We have more than one thing in common," Dillon replied.

"Storm," she said.

"Both storms," he countered. They continued riding in silence after that.

HAUNTING SHADOWS

One by one, the company of knights drew to a halt outside the lighthouse.

"I don't have a lot of room," Ramona said, "but you're welcome to rest here for a while." The Centurion of the group introduced himself, and thanked Ramona on behalf of Dillon and the rest of his company.

"Is there someone I should notify that you're on your way back with wounded?" she asked.

"Can you do that?" the Centurion asked, raising his eyebrows quizzically.

"I can," she said. "Just give me a few minutes." She ran upstairs to the lighthouse room and opened the window. The air smelled like ozone, a strangely fresh smell that contrasted with the no-smell of the Shadowlands. She cooed softly and waited for the flap of wings as Cooper landed on her outstretched arm. She took out a small piece of parchment, some ink and a quill, and scribbled out a hasty message. She tied it in a tight little roll onto one of Cooper's legs. "Take this to the Legion of Fate," she said, hoping that Cooper knew what she meant. Instantly, the passenger pigeon flew away.

She replaced her sword in the drawer after wiping down the blade. Then she grabbed a towel and wiped her face and arms, also covered with the stuff of Spectres, something yellow and viscous that she didn't want to think about any longer than she had to.

A few minutes later she was downstairs, with all the towels and any other pieces of cloth she could find for the soldiers to use to wipe themselves down.

While the knights went outside again to see to their mounts, Ramona accompanied Dillon outside to where Storm waited for him.

"No saddle or bridle?" she asked as Dillon used one of the towels to wipe the animal down.

He shook his head. "From the beginning he disliked any kind of tack. I think he found the soul stuff disturbing," he said.

"I can understand that," Ramona said. "I'm not wild about it either." He put a hand on Storm's withers and started to walk the animal, letting him cool down from his exertions. Ramona accompanied him.

"I was hoping he could get the message across," Dillon said. "He's always seemed exceptionally smart."

Ramona just nodded her head. Then, as an afterthought, she replied, "I saw pictures in my head when I touched him."

Dillon laughed. "Just be glad you don't get them all the time, like I do," he said. "Storm's a very funny horse, or so he seems to think."

Ramona decided it was better not to ask Dillon to elaborate.

"I hope you'll bring him back to visit me," she said.

Dillon stopped and looked at her. Then he smiled, just a small smile. "I will," he said. "I don't think I could keep him away, now that he knows he's got a friend here."

"I've only been here a few days," Ramona confessed. "I don't even know what the name of this lighthouse is." A few seconds later, she added, "I forgot to ask."

Dillon laughed. "I don't know what it was called in the Skinlands," he said. "We've called it Desolation Row, 'cause it's so far out of the way. It's named after some song, or a book," Dillon said. "Maybe both."

"I've heard of the song," Ramona said.

After another half hour or so, the Centurion declared the company ready to return to Stygia. The company mounted up and prepared to ride off.

Dillon waved at her as the Equitaeas rode off.

STORMS

Ramona returned the wave, thinking that nothing would ever be the same again. When she returned to the lighthouse room, she found Cooper waiting patiently for her. She checked his leg, finding a reply to the message. She unrolled it, and smiled as she read: *Received loud and clear. Well done. Moriah.*



Ramona fell back quickly into her routine, although she found even more to watch for as she kept vigil inside the lighthouse. Her supply of relics was growing, as items washed up on shore, everything from bottles to parts of furniture to the occasional coin from the Skinlands. The next time someone came through, she thought, she would see if she could trade it for something she could use, if she could think of anything.

The storms that came and went held no fear for her, so long as they were just storms. She found her Shadow had become quiet, and sometimes that worried her, but most of the times she just gave thanks to Fate that she didn't have to contend with it as often as she used to.

She spent some time every day walking outside the lighthouse, familiarizing herself with her surroundings. Mostly, she tended to her job, making sure the lantern never went out, spending time with Cooper, who seemed to appreciate it, and watching. Mostly watching.

She knew she shouldn't hope for another Tempest-caused storm, but sometimes she did. Those were the times she felt her Shadow stirring, and those were the times she quickly quashed the thought. She spent a lot of time reading, only now she scoured her library for anything that had to do with horses, finding a few books she very nearly memorized. She also read as many books as she could find on the weather, knowing that such information could only help her in her job.

And she watched, and listened, her ears straining for the sound of hoofbeats or for the low, rolling waves of thunder that might signify another great confluence of rain and wind and lightning, waiting always for another storm.



LUCIEN SOULBAN

They paddled along the unnamed fingers of that lightning bolt known as the Amazon River, in an unmapped quadrant the size of Rhode Island. They sought the unlikelyst of Hail Marys before the company sued for Chapter 11.

No pressure, thought Dr. Amours Katlilian, not that he succumbed to panic. Only to headaches made worse by the monkeys that howled at ear-splitting decibels, headaches like rusty fingernails pushed slowly into his cranium by the hand of malice.

The humidity sapped him, the heat harassed him and turned his lungs into a pair of wet sponges. *Why'd I let them drag me out here?*

Satellite photos showed no features but an endless canopy of green; only the locals had a name for it, but no real map. Amours had heard it before, various tribes claiming to know about this unfound Eden or that pristine heaven pocketed somewhere in the untamed jungle. He took it as pure fancy, a subconscious desire to remember an Amazon before rubber barons, cocaine smugglers, and lumber companies uprooted jungle and massacred tribes. Or an attempt to bilk his company's desperation to finesse the ability to "project" one's consciousness outside the human body. This time, though, a local guide named Emilio backed his assertions with several preserved flowers, genus previously unknown.

The bracts were preserved crudely in a Ziploc; they looked fetid, dyed with an oily black and deep purple pigment. It was an unnatural hue, normally occurring only through the efforts of hybridists who manufactured the Queen of the Night tulip or Black Velvet petunia. Amours almost dismissed it on sight as a fake, but his company was desperate for a breakthrough and pressed him to test the petal.

He discovered the hue was somehow naturally occurring, the flower richer in anthocyanins than any Amours had ever seen. What this could do for cancer research alone was incalculable, but no one could figure out why the flower was so saturated in that type of flavonoid. Some integral part was missing, a key without its lock, and nothing excited the imagination more than an orphaned key.

Of greater interest were the psychotropic properties of the petal. It was a completely new class of psychoactive, neither stimulant nor analgesic, not hallucinogenic nor euphoric, but something entirely different. Once the lab dismissed the effect as not hallucinogenic, it could only be a new class that allowed one to leave their body like a—

Ghost.

“Ridiculous,” the doctor wanted to say, but Amours had seen too much to rest on his own certainties. The company was still arguing over the term “ghost,” but it was a branding issue now. Ghost implied charlatans and circus popcorn, some said, while others thought they needed to steer into the word; and while they argued, nobody could agree upon that one unspoken question that mattered most... what do we do with this? Salvage company for lost treasures; expensive tours of the afterlife; retain control of your assets after death; speak to history’s witnesses; new cancer treatments; unrealized pharmacological opportunities? The possibilities were infinite, and Amours was already scared of his employer...

“...An expedition to the Bosawas Biosphere Reserve? That’s Central America, not where this plant grows.”

“We are captains of a new industry, Dr. Katlilian, but spies and corporate espionage can steal our ship out from under us. Nobody can know where you’re really going. The Bosawas expedition is a red herring.”

Amours refused to believe in “ghosts,” but the new flower’s ability to disassociate one from their own body was compelling evidence that identity survived death.

And what a kick in the teeth that was. There was a possibility of a hereafter...not an epilogue, but whole new chapters that distilled his life’s work into a set of diminishing returns. The thought angered him, *fuck I could scream*— but —

Hun.

—he shut his mouth, and brought his anger to heel.

“Hun,” Maggie would say, and that was it. A simple word that carried bottomless patience, and a hint of a kind warning with (perhaps) a slight edge of exasperation.

A decade...was that all? More of his life was spent without her, and yet — the fingers dug harder into his brain.

• • •

The jungle seemed to part for the figure, vines snaking around it, trees bending away from its touch. A ragged aura surrounded it, gauze undulating like snakes in the brush, a smile like a cruel forever.

I was waiting.

You want the flower.

I can give it to you.

Come.

• • •

For not the first time, nor perhaps the last, Amours stood at the threshold of this strange Eden. The two dead trees leaned against each other, forming an arch. Living lupuna trees had always carried the weight of the jungle canopy; stretched trunks, their branches spread out with cradling and curled fingers. Their bark brought visions, the sap poison; the tribes feared and revered the various lupuna, calling them Mafomeira, and each was said to hold a spirit that protected the forest.

HAUNTING SHADOWS

Amours wondered what the legends said about the dead kind as he studied the two fallen trees. He shouldn't be here, he knew that; not out of any reverence, but because he wasn't equipped to survive the way Emilio's tribe had adapted and evolved.

Local legend had it that the tribe, a distant branch of the Maku, were born with the map etched into the palms of their hands, though Amours suspected this was mainly shameless self-promotion and an unhealthy touch of vanity.

Come.

It was so damn frustrating. Four days, being this close to answers, knowing that the rainy season was ending and the rivers that carried them here would vanish. And they were still waiting on Emilio, who walked into the jungle as soon as they set up camp and never returned. When he asked Heitor, an older guide, about Emilio, the man simply stared at him through dark eyes set in ripples of wrinkles and then glanced down the path where Emilio had vanished...the path to this place.

What in God's name am I doing out here?

He wanted to shout, but Maggie wandered back into his thoughts with a patient smile, and he knew. He rubbed his fingers together, but the purple stain remained as dark and as vivid as ever.

When did I touch the purple plant? When had I seen it?

The urge to enter Emilio's slice of paradise itched at the underside of his skin. Why did he keep doing this to himself, coming here and staring, his thoughts drifting? His world was about to be upended, and here he was, babysitting interns who didn't understand the significance of this place.

Cole might be a problem down the road, Amours realized. If this flower was the real thing, the company would have a head-start on a wealth of biodiversity and pharmacological research, but no right to any land claims on what was likely protected tribal soil. They'd have to operate in secret, uprooting native species, smuggling them into North America, transplanting them in hidden greenhouses, and then retroactively getting the permits through bribes.

It was corporate and agricultural spycraft; he'd engaged in it before, but Cole's penchant for storytelling would land them in hot water somewhere down the line. He was sure of it.

Then there was Amy. She was the idealist of the group, and while she'd signed the admittedly restrictive Non-Disclosure Agreement without hesitation, there would come a time when her morals would move her to action. He didn't blame her...he admired that in her, admired that reflection of Maggie's spirit.

Amours smoldered slowly, just waiting here. All the answers were just within reach, and Amours wasn't used to having questions. So many questions. He ached under the weight of them, and Emilio had been gone for days and the conversations he endured were insipid and—

Hun.

I'm sorry, darling, Amours thought, *but they don't understand how important this could be...this will change everything! I could see you again, but everything I've known and believed in would be—*

Maggie didn't respond. He rarely heard her voice beyond a familiar word or two.

Hun.

He slapped at a mosquito, frustrated and hard enough to sting. The blotch was still there, on his fingertips, that unaccounted stain.

Amours wanted to hear more of Maggie's voice, he wanted all the conversations they never got around to having, all the years promised in their vows. It wasn't fair, being given so much happiness for so short a time, and then having it ripped away so slowly that they

could see the end coming for years. Before Maggie, Amours would have shrugged at the tale. Life was a wasp laying eggs in a paralyzed spider's abdomen. Life was a parasite eating and replacing a fish's tongue with itself. Life was cruel, but it wasn't malicious.

Or at least, that was what he thought.

Now he was angry because it wasn't fair and because it felt cruel AND malicious. If there was a continued existence, then didn't that imply purpose, a design? Didn't that mean that suffering was malicious because...it was all deliberate?

Come.

Amours stepped forward, ready, willing to go through on his own this time.

"Going in, Dr. Katlilian?"

Amours spun around, his heart hammering savagely in his chest. "Jesus, Cole!" he said.

"Sorry. I wasn't expecting you to jump like that."

"Jesus," Amours repeated, trying to bite down on that savage bile of anger that made it hard to think. Cole meant to scare him. That smirk said everything that words didn't.

Hun.

No, he doesn't respect me. The fingers dug deeper into his skull, tearing it open into a ragged, broken smile. *He meant to scare me, to go running off to his friends and give them all a good laugh at my expense.* Amours struggled not to wince, to give this idiot the satisfaction.

"Were you going in?"

Amours looked at Cole, almost spat *fuck you*, but then he forced a nod.

"Awesome! I'll get the others."

"No," Amours said. He breathed out the anger and met Cole's gaze. "This place, it needs a light step. We don't know how many unique species live there, how delicate the balance is. Maybe," he said, pausing for effect. "Maybe we should come back later when Emilio returns."

"Hey, no," Cole said, rushing forward. "You and me, we go take a look. See what we see, you know?"

"But if the others find out—"

"We won't say. I can keep my mouth shut," Cole said, his gaze already looking past Amours to the twin lupunas.

Amours nodded. "All right. Let's," he said, heading for the jungle archway.

Come.

• • •

"Doctor Katlilian?"

Amours almost tipped himself over in the hammock. His sense of balance tilted and the world spun for a moment. He pitched inside his own head, unable to right his own ship. The pain in his skull sheared him in half, his edges jagged and sharp. Something had sawed him in half with a rusty blade, leaving behind rough and broken edges.

"Are you okay?" Amy ducked under the tarp and grabbed the lining of his hammock, steadying him.

"I—I'm not feeling well," Amours admitted. That was an understatement. *Where am I? Who is this woman?* The answers filtered through the throbbing heartbeats deep inside his skull, but he was still slow to take.

"You feel hot."

“It’s the jungle. I’m always hot.”

“What about your lymph nodes?” she asked, touching him under the jaw.

“No.”

“Fever, headache?”

“Headache.”

“Joint pain?”

He chuckled. “It’s not Dengue. We’re vaccinated.”

“Chagas?”

“Headache,” he repeated. “Just your run-of-the-mill headache from dehydration and mineral deficiency.”

She eyed him carefully, studying him. “Okay,” she said, grabbing the water bottle from his backpack. She sloshed it around and handing it to him. “Your eyes are bloodshot too... drink, grab some more sleep. We’ll handle it.”

“Handle what?” he asked, trying to raise his head.

Amy hesitated, but he could see it in her eyes, the small defeat of having said too much. “Cole’s missing.”

“What?” Amours replied, struggling to get up, but she pushed him down.

“He’s late,” she said. “Heitor went off looking for him, but...yeah.”

“I’ll help,” Amours said but he barely had the energy to blink.

“We got this. Drink. I’ll let you know when we find him.”

He lay there after she left, his eyes shut against the world, against the jungle. He drank a sip and then guzzled the rest, unhappy when the bottle ran dry but the thirst remained. He wanted to call out, to ask for more water, but even that was too much effort. Amours fell in and out of consciousness a couple of times. Images and memories flittered through his head, no chronology, unburdened of cause and effect. Thoughts slid over one another, some forgotten the moment they stopped and others skating through his dreams.

I should be worried about Cole, but he wasn’t. Maybe he was too weak. Maybe he didn’t like the man enough to care.

Why’s the soil all black, Dr. Katlilian?

Come.

He blinked, startled. When had that happened, Cole following him meekly as—

Amours was on his feet now, pulling down the mesh bag with his boots. Mud caked his treads, the soil a familiar brown with clumps of—

Why’s the soil all black, Dr. Katlilian?

It’s called terra preta de índio, Cole.

Now...come.

The fingers dug deeper into his skull and the pain shot down the ladder of his spine. Despite the heat, he flushed with damp chill. He couldn’t have gone past the lupuna trees — taken Cole inside with him — raised his fists above his head. That was impossible but—

Cole’s penchant for storytelling would land them in hot water somewhere down the line.

“Hallucination,” Amours said, muttering to himself. He checked his fingertips; the same colored stain as before. “That’s all, hallucination.” He hadn’t led Cole into that strange patch of jungle, hadn’t shown him the flower, hadn’t raised his fists, hadn’t hesitated, hadn’t— what was that beneath his fingernails. It was black and brown with soil and something else.

I can't.

The figure bled from its silhouette, ash and misery, and when it smiled, the corners of its lips spiraled off somewhere into the abyss where the God of all storms raged for centuries now.

Don't you want to know?

And he did, with an indescribable fatigue, so very much.

Amours donned his boots. The camp was empty, the others likely off searching for Cole, and he moved quickly toward the dead archway.

• • •

Past the dead lupuna trees, the temperature dropped, the air damp in a way that tore a shiver from Amours. The effect startled him; this felt closer to being in a European forest. Instead of offering relief, something vital had been pulled from the air, more fever-chill than cool. Heat died, smell rotted, life leeches away, and the decibels muddled. The Amazon was loud, uncomfortably so with alien chirps, howls, shrieks, and booming cries. They carried for miles, but here, the noise was timid, an affront to survival.

It was all so very familiar, each step deeper in certainty of that fact. He'd been here before, repeatedly. But when did he possess that sort of temerity, that lack of fear? He'd wanted to, desperately when they'd first arrived, but to have done it?

He didn't question it, didn't want to question it. He stepped where he remembered stepping, where...

...Emilio told me to step.

Amours was past questioning his own memories. He'd been here before, with Emilio, with Cole. Was he the reason they were both missing? No, he couldn't question that right now or everything would unravel.

Come.

The canopy had shut the door against the clouded sky, except for keyhole shafts of light that played across the alien flora. Patches of yellow luminescence glowed against the darkness, a skein of fungal web and the budding fruit of multicolored slime mold. It smothered trees and earth in an organic shag carpeting. The mold's fruit, clusters of stalks and drooping bulbs, hued their surroundings with a soft radium glow. Like the chill, however, it was sickly and anemic, a poor reflection of the real thing.

He should have been surprised by all these incongruities, but he wasn't. Déjà vu, selective amnesia, all of this was waiting for him to rediscover, waiting for him to remember—

"I knew you would come. What do you think?" Emilio stood there quietly, rifle laid across the crook of his arm, simply waiting like he knew Amours would be unable to stay away. Amours stared, mesmerized by the fungus-covered Eden.

"I had to see for myself," Amours replied, hoping he hadn't offended Emilio, but he wasn't going back, not just yet. He was exhausted from the hike here, but he wanted to experience it without the prattle of his interns who were laid out after setting camp. They'd step all over the flowers of Paradise in their eagerness, and this place was too delicate, too exotic to trample under boot.

"This is a special place," Emilio replied. He looked around, not with any sense of appreciation, but with the gravity of a warden. Like it was his duty.

"Yes, special," Amours admitted, glancing around. He nodded to the fungus. "It looks like a species of Myxogastria, if I had to guess, but I'd expect it in a European or North American, uhm, deciduous forest. Not here."

HAUNTING SHADOWS

"No, not here," Emilio said. He slung the rifle over his shoulder and said, "Come. We go look."

"I thought you'd try to talk me out of it."

"No," Emilio said. "You want the flower."

"That's why I was sent here."

"No," Emilio said. He stepped forward and tapped Amours in the chest, his eyes lost under shadow. "You. I can give it to you. Come."

Hun...

No, love. This is for us.

Amours followed the path on instinct. He remembered Emilio in the lead as he headed into the overgrown jungle, pointing to spots on the ground.

Step where I step.

Amours traveled softly...around patches of the strange growth, following echoes of his previous visits. Why couldn't he remember them? Where was Emilio in all this? They were here, together that first night, but now?

And Cole?

Dr. Katlilian. I really think we should head back. Grab the others. This place, these plants are all wrong. The air's all wrong.

Come, Cole. Step where I step.

Cole was sorely out of his element and Amours reveled in his discomfort. That much he remembered. Not that he blamed Cole either. Nothing about this place made sense. It was like he was staring at the inside of an infection.

The jungle suffered for the presence of the fungus, the plants leeched to an almost chalky, sickly white. *Could this be part of the flower's mechanism, the missing component somehow symbiotic?* This wasn't why he was here, but he couldn't help but dissect his surroundings.

He'd seen fungus grow in time-lapse videos, the way its tendrils lashed out randomly in lightning-bolt webs, searching for something to consume. The tendrils flowed and ebbed, beating steadily and without hurry, sending out new arms with each pulse. Some pathways died, but others anchored into fodder and created new hubs of activity. But that was over the span of days, and here he was seeing that pulsing in real time, a sickly yellow heartbeat that kept the fungus vibrant but static at the same time.

Then he noticed (remembered to notice) the soil. He knelt down and ran his fingers through the dirt.

"Terra preta de índio," he whispered to Emilio. "Indian black earth."

Emilio stopped and regarded him with an emotionless gaze, but Amours was too excited to censor himself. "It's made from bone, manure, charcoal, uhm, rotting vegetables...that means," he said, looking around, "this used to be inhabited land...farming land. Do people still live here?"

"My ancestors." Emilio turned and nodded further into the jungle. "I will show you."

Not for the last time, Amours felt helpless and certain he was walking his own last mile. Just past the two lupuna trees, he could have found his way back, but out here? Getting lost was a death sentence.

Cole felt the same way, Amours remembered. Lost and helpless. He, on the other hand, felt powerful. Why? Why had he felt that way?

Because it felt good to be angry, to unleash it on someone.

Hun...

“No!” Amours shouted, and then froze. Maybe he was startled by his own voice? Maybe it was shouting out loud in the dangerous jungle. Or maybe it was the strange tenor to his voice. He didn’t sound like himself.

But why then did it sound familiar?

Amours shook his head, but in his thoughts, the figure of ash and shadow whose smile endlessly unfurled said, *come*, and Amours obeyed.



The ruined walls seemed to appear out of nowhere, but Amours knew they were always there. The Amazon was an exercise in large-scale camouflage, threats and wonders alike nearly invisible amid the leaves and branches of the trees. Crawling liana vines curled over and through stone in undulating patterns. In the shadows, they seemed to writhe.

What civilization had trucked these materials here? Inca? Norte Chico? Tiwanaku? The stone masonry was sophisticated, rectangular blocks laid out in tightly packed formation, the edges at right angles. Whatever mortar had kept it together had been eaten away by the fungus that grew into the cracks and seams.

Open doorways and windows lay curtained by broad leaves and jungle trees, but beyond the path of fieldstone lay larger structures. He came across an overgrown courtyard surrounded by buildings, across adjoining streets and fallen buildings overgrown with roots and earth. When the childhood tug of curiosity pulled him to explore, fingers dug through his brain, raking his skull with fire and an anger so hot it turned to bile in his stomach. He continued straight instead, obeying because it was so much easier than fighting.

Jaguar-headed statues and wall carvings of the Staff God with his fanged teeth and snake staffs watched him walk by in silence, their faces somehow stoic and feral.

The fieldstone road that once ran straight lay buckled by trees and roots that forced him under and around. Still, the ghost of Cole followed him as he himself had been led by the ghost of Emilio who guided him that first night with silent nods and head gestures.

Up ahead, seeming to round a tree trunk or fallen blocks of stone as soon as Amours noticed him, a figure constantly slipped from view. It was hard to see in the dim, hard to separate another presence from imagination and shadows, but Amours was certain he walked in the wake of someone else.

Come.

“Damn you, I am. Do I have a choice?”

You never wanted one.

Amours couldn’t argue there. He was tired of second-guessing himself, tired of being angry with no recourse to lash out. Be the better person, be above it all, be intellectually superior, be knowledgeable.

Hun...

He was tired of the uncertainty of it all, now that his world was upside down. He’d made peace with never seeing Maggie again...

Coerced is not peace. It’s surrender.

...with living out his life devoted to science.

Science lies out of ignorance.

“Shut up!” Amours shouted at the figure walking ahead of him, at the shadow, but all he heard was a chuckle in reply. Amours stopped caring about his steps, stopped caring about

HAUNTING SHADOWS

the path, about where he put his hands, where he brushed against trees. He stopped caring about the origins of the stain on his fingertips. He ran after the figure. “Fuck you! Face me!”

You’ve devoted yourself to a lie.

But no matter how fast he ran, the figure rounded tree, rounded collapsed wall, always a wisp of laughing shadows and darting ash.

But I can change that.

Amours cleared around a wall and grabbed the edge of crumbling stonework before the lake could swallow him up.

• • •

He’d seen it before, twice at least. Why was he surprised this was here? The lake was in fact a grand basin the size of a football field, sunken and collapsed in spots, filled with murky water and dotted with xate and giant kapok trees that had broken through the fieldstone foundation. He couldn’t see the far edges in the gloom of these ruins.

The fungus had spread atop the still water. Long stalks of fruiting bulbs rose to several feet in height, sprouted from the decaying trees and animals that had fallen in. Why were there so many animal carcasses here?

Because all gardens need death.

The smell was horrid; gagging nausea punched him in the throat; thousands of insects droned and feasted on the rot. And the black flower grew here as well, emerging from hollowed out trunks and rotting corpses. Fungal blooms had already started growing out of Cole’s back, the back of his skull matted with blood and maggots. Soon, the flowers would grow from him too.

“No,” Amours shouted.

You did that with your fists. Such rage.

“No, you made me do that!”

I didn’t make you do anything. Who needs lies when the world is simply what it is.

The blood left his head, legs buckled and he sat down hard on a heavy kapok root. The figure was there in the basin, just above the water. Its body was made from oil-covered tentacles that writhed over and under its own appendages, its silhouette bled off in ash and soot, its smile of broken ivory sharpness stretched back and away until the corners of its mouth unfurled in smoky whirls and loops. Amours knew he was seeing only part of it, a human-shaped pinprick in the fabric that separated this place from Hell.

We devour Hell.

“I tried the flower, didn’t I?” Amours said, rubbing at the night-purple stain on his fingertips. “Emilio prepared it for me and I tried it.”

And you saw the truth. This world is a shell, a flaking coat of paint on the outside of a crumbling mansion.

“I— you made me see horrible things,” Amours said. He couldn’t stop the memories from welling up; the gray world beneath this one sat upon the foundations of civilizations that crushed the ones that came before them; the bruise of a storm, that welt on reality’s skin; the screaming, howling monsters that spiraled on rip currents. The afterlife was nothing but teeth and rage, a cannibal’s delight.

All truth is horror. It’s the lies that comfort you.

“And what is the truth? That the world is nothing but anguish? That there is an afterlife and it was nothing like we were promised.”

Yes, not that you ever believed in the hereafter...until now.

“Why should I believe you?”

Because I never sold you hope. I only promised to pull the curtain back and let you see the world for what it really was.

“You don’t care! Why do any of this?”

To return to your company with you. To teach you all the wonders this precious flower can bring you. I will be your new guide.

“No...”

Then walk away and never find this place again. Never find the answers that really matter.

The pain returned, his skull cracking in agony. “I—I need time to think. I can’t think.”

I’ve given you time, and yet you still come back to me, night after night. Despite the pain, despite the fear. This means more to you than any of that.

“Will— will I see Maggie?”

No, the shadow responded. But you didn’t come here for her. You didn’t come here for your company or their petty ambitions. You came here for yourself, and that’s why you’re angry, Amours Katlilian. You’re angry because even if I offered you Maggie in one hand and the truth in the other, you know which one you’d pick.

Hun...Maggie said, but in truth, her voice had already faded to an ember. Amours knew the shadow was right. He was chasing after the truth, trying to unravel the mysteries of the universe through magnifying glasses and microscopes. It wasn’t his tools that had failed him. He was just using the wrong set of eyes.

“You have a deal,” Amours whispered.



Flesh made for a strange dress; it tugged in all the wrong ways, stretched resentfully. Joints buckled, muscles tore, bones snapped. It felt ready to burst with his presence pushing against all that meat. Worst of all, he couldn’t taste his own blood or dip his hands inside his own entrails, not without damaging this host.

Amours was pliant, his anger and his hunger for knowledge familiar levers. The shadow wouldn’t find a permanent home in the doctor, not just yet, but this rack of skin and anguish would grow more comfortable, more accommodating, over time. It even felt comfortable enough letting the doctor drive, letting him speak.

“What do I call you?”

El Tunche, Emilio called me that. It’s fitting.

“Is he dead? Did I kill him too?”

No...his bargain with me is different, and he fulfilled his part. He and Heitor are leaving, stranding you all here alone so that our journey begins.

“Our journey?” Amours asked, his words heavy.

Bring the other interns here. Harvest the flowers and prepare them for passage back to your home.

“What do I tell them about Cole?”

Let them find his corpse and steer another intern into an accident over the next couple of days. We need their spirits broken. We need them afraid and compliant before we lead them out of the jungle.

“Accident. Who?”

You tell me.

“Amy,” Amours said after a moment. “She’ll be a problem for us down the road.”



RICHARD LEE BYERS

Even when you've been dead for a while, most things seen through the lens of death look creepy, but the old hotel was something special. It *felt* sinister, and that vibe wasn't even broadcasting on my wavelength, so to speak. It was aimed at the living, and I was just getting the spillover. I had no doubt something nasty lurked inside.

"Sorry," I said, "I'm not going in there."

As I spoke, I felt a twinge of guilt that made me wonder why I said it. Was it just common sense coupled with the fact that my real responsibility was helping ghost slaves escape to freedom on the Underground Railroad, my work as a hired snoop and troubleshooter basically just a cover? That was what I wanted to believe. But maybe it was cowardice and selfishness, the bad part of me, the part some ghosts call the Shadow.

Catherine looked at me with anguish in her eyes that made the guilt worse. She was a waif-like young woman of a ghost with a torso still indented where the steering wheel of a wrecked car crushed the life out of her. "I can pay more!" she said. "I'll get the money somehow!"

"That's not it."

"Please! It's my daughter!"

Her living, now grown-up daughter Sandy the "urban explorer." I told myself that if Sandy and her college friends had been stupid enough to ignore the warning the abandoned hotel was giving off and go in anyway, they'd brought whatever happened on themselves. Thinking like that didn't make me like me any better.

So maybe I was going in to find out what happened to her and help her if I could? I was still wavering when a Hyundai sedan with a rental sticker pulled up. It was either a few feet away or a universe away on the other side of the invisible wall that separates dead from living, depending on how you looked at it.

A thin man with a buzz cut and a face made for judging and condemning got out of the car. He glowed like all the living do, but that wasn't why Catherine and I flinched. He had a power, either something inside him or something he carried on his person, that made me feel like tiny bugs were biting my face and hands. I suspected that if he realized I was here and used the power against me, I'd feel worse than that.

As he looked over the front of the hotel, he hung a stole around his neck, but not the stole of your average priest. It bore the symbols of the Sons of Tertullian, ghost hunters and exorcists extraordinaire. I recognized them because I'd run into them on another case years before. Apparently this particular fanatic had come to try his luck inside.

If he sensed me, he'd probably destroy me as a warm up. But if he didn't, and we both went inside and used our abilities against whatever was waiting there, maybe we'd kick its ass.

Or maybe that was my stupidest idea ever, the bad me hitting on a particularly interesting way to kill (ghost-kill) the whole of me. But it got rid of the guilty feeling, so there was that.

My new friend the exorcist took a flashlight out of his pocket and headed for the hotel. "Wait here," I said to Catherine.

"I can come with you," she replied.

"Wait here," I repeated. Helping her daughter was likely to be tough enough without worrying about protecting her, too.

The exorcist tried the door, found it was open — maybe Sandy and her friends had jimmied it — and stepped into the gloom inside with flashlight in hand. Trying to ignore the bugs-biting sensation, I followed. I didn't know what he could see or sense, but it seemed like a good idea to stay behind him.

He played the flashlight beam here and there, picking out one detail after another. I could have managed without it. Ghosts can mostly see in the dark if there's even a little bit of light coming from anywhere, in this case the cracked, filthy windows.

In its day, the hotel had been upscale. Since then, time had dulled and dirtied everything with dust, rats had gnawed holes in the wainscoting, and intruders had defaced the wallpaper and landscape paintings with graffiti and left cigarette butts, broken bottles, and hypodermic needles scattered around the rotting chairs and couches. The signs of previous visits seemed encouraging until you realized that just because people had gotten in didn't mean they'd been allowed to leave.

The wall separating the dead and the living was flimsy as wet toilet paper here. It would have been easy for something to reach through from my side and hurt Sandy. The good news, if there was any, was that it might also make it easier for me to help her.

The Son of Tertullian recited some mumbo jumbo in what I took to be Latin. Something like an invisible brush swept lightly over me, and I was afraid he was about to notice me. He didn't, though. Maybe the prayer, spell, or whatever had been targeted specifically at the inhabitants of this place and, me being an intruder like him, I didn't qualify.

We prowled on through a bar, then a restaurant, and found our way to a ballroom. Once inside, my companion didn't have to do anything special to see the supernatural. Jazz played, at first faint, tinny, and then louder as musicians appeared on the bandstand. Dancers appeared, too, the men with slicked hair and sack suits, the women flappers in short dresses with beads swinging around their necks.

The exorcist scowled like he'd sighted the enemy. If he thought he was seeing ghosts, he didn't know all that much about my world, because really, something else was happening. Time was serving up a glimpse of the past as it sometimes will in places like that. It was harmless.

Or in this case, maybe not. Two of the prettier flappers, one for him and one for me, turned, smiled, and beckoned for us to come dance with them. My thoughts blurred, making

it hard to remember what was really happening, and I wanted to go out onto the dance floor and join the fun.

Maybe I would have, too, if the exorcist hadn't stepped forward ahead of me. Seeing him heading happily into danger snapped me out of my own daze, although confusion instantly tried to worm its way back into my mind. I reached into my pocket, brought out the detective's shield that had come with me from life into death, and stuck it out at the phantoms.

Doing that finished the job of clearing my head, and it popped the apparitions like soap bubbles. The badge wouldn't have done that or anything close to it to real ghosts, but illusions like the dancers and musicians were more fragile. The Son of Tertullian gasped when everything vanished, then slapped himself hard in the face as though to make sure he wasn't even a little bit hypnotized anymore. Or to punish himself for getting hypnotized in the first place.

Meanwhile, it occurred to me that the ballroom could have been flypaper meant to hold an intruder stupefied and helpless until the inhabitants of the hotel came and collected him. If so, weaponizing such phenomena took power, a kind of power I didn't understand and wasn't sure I could continue beating.

I hoped the slap would keep my unwitting partner from slipping into a stupor next time and make him faster on the draw with his own special kind of power. I also hoped the power wouldn't explode in all directions like a bomb and blow my ectoplasmic ass to bits.

The electricity had been off for decades, so an elevator ride was out of the question even if the Son and I were dumb enough to take one. We climbed the stairs to the mezzanine.

There was nothing waiting for us on that level but more darkness, dirt, decay, and that gnawing, disquieting feeling that something bad was about to happen. I'll say this for the Son — though I was sure he had the jitters worse than me, he never once looked like he was thinking of making a run for it. He murmured Bible verses and prayers for strength, courage, and God's help, and kept right on exploring.

Above the mezzanine were the floors of sleeping rooms. The thin man had a bump key that opened the doors one by one. If he hadn't gone into the exorcism business, he would have made a good burglar.

On the fourth floor was a door he didn't have to open. It swung inward by itself. He took the dare, and I went in after him.

What had been a ruin of a space full of must and mold melted into a properly kept hotel room. A tearful young woman was sitting on the bed. A uniformed cop with a gentle manner was questioning her and jotting information in a notepad.

After a moment of hesitation, my partner approached the scene. He might break out his power and blast the phantoms in due course, but first — I guessed — he wanted to find out what this scene was all about. He scanned the room like he was taking everything in.

Because that's how smart ghost hunters, even the fanatics out to get rid of each and every one of us, operate. They look for clues to the reason for a haunting on the theory that understanding will help them put the kibosh on the "evil spirits." Sometimes they're right.

That being true, I wanted to watch the scene as well, but there was something strange and frustrating about it. It was easy to see the young woman and the cop but hard to make out what they were saying. The voices grew louder and softer like someone was twisting a volume knob back and forth. Even my sharp ghostly hearing was having trouble although I did eventually figure out the young woman had checked in to the hotel with a friend who'd disappeared.

Straining to catch every word he could, intent on the scene and nothing else, the thin man stood and listened. Eventually, though, his scowl of concentration softened, and a

sleepy vagueness took its place. His eyelids drooped. Focused on the illusion in front of us just like he was, I only noticed when he looked well on the way to passing out entirely.

At first I thought he was falling prey to another psychic attack. But back in the ballroom we'd both felt the influence, and here, I didn't. Maybe something different was happening, something that could only affect a living man.

I turned away from the two phantoms and looked over the rest of the room. When the voices got soft again, I heard a hissing so faint no live person would have noticed it, and that led me to the tiny jets in the wall. The hotel might be a wreck overall, but someone was keeping up a system to pipe odorless, colorless gas into this sleeping room and, I suspected, a number of others.

Just as I worked that out, the exorcist swayed and fell down.

I had to get him out of there if he was going to be of any use to me. I tried to stick my hands through that barrier between alive and dead, and as I expected, it tore easily. I picked up the unconscious man and carried him out of the room and down the hall far enough that I figured we were out of the gas. It seemed unlikely the system had been built to flood the whole floor with a concentration that would knock people out.

The ghost hunter was still breathing, I didn't hear anything weak or unsteady about the thump-thump-thump of his heartbeat, and his glow wasn't fading, either. Reassured, I set him down on the filthy carpet and wondered what to do next — for a second or two, until a figure looked out of the room we'd just left.

Even if her flapper clothes and short black hairdo hadn't given it away, the absence of a glow showed me she wasn't alive. She wasn't just another illusion, either. Her wide-eyed, startled reaction when she looked down the hall and spotted me showed I'd finally found a real ghost.

My guess was, she'd turned on the gas and subsequently stepped into the room through a wall to do something nasty to the exorcist after enough time had gone by for him to pass out. She'd been surprised to find him gone, had looked out into the hallway to see what had become of him, and was surprised again to discover me.

"Stay right there!" I yelled, starting toward her.

I thought she might. When I was alive, I'd learned how to be intimidating when it was useful like a lot of cops did, and being a big guy had added to the effect. Now that I was dead, I was even bigger, with almost freakish muscles like a bodybuilder or pro wrestler.

It was because many ghosts develop skills that mark them. I'd never joined any of the Guilds that taught you how to go down a particular path, but it had turned out that some of my natural talents were for exerting physical force on either side of the Shroud.

Unfortunately, my size and manner didn't scare the ghost looking out into the corridor, or at least they didn't scare her into surrender. She sang a few sour, jarring notes, and that was one of her talents. The music made me stagger and feel lightheaded, but I shook off the effect and rushed her.

She disappeared back through the doorway. By the time I made it up there, she was gone.

I could still hear a trace of her, though. A faint music with no obvious source sounded, a show tune, "Someone to Watch Over Me." The sign of her talents, the way Charles Atlas muscles were the sign of mine.

If I was hearing that, she was still close by. I stuck my head through a couple interior walls — they weren't solid in relation to me but still felt like cobwebs breaking against my face — and didn't see her. I did the same with a grimy windowpane and didn't spot her floating in the air outside or clinging to the side of the building like a spider, either.

HAUNTING SHADOWS

Damn it! I couldn't figure out how she'd eluded me. Given all the different kinds of ghosts there were with different weird abilities, there was apparently a way, but I sure as hell didn't understand it.

I realized I needed to get back to the Son of Tertullian. I couldn't just leave him lying around unconscious and unprotected. When I returned to him, he was snoring softly, and a thin line of drool had leaked from the left corner of his mouth.

Okay, now what?

It seemed to me that, working as we had been, the thin man and I weren't accomplishing anything beyond avoiding getting killed or ghost-killed, and I wondered how long our luck would even hold that far. We needed to make a change. Specifically, we had to talk to each other and work as a team. Which would have to start with me letting him know I was here and dealing with his reaction.

I kneeled beside him, reached into his world, and softly slapped his face. He groaned but didn't wake. I slapped a little harder.

His eyelids fluttered and then opened wide. Scared and confused to find himself waking up on the floor in the dark, he stuck his hand in his coat pocket.

It was almost certainly where he kept the thing that kept stinging me, the relic or other doodad that was kryptonite for ghosts, and it would be a bad idea to let him take it out. I gripped him by the arms. He struggled, but I was stronger.

I squeezed hard enough for it to hurt and spoke so he could hear me. "If you keep trying to pull out your weapon, I'll have to break some bones."

"Unclean spirit!" he snarled, and followed that up with some Latin that was probably from a rite of exorcism. But without his object of power backing it up, it was just like being poked repeatedly in the chest. Annoying but harmless.

"Knock it off," I said. "I am a ghost, but not one of the ones that haunt this place. Not one of the ones you came to banish."

"My charge is to exorcise every one of your kind I encounter."

"And why's that?"

He hesitated. "What?"

"To protect the living, right?"

Another hesitation. I had a hunch he agreed but didn't want to give any ground in an argument. "It's to do God's will."

"In Sunday school, they taught me it's God's will that we help people in need. Some people, living people, came into this building and haven't come out. I'm here to help them get out if they're still alive."

"Why?"

I doubted I could convince him I was doing it because I was a swell guy. I wasn't sure I believed it myself. "I'm getting paid. You probably don't know, but ghosts have money. A whole society."

He made a face like he was going to spit. "The society of Hell."

"Whatever. The point is, I want to work with you to save the missing people. I think it will take both of us. Will you partner up with me for their sakes?"

He couldn't bring himself to come right out and say yes. Instead, he gave me a sulky "I won't be any use if I can't see anything."

"You dropped your flashlight when you passed out. I'll get it." I carefully let him go, ready to grab him again if he tried to whip out his holy whatever it was. He didn't, though,

not then and not when I came back down the hall with the light shining in my hand. I held it out, and he accepted it warily, like he suspected I was going to turn it into a snake.

He shined it around the hallway. "I still don't see you."

"It's enough that you hear me. It would take more work for me to make you see me." I'd also be giving him a visible target if he decided to blast me after all. "How do you do your job, anyway? How do you fight ghosts if you can't see them?"

"There's generally something to zero in on when they manifest. And I can sense them some of the time. I would have sensed you if the whole hotel didn't have a filthy aura."

"You're right about that."

"Tell me about these people you want to find. And what happened to me in the bedroom. My head aches, and I don't think it's from falling down and bumping it."

I filled him in.

When I finished, he said, "Gas. Regular physical knockout gas and hidden pipes and nozzles to spray it into the room."

"Yeah."

"How is that something a ghost would do?"

"You really don't know as much about us as you think. Still, you've got a point. It's unusual. My guess is, the singer built and owned this place when she was alive. She gassed guests to rob them or something. She liked it enough that she's still doing it today."

He frowned. "People should know enough, feel enough, to stay away."

"If they don't believe in ghosts, or if they do but want to find them like you do, they'll come despite or even because of the feeling the hotel gives off. The singer may also have tricks for drawing the living in."

"I suppose." He squared his shoulders. "My headache's getting better. We should keep searching."

"Yeah. Sandy and her friends have to be here someplace."

We moved on. After a while, it occurred to me that if we were going to be partners, maybe we should get to know each other a little. "My name's Flaherty," I said. "I was a cop back in the 1950s."

The thin man grunted. "A dirty one, I imagine, to end up like you have."

"You're wrong." I could have told him what really kept me close to the world of the living, worrying about my wife and boys, but smart ghosts didn't share that kind of information often.

"Well, you must have sinned somehow."

"Who hasn't? What's your name?"

"You don't need to know."

"What do they teach you in exorcist school, that names have power? Maybe they do, but I don't know how to do anything with it." I paused, giving him another chance to introduce himself. He didn't. "Why did you join the Sons of Tertullian?"

"You don't need to know that, either."

Yeah, this was going great. I shut up and concentrated on the search.

That wasn't getting anywhere, either. Working our way upward, we checked hallway after hallway, room after room, and from time to time another vision of the past appeared before us.

Two newlyweds argued, and the quarrel escalated until he hit her, split her lip, and spattered blood down the front of her wedding gown. Then, when he turned away, she looped a belt around his neck and jerked it tight.

A painter shredded his art and then turned the palette knife on his own eyes.

A handcuffed maid pleaded in accented English that she hadn't stolen anything as a cop hauled her away. I got the feeling the hotel guest leaning against the wall in the background, smirking at the maid's distress, had accused her for the fun of it.

What made these visions different from the first two, though, was that they weren't parts of traps for either one of us. They showed themselves like little movies, and that was that. There was no hypnotizing effect, no gas, no appearance by the singer, nothing. No sign of Sandy and her friends, either.

The exorcist and I had more hotel to search, but I was getting the feeling it wouldn't do any good if we simply went on the way we were. "The singer's keeping her distance," I said.

The thin man twitched in surprise as he sometimes did when I spoke after being quiet for a while. "I agree," he replied. "She was probably already wary of the relic I brought with me but was game to try to take me down anyway. But when she realized I had a ghost on my side, contending with both of us just seemed too risky. She decided it would be better simply to let us blunder around until we gave up and went away."

"Sounds likely."

"I've sensed her spying a time or two, or thought I did, but she was there and gone too quickly for me even to be certain, let alone do anything about it."

It was my turn to be startled. I'd already learned the singer was elusive, but I really didn't like the idea that she'd shadowed us and I hadn't picked up on it at all. Once again, it didn't seem like something that ought to be possible.

"We need a different approach," I said.

"Agreed. It's your presence that's deterring her. If you seemed to be gone, she might attack me again, and that would give you the chance to ambush her."

"You're willing to be bait?"

"How is it any different than when I came in here believing I was on my own?"

"Fair enough. But what would convince her I'm no longer here?" I thought about it for a second. "You were unconscious when I pulled you away from the gas, and we haven't exactly been chatty since. If she hasn't heard us talking, she might not realize you know I'm around."

"And so?"

"The next vision we see, exorcise it like you have no idea you'll be endangering a partner. Reach into your pocket, take out your relic, and blast the illusion. Just take your time bringing it out to give me a chance to run. The singer will sense the exorcism and assume you destroyed me along with the illusion. Or else that I ran away and had the sense to keep running like almost any ghost would. Afterward I'll sneak along behind you and jump her when she shows herself."

The thin man gave a brusque nod. "Let's do it. No talking from here on out."

It didn't take long to find the next vision. A pudgy traveling salesman — his sample case was in the corner of his room — in his boxers was cowering from a burly red-faced guy with clenched fists, as was the brunette in bra and girdle on the bed. It looked like the badger game. The burly guy was supposedly the woman's angry husband, and the two of them were trying to extort money from the mark. But the scheme went off the rails when the salesman rushed the big man and threw a wild punch.

The ghost hunter started reciting in Latin and stuck his hand in his pocket. I retreated back out into the hallway, ran a ways, and ducked through the closed door of a room on the other side. I didn't know if physical barriers like walls would help protect me from the power of the relic, but maybe.

The flash came a couple seconds later. Except it wasn't really a flash, although something about it suggested unbearable brightness, like looking at the noonday sun or an A-bomb explosion. It wasn't a boom or a shock of agony, either, even if it could be mistaken for those things, too. It was all my senses being scrambled.

But not fried. When the jolt ended, I was still me with mind, eyes, ears, and all four limbs still in working condition. I was pretty damn impressed, though.

If I were the singer, that show of power would have convinced me to stay away from the Son whether he had a ghost partner backing him up or not. Still, she might be confident enough to try taking him down. When all was said and done, he was just a mortal, the kind of victim she'd taken time and again, and the relic wasn't going to save him if she attacked in a way that kept him from using it.

Anyway, my job now was to follow him. I waited a minute to give him a lead and then crept back down the hall. The shine of his living body made him easy to keep track of.

As I prowled along, I looked for the singer shadowing the exorcist like I was. But I didn't see any sign of her.

One floor up, light, laughter, and the buzz of conversation came through the doorway to a suite. The exorcist went in and didn't come out again after the illumination and sounds faded away.

I didn't want to approach the suite until the singer was sure she'd trapped the thin man and showed herself, but I also didn't want to wait long enough to let her cut his throat or something. I counted to sixty-Mississippi, then skulked up the hall and peeked in the doorway.

There were ghosts in the suite, but neither was the ghost I expected. Two guys were picking up the unconscious Son of Tertullian off the floor. One was bigger than me. The smaller one had a crooked jaw that had probably gotten broken when he was alive and set badly. It slurred his speech as he griped about the stinging and itching he was feeling from being close to the relic in the Son's pocket.

The fact that there were two of them and neither of them was the singer made me hesitate for a second. Time enough for them to carry the exorcist through an opening in the wall and close the panel behind them. Once it was shut, no one would have guessed there was a door there. A faint hissing ended a moment later as, no doubt, one of the ghosts turned off the gas.

Now I knew how the singer had disappeared on me and shadowed the exorcist and me without me spotting her. The hotel had secret passages, and I hadn't known because I hadn't been lucky enough to ghost-walk my way into one. Back when the singer was alive, they must have been useful for snatching guests from their rooms without anybody seeing what was happening.

I'd also learned the singer wasn't working alone. She had partners, too, maybe more than I could handle.

But Sandy's mother was counting on me. So was the Son of Tertullian. I gave the guys who'd taken him a minute to get farther ahead of me, then slipped through the hidden panel. Since I wasn't carrying a living man or anything from the world of the living, I didn't have to bother with finding the catch.

Although the narrow passage on the other side was dark enough that my partner's fallen flashlight would have come in handy. Still, following the sound of Crooked Jaw complaining, I groped my way to a staircase and followed the Son's captors as they descended.

They went down several flights to what I suspected was a hidden section of the basement. It had some light. I waited a while after the guys I was tailing reached the bottom of the steps, then crept down just far enough that I could peek out after them. What I saw reminded me of the exorcist's belief that the world of ghosts was Hell. He was right about this part of it, anyway.

Some of the light came from slap-up battery-powered lights on the walls, another part from the glows of living people I took to be Sandy and her college friends. Most of them were locked in cramped little cages like you'd put a dog in and had bruises, black eyes, and other marks of abuse. His naked back crisscrossed with gashes, one kid was tied to a whipping post, and the air smelled of his blood. Pincers and other instruments of torture hung on hooks on the walls or lay on tables and shelves.

The rest of the light shined from the red coals glowing in the belly of a soulforge, one of the tools certain ghosts use to turn other spirits into mindless objects like coins, chains, or almost anything, really. The guy standing beside the singer and holding the whip had the soot-blackened look of a smith.

Now I understood what was going on. The singer wasn't just indulging her natural cruelty, although that was probably part of it. This was business.

You couldn't know for certain which dying person would become a ghost and which would pass on to whatever else there was. But people who died in pain and terror were more likely to become ghosts. So a soulforging operation could guarantee a supply of raw material by capturing the living and torturing them to death. Afterward, the murderers would drag the new ghosts to the fire while they were weak and confused.

The Son's relic prompted some discussion among the four killers. Nobody wanted to reach into his coat pocket and touch the thing. Eventually they settled for pulling off the coat and tossing it, relic and all, in a corner before dumping him in a vacant cage.

I thought that was promising. After the exorcist came to, I'd get the coat back to him somehow, run back up the stairs to safety, and he could use the relic to blast the other ghosts.

It seemed like a pretty good plan until the smith went back to flogging the kid tied to the whipping post. Meanwhile, the singer crooned a wordless dirge of a melody that promised suffering and misery without end. She targeted it at the young man who was being lashed, and the prisoners in the cages, too. Probably the fact that they couldn't see who was singing or swinging the whip made everything that much more frightening.

It made me angry, but there was worse to come. Reading the light that shines from a living person isn't one of my talents, but even I could see the young man's glow was fading. He couldn't take many more cuts from the whip.

I checked the light coming from the exorcist, but like I said, I'm no expert, and it didn't give me any indication of how close he was to coming around.

But it couldn't be *too* much longer, could it? True, before, I'd slapped him to bring him around, but maybe that wasn't the main reason he woke up. Maybe the effect of the gas didn't last very long.

Either way, I wasn't going to just stand around and watch the kid at the whipping post die.

The new plan was to sneak into the cellar, get the coat into the Son's cage without anyone noticing, then reveal myself and stall the other ghosts until my partner woke up. While everybody else was looking elsewhere, I crept down the last stairs as silently as I could. Which I thought was pretty silent, but by pure bad luck, maybe, the guy who was even bigger than me glanced around and saw me. He yelled a warning to his friends and rushed me.

I pulled out my badge. It couldn't do much to him, but it did make him hesitate just long enough for me to step in and punch him in the throat.

I'd heard ghosts didn't have internal organs and such. But my experience had been that most of us had soft spots anyway, maybe because those were the expectations we'd carried into death. At any rate, the big ghost stumbled backward making choking sounds.

By then, though, his friend with the crooked jaw was coming at me. It turned out he was one of those ghosts who can change both the bodies of others and their own. His hands were bigger now, and the nails had grown into curved, pointed claws.

I tried the badge again, but it didn't slow Crooked Jaw down. Either he was more resistant, or it was out of juice.

He slashed at me. I made my hands and forearms hard as rock and blocked without getting cut. I punched him in the face and knocked him down.

I wanted to follow up with a stamp kick, but the big guy had recovered from the throat punch and was circling to flank me. I pivoted to face him, and the ghost with the claws scrambled up and rushed me.

I might have blocked the next claw attack, too, but the singer sang another string of harsh, off-key notes, and the noise jarred me and slowed me down. Crooked Jaw got through my guard and ripped my shoulder.

I gasped at the pain, and pale smoke streamed up from the wound. He hadn't just clawed me. He'd used his power to shape ghost flesh to make the injury worse. Maybe it was only fear or imagination, but it seemed like I could already feel it numbing me and bleeding away my strength.

I sent him scurrying backward with a combination — maybe that first knockdown punch had made him skittish — ducked a haymaker from his friend, and stopped the big guy for a second with a kick to the kneecap. None of which was going to matter for long. The singer was moving in, no doubt to pound me with more of her music, and the smith was right behind her with a hammer in his hand.

Behind him, though, the exorcist rolled his head to the side and retched. Waking up? Maybe, and as the murderer ghosts pushed me back, I'd retreated toward the corner where they'd dumped his coat.

I backed up farther, stooped, grabbed it, and threw it. "Get it!" I shouted in a voice the Son could hear.

The smith swung his hammer to bat the coat out of the air. But fragile as the wall between dead and living was here, a ghost still had to use a little willpower to break through, and in his haste, he forgot. The hammer went right through without knocking the coat off course. It hit the bars of the cage and landed right outside.

The ghost hunter grabbed one end of it. The singer pounced, reached through the invisible wall, and grabbed the other. A tug of war began, and I was afraid that, still weak from the gas, my partner was going to lose.

I wasn't doing all that great, either. I tagged Crooked Jaw with a jab, but right afterward his big friend hit me hard on the side of the head, stunning me for an instant, pulled me to him, and wrapped his arms around me from behind. I snapped my head back into his nose, kicked backward at his knee, stamped on his toes, but couldn't loosen his grip. Shaking off the effects of the jab, Crooked Jaw circled to claw me some more.

That was when the Son realized he didn't have to win the tug of war for the coat. He just had to get what was in the pocket. He stuck his hand in and snatched out something I thought might be a piece of bone encased in crystal or even plastic, although I wasn't sure. To a ghost's eyes, it shed a painful, dazzling light.

The singer cringed from it but then gathered herself with the clear intention of using her music to cripple or kill him. Meanwhile, the exorcist hesitated, maybe because I'd asked

HAUNTING SHADOWS

him before not to use the relic until I got clear.

Getting clear was no longer an option, but if I was about to die the second death no matter what, I was taking the singer and her accomplices with me. “Do it!” I cried, once again projecting my voice from my world to my partner’s. “Now!”

The thin man jabbered some Latin, and force exploded from the relic to flood the room. It blasted away my ability to see, hear, think, or feel. It blasted away me.

Not permanently, though. When my head cleared, I was standing alone, with no big guy bear-hugging me and no Crooked Jaw reaching to tear my face off. The singer and the smith were gone, too.

I was so dizzy and shaky I wasn’t sure I could walk, but I had to because the job wasn’t done. I found a key on a table, dredged up the strength to take hold of it through the invisible wall, and brought it to the lock on the door of the exorcist’s cage. It turned, and I left it in the keyhole. He could use it to free the other prisoners.

Most of what had happened during the fight had been invisible to them. But they’d heard the exorcism, they saw the cage door open and the thin man crawl out, and their wretchedness turned to elation. They babbled questions.

I had one of my own. As the Son stood up and, to my relief, pocketed the relic, I asked, “Why didn’t your doodad destroy me?”

“I asked God to spare you,” he replied.

“No kidding. I might have just enough strength left to reach across and shake your hand.”

He smiled. It was a tiny flicker of a smile, but the first I’d seen from him during our time together. “Let’s not get carried away.”



CATHERINE LUNDOFF

Rebecca Isaacs ducked as the wraith flung itself at her. It spoke a language that she didn't understand, but its rage, at least, was clear. Instinctively, she reached for the bag at her side, searching frantically for one of the few weapons she'd been able to bring with her. She wove out of the wraith's grasp and tugged her latest discovery free. The blade shimmered bright in the gray light of the Shadowlands, just as Agnes Monfort had told her that it would.

She slashed out, meeting spectral claws with a sword forged of light and shadow. The duel went swiftly, her opponent shifting in and out of her sight, until a slash of her blade dissipated it, driving it into the rocks beneath their feet with a howl. She stood, feet braced, blade outstretched, and waited for the next attack. *Take this*, Agnes had said. *You will need it beyond the Shroud. They will sense what you are, neither living nor dead, and you will have to fight your way through.*

But the elder wouldn't come with her, not here. She had called it a "fool's errand" and had snarled when Rebecca pressed her. Rebecca had given her back a snarl and harsh words of her own, then she had left to find her path here, beyond the Shroud.

No, that was her memory failing her, just as the old sorcerer had warned her that it would once she passed the Shroud. Agnes had found her a fortnight later, given her this blade. Had told her...things. She couldn't remember them right now, but they would come back to her. She hoped.

By then, she had found some of the answers that she sought. The stolen orb, the last inheritance that she had from her family — dead now for centuries — was in the Underworld, in the City of Stygia. More than memories, it was a weapon that she and Agnes had used to fight their enemies for over two hundred years, since they had used it in their first battle against Baron Blackwood. But they were not safe, not even now, and she had to get it back. With that thought, she slipped the sword awkwardly into its scabbard and hung it down her back.

The gesture confused her for a moment. Why would Agnes have given her a sword? She was no warrior. She had only her magic, and with her most potent weapon gone she was as hampered in a fight as if she had one arm tied back. Was this a dream, then, rather than a memory?

She peered through the gloom at a vast dark lake or wide river that she could see in the valley below where she now stood. Through the mist, the towers of a ruined city on a distant island filled the horizon. A large boat moved slowly toward the shore below her, powered by some force that she could not see.

A sharp urgency went through her at the sight and she scrambled down the path before her, her sturdy leather boots shielding her feet from the sharp rocks beneath them. She pulled her leather jacket closed to keep out the blast of cold wind that met her downward race and hoped that no more wraiths would appear to slow her passage. Something, everything, told her that she needed to be on that boat, needed to reach that city, whatever it was.

That urgency was enough to distract her, to make her oblivious to her surroundings. When the attack came, she had no defenses, not even the sword. A swirl of light gray mist that shrieked enveloped her and she felt a sharp blow before she sank into the dark.



It was the sounds of someone, or several someones, speaking Hebrew that woke her up. The sky above them was unchanged, so she did not know how long she had been sleeping. Or unconscious? And what were they saying? For centuries now, she had spoken only French and English, an outcast to her people by virtue of the changes in her body and her spirit. The language of her long ago girlhood was hard to follow. Odd that there was something familiar about one of the voices.

She gathered her strength and her power, assessing the condition of her body. She was bound, but a concerted twist of her wrists would set her free. There was no prison around and her captors, whoever they were, didn't seem to be paying much attention to her. There were two — no, three — of them and they were arguing about something. One of them spoke a language she didn't recognize, with the exception of one word: "renegado."

But if they were wraiths, what were they renegades from? She knew little of the Shadowlands, since after all, as one of the undead, she was never destined to see them. There were rumors of a great kingdom, or more, of the dead who did not embrace oblivion or pass on to an afterlife, so perhaps that was where she found herself now. The fact that one of them sounded familiar was probably just a quirk of this strange land that she found herself in.

But enough. She needed to free herself, get to the boat and go to the city. With a fierce twist, she flipped over on her back and tried to yank her hands apart. Nothing happened except a slow dull ache that radiated up her arms. For a moment, she was frozen in shock. One of the advantages of being cursed was her tremendous strength. What was happening to her?

The wraiths turned toward her and came to circle her prone body. "Hello, sister," one of them whispered. "Or does nothing of my sister Rebecca remain?"

She blinked slowly. The gray light made it hard to see faces, let alone recognize one that she had not seen in centuries. "Simon? How came you here?"

He laughed, a creaky, raspy sound that was barely recognizable from his mortal humor. She glanced at his companions to make sure that none of them looked familiar. After a moment, she realized that the Gangrel part of her brain was categorizing them as prey and wondering what their blood might taste like. With an effort, she quieted that part of herself. *We will hunt later*, she told it, all the while wondering if that could even happen in this strange land of the walking dead.

INHERITANCE

But this was no time to be distracted. Simon, if this was Simon, did not appear to have an excess of brotherly feeling, and now that she was more aware, the other two wraiths were armed and pointing their weapons at her. It was, on the one hand, unlikely that they could do her much harm, but on the other, what would not damage her in the lands of the living might consign her to stay here forever. Rebecca did not think she wanted that.

Another tug at her wrists brought no results, but Simon reached down and hauled her up into a sitting position with a sharp tug on her bonds. “We know why you’ve come here, Rebecca. You have lost our birthright, the artifact that our father gave to you despite my wishes and warnings.” He crouched down to look into her eyes. “You have always been unworthy of his faith in you.”

His eyes were flat, distant, nothing like those of the brother whom she had loved when they were both alive. This place must twist all those who came here, leaving shadows of only their worst selves. A distant part of Rebecca felt some pity, but it was soon drowned in a white-hot rage.

That was enough to fuel the scraps of her remaining magic and some of the tremendous strength that came with her curse. With a shriek, she burst her bonds and hurled herself at Simon’s throat. She could feel her face grow longer, her fangs emerge as she and her brother rolled on the rocky ground, each struggling for advantage. The other wraiths struck at her with their weapons, but it was hard for them to aim in the near-permanent dusk, at least until one of them grabbed her leg and began dragging her off her brother.

She whirled and lashed out at him, only to be struck by a weighted net of some sort that dropped over her, obscured her vision and pinned her to the ground. The sharp point of her own sword poked through a gap in the net and lifted her chin to face the sword’s wielder. “We need you to recover what you lost and help us overthrow the Hierarchy. With the orb, your powers, and our weapons, we have a chance.” Simon’s wraithlike voice held a shadow of an echo of passion.

Rebecca closed her eyes for a moment, regaining control over herself as much as pausing to appreciate the irony of her situation.



The city on the horizon was much closer now. Simon and his companions had commandeered or built a boat of their own and they were sailing across the treacherous water toward the mighty Stygia. Whenever the chance of calm water presented itself, they took upon themselves to explain the Hierarchy and the laws of this land of the dead that they traveled through. Rebecca wondered if it was possible to die from boredom, but refrained from letting that show to her captors.

She did ask Simon if the rest of their family was here as well, but gathered from his silence that they were not. Why, then, was he not with them in whatever afterlife they had achieved? The question wriggled at the back of her mind, where she couldn’t completely ignore it.

Not that she had long to wait. Their boat slid into the shadows and up to an ancient, rotting dock, just south of the harbor port where she could see soldiers in bright armor on the pier. This dock, in comparison, was almost deserted. There were only a few of Simon’s compatriots to meet them, renegados all, as far as she could tell. They herded her onto the rotting wood, and from there onto the rocky path, hands bound before her in twice the number of chains that they had placed upon her when they first captured her.

That was when she felt it, like a ghostly chord on her soul. The orb was here and not very far away, relative to the distances that she had already covered. Now it tugged gently at her, as if coaxing her to come to it. She glanced sidelong at Simon, wondering if he could feel it too through the strength of his obsession.

If he did, he gave no sign. They drove her into a cave, told her more about their need to overthrow the Hierarchy, spoke of their cause. She drifted into an open-eyed meditative state, letting her mind drift and her magic center itself. She would need to escape soon. Something told her that her time here must be short, unless she wanted to remain here forever. Perhaps it was something that the old sorcerer, or even Agnes, had warned her about.

At last, Simon noticed her distraction, or perhaps there was some new event coming that she was unaware of. He motioned his compatriots, gray shadows all, into what passed for silence and looked at her. "Do you understand why we need the orb now?"

She nodded, hoping that would be enough to get them to free her.

He's a fool, your brother. An idealist, obsessed with what he's lost. Not like you, Rebecca. You have no more idealism to lose, do you? The whisper came out of nowhere and she schooled her features not to react. Who was this?

From the corner of her eye, she saw Simon. But...not Simon. This was his twin, his mirror image, his features sharper, his eyes colder, his expression crueler. What wizardry was this? Before she could ask or react, the other Simon vanished, leaving her to wonder if she had imagined him there.

The pull from the orb got stronger, as if it were getting closer or she was getting more sensitive. An idea came to her then. "Let me go. I can lead you to it. I know where it is. We both need it, so let's find it and fulfill your mission and mine." The lie flowed easily from her lips, as if she had rehearsed it. Simon's companions reacted, their bodies expressing a range of emotions, many of them unreadable.

"Rebecca, daughter of Ezra ben Isaac, do you swear upon the love that you bore our father that you will help me in my quest?" Simon's voice took on depth and timbre, so much that he might have been alive again.

But he was not and neither was she, and what did oaths among the dead count for? She heard herself take the oath, a brief memory of their father flashing before her eyes. He had been a good man, one who tried to protect his family and his people. He had led them to the shores of the Baltic Sea when the King of England drove the Jews from English shores. He had given his only daughter their family's magical inheritance when he had seen the power within her, over the objections of one, perhaps all, of her brothers. For an instant, she wished he was here instead of Simon.

Then she was herself again, at least the version she had been in the centuries since she had met Agnes Monfort and her immortal foe, the Tremere sorcerer, Baron Claremont. Her hands were awash with blood, she had drunk from the veins of innocents, she had slain the guilty and she had cast her spells on her enemies. Her father would be hard-pressed to recognize her and only her brother's desire and longing for the object she had possessed enabled him to be here to see her now.

She felt her bonds loosen and threw back her head to drink in the air. There was no wind here, or not one that she could sense in this land of the dead. But it was enough. She could see the orb in her mind now, so close she could almost touch it. In a moment, she was on her feet and racing through the cave, her path taking her through the wraiths if they were foolish enough to continue to stand in her way. But, foolish or not, Simon led them in a race that followed her lead as she hunted for what they both sought.

Once she glanced back and saw her sword at his back. Good. They would probably need that too. Whoever or whatever now possessed the orb probably knew what they had, and they weren't going to give it up without a fight. She let herself ease into wolf form so she could run on four legs, instead of just two. The dead would keep up or lose their chance.

She darted up a rocky path, then over a hill to find herself on the edge of a great city. Buildings loomed above her and darkened streets ran in all directions, each occupied by a

INHERITANCE

parade of phantoms of various degrees of solidity. There were men, women, children, beings so changed and warped by their deaths and afterlife that she could no longer identify what they might have been. A troop of soldiers marched down one of the larger streets, heading away from her. A cloud of moans surrounded them, the sound making her shake her head.

Aspectral hand caught her by the scruff of the neck and pulled her into the darker shadows as some of the children pointed toward her. “Hsst...sister, do you want to be trapped here? There are those who have the power to bind a living soul to this place.” Simon whispered the words fiercely at her.

Rebecca pulled away from him and shifted, clothing herself again with a cantrip just as she would have done in the lands beyond the Shroud. The effort sent her to her knees, shaking. For the first time in years, she felt something akin to pain. She gasped, drinking in the foul air as if it were the finest of wines, and tried to recover.

A sound from the street sent a ripple through Simon’s companions and Rebecca heard the tramp of boots growing nearer. Simon reached for her and tugged her to her feet. “We need to go before they catch us. Come on.” He pulled her along behind him down one twisting alley, then another, doubling around and back. She had to go around the obstacles that he could go through, but they still made good time, putting some distance between themselves and the soldiers.

For the moment, at any rate. Rebecca suspected that they could track her easily enough. How many vampires with the tang of magic on them could there be in this accursed land? On the other hand, running through alleys and hiding was bringing her no closer to the orb. She placed her back against a wall and closed her eyes, sending small tendrils of power questing out into the city around her.

The pain, when it came this time, was less severe and she pushed back against it, focusing on the orb and its current location. It was closer than she expected, and after a moment she opened her eyes and began to walk back the way they had come. “Where are you going?” Simon hissed in a whisper, as if he feared to be overheard.

“It lies that way and that is the path I must follow. Join me or wait, it is your choice.”

He hesitated and motioned to the others to scatter, presumably to hide or to gather elsewhere in a safer location. Then he unsheathed her sword and stepped up beside her. “We go at my pace and if I say we need to hide, we hide. Those were the Skeletal Lord’s men and if we don’t want to wind up soulforged or worse, we need to be cautious.”

She tilted her face up at him and curled a lip in what might have been a smile, did it not expose a length of fang. Simon scowled and drew back, but only a little. What more could she do to him that had not already happened? After a moment of glaring at each other and circling like wolves, they both paused, and after a moment, Rebecca nodded her assent.

Together, they crept forward, but Simon chose a different route from the way that they had come. Rebecca’s head swirled with questions, what was the Skeletal Lord and what did he want with the orb being first among them. But there were others drifting or marching nearby and they were moving toward the center of this strange city, filled with both rot and magnificence, and there was no time.

The other wraiths took some notice of her, drawing back or surging forward aggressively as if to verify that she was real, and both she and Simon had to bat away insistent hands or the occasional swipe of a claw. He led them into more deserted alleys and they fought their way through when they needed to.

After a time, she could see a citadel looming above them, its imposing towers and walls still intact and glowing with a fine white spiderweb. Simon nodded toward it as she sniffed the air, incredulous. “The Lord’s keep, with its wall made of fine ground bones. Can you feel the orb inside?”

Rebecca reached out carefully, looking for the orb's trail with her mind's eye. Simon had been right; it led within the mighty walls before them. She could see soldiers on the parapets and in front of the gates, many and well-armed. "How are we to get inside? Do you plan to fight your way in?"

"With you by my side, sister, who could stand against us?" Simon gave her a twisted smile. "No. There are too many and they are too well-armed. We will have to find a thief's way in."

"Are there sewers? Or perhaps, unwatched servant's quarters? I cannot disguise my scent or the way I look, but perhaps you can get in and open a door or a window. Or walk through the damn wall and bring the orb out." Rebecca gave her brother a sidelong glare. "Why do you need me here at all?"

"You were already coming here. You have brought a sword that can destroy wraiths, at least for a time. You have accursed powers, greater than what you possessed when we were a family. Would you have me turn aside the best weapon to come to me in centuries because it comes in the guise of one who was once my sister?"

Once again, she saw his features double and a version of him stepped to her side while Simon himself went on looking at the citadel. This time, she was ready, or so she thought. This time it whispered of betrayal and murder, though whether tempting Simon to use the sword on her, or her to kill him, she could not determine. Probably the former. She lunged for it, reaching out with her hands and her power at once, but it slipped from her grasp.

"Do you think to slay that part of myself that threatens you, sister? Would that I could do as much with you!" Simon grimaced at her. "But I think we must remain as we are for the moment and concentrate on the fortress. And retrieving the orb."

"Why do you desire it so much, brother? Its powers would be limited in your hands. That is why our father chose me when it became evident that I would surpass my brothers in this regard."

"It is unseemly in the eyes of our people for a woman to put herself forward as you have done." He hissed the words and his shadowy gray eyes darkened with malice and rage.

"And who are you to determine who shall receive the gifts of God, for so our father believed my powers to be?" Rebecca lunged and forced his arm down to keep him from drawing the blade.

He froze, seeming to fight with himself. An instant later, they were surrounded by wraiths, many of them bearing the crest of the Skeletal Lord. Rebecca released Simon's arm and let her claws spring from her fingertips. That, at least, would require less pain than using her full powers. Simon tugged the sword free, circling so that they stood back to back. "I see your point, sister."

"Better late than never, brother." Rebecca studied the wraith soldiers, looking for their weak spots. Or, at least, hoping that they had a few that she would recognize. How she missed the certainty of her powers, her strength, in the lands of the living! The vagueness that had filled her mind since she had woken here was an enemy, the pain that swept through her when she used her powers here was a dire foe, and anything or anyone that stood between her and returning beyond this Shroud they spoke of was an obstacle that she would do her best to destroy.

The wraiths swarmed them then and Rebecca stopped thinking for a while. She and Simon slashed and cut at their opponents, all the while remaining back to back, allies for once. Wraiths fell, came back, faded into the floor only to pop up elsewhere. Only the ones who were cut by the blade seemed to stay gone, though it was hard to tell which wraiths were new and which were the same ones they had been fighting.

INHERITANCE

Eventually, the sheer numbers overwhelmed them and Rebecca and Simon found themselves dragged toward the citadel they had been plotting to enter. Realizing this, Rebecca let herself get carried along without resistance, waiting for the orb or an opportunity for escape to present itself. The orb, at least, was waiting for them at the end of many lacy white corridors and rooms that spoke of death and bones sacrificed to make something more than themselves. They befitted their lord, who awaited them on a seat of bones at the end of a long, dark ballroom.

The Skeletal Lord resembled his name, turning not-quite-empty eye sockets toward them as if to study who and what they were. The orb rested on a cushion near the throne and Rebecca could see Simon's gaze fix upon it. While she could feel its tug, she was much more interested in the being that watched them. Behind her, one of the wraith soldiers tried to force her to kneel, but she stiffened her knees and resisted.

Instead, she locked her gaze with that of the Skeletal Lord, daring to look into the stygian depths in the sockets that appeared to gaze back at her. It was an unequal contest, this test of wills between the no-longer human, but still limited, sorceress and this King of the Underworld, and while she still refused to kneel, she dropped her gaze to the dusty floor when she could look no more.

"You have provided me with the means to demonstrate that I alone have the power to succeed our lord, Charon." The creature's voice was the rasp of bones upon bones, creaking and scraping and echoing throughout the chamber.

Even Rebecca felt the ghost of a shudder run through her. "And how have we done that, my lord?" She added the honorific reluctantly. It seemed wiser than defying this being on small things, though. Perhaps it might even distract him, though she had no idea what that might look like or what good it might do. They dueled back and forth with words until he beckoned her closer.

She found herself moving forward, though she resisted as much as she could. The Skeletal Lord was trying to peer into her mind and soul and she could feel its power battering against her defenses. The being on the throne seemed to her to be neither male nor female, but somehow beyond such concerns of mortals. Or even those who were no longer mortals. Some instinct told her not to look toward Simon and to keep the Lord's focus on her, and so she resisted his pull as long as she could.

Then she dropped all resistance and allowed him to view the snarling Cainite that lived inside her. Her power poured forth in a wave, the pain driving her at last to her knees, and struck the Skeletal Lord full force. Battle was joined and they dueled back and forth, mind-to-mind, ferocity against cunning, power against power.

Dimly, Rebecca realized that there was movement behind her, that something was happening, but she could not turn from the battle so she ignored it as best she could. All her raw pain, all her power, all the strength of combined magic and Cainite soul was not going to be enough. The Skeletal Lord was going to win and she would end up soulforged or perhaps sent to Oblivion, yet she would not surrender willingly.

She dug her clawed fingers into the bones of the floor, trying to hang on, though for what she couldn't say. It was Simon's voice that pulled her back. "Release her, if you want this," he howled the words at the Skeletal Lord. The wraith-slaying blade was in one of his hands, the orb in the other. It began to glow when he touched it, sending a brilliant light around the chamber that forced the wraiths and their lord to cover their faces.

Rebecca broke free of the Skeletal Lord's thrall a moment later and stood slowly. She reached out and touched the orb with one finger and the glow intensified. Simon released it slowly into her hand, his reluctance obvious. As the orb grew brighter, a wraith on the other side of the chamber disintegrated with a cry. Then another.

HAUNTING SHADOWS

She turned slowly around, pointing it at the soldiers who stood nearby. Not all vanished, but enough of them did that she could feel the power in the chamber shift. Then the Skeletal Lord leapt upward, face turned away, and seized Simon by the throat. The sword did nothing against such a compelling foe and Rebecca could see Simon blur around the edges. His hand on the sword blurred and his fingers vanished as though the hilt had eaten them. The implication was clear.

The Skeletal Lord kept his face turned from the orb even as she raised it. Simon gave her a beseeching look and she raised her other hand to clasp the orb. With one last, desperate push, she channeled her power through it, directing it not at the Skeletal Lord, but at his captive instead. Simon had released the orb to her, so perhaps this would be enough...

A blazing light, a joyous cry, and her brother vanished into the blazing glow that lit the room. One of the other wraiths whispered, "Transcendence," and the others took it up. The Skeletal Lord leapt to his feet, clearly enraged, and a wave of power struck Rebecca. With a gigantic effort, she leaned down and picked up the sword before she was swept away.



The cold hillside in the city park was not where she expected to find herself. Nor did she expect to be awakened by the nudge of a familiar foot. Bleary-eyed, she peered up at the twilight sky and Agnes' long face. Agnes was sheathing the sword and putting it away in a bag as she sat up. The orb was nowhere in sight, not at first, though her hand tingled strangely, and when she thought as hard as she could, it glowed slightly, outlining the bones. Rebecca made a face at her fingers and stood up.

"That old man that sent you to the Underworld? I found out that he was a creature of Blackwood's," Agnes remarked. "He told me where you might come back, if you came back. After some persuasion."

Rebecca tilted her head up, eyes narrowed. "And Claremont is here?" At Agnes' head jerk of acknowledgment, she lurched forward, unsteadily at first, then finding her bearings after a few steps. "We need to go hunting." With that, they slipped off into the night.



RICHARD DANSKY

The guys following me looked like they'd died in Myrtle Beach. The rag-tag armor they wore over their cargo shorts and T-shirts looked like it had been scrounged from unwanted relic piles, and they shared a look of hungry desperation on their beefy faces.

Thrall-hunters. I could spot them a mile away. Unfortunately, it looked like these three had locked onto me as a possible target. Odds were they were going to follow me out of the Necropolis and wait for a secluded spot to jump me. Three against one. It would hardly be a fair fight.

At least, that would be their assumption.

I risked a glance over my shoulder. The leader, a stocky type with a beach bodybuilder's build, was barely even trying to conceal the fact that he was following me. His eyes caught mine and he grinned. It wasn't a pleasant expression by any stretch of the imagination — he'd been to a Masquer, it seemed, and now his teeth gleamed needle-sharp. The idiot was halfway to being a Spectre without even trying.

The crowds around me were thinning out now, a sign that I was getting to the edge of the Necropolis proper. Soon it would just be me and them, and they were gaining.

Enough was enough, I decided. Time to deal with this before it was too late. I stopped and turned.

"You," I said. "What the hell do you want with me?"

The leader stopped, surprised. Apparently I was just supposed to keep going until they could jump me. His two goons hesitated as well, looking to him for direction.

"Nothing," he finally said. "Just going for a walk. Ain't that right, guys?" The other two nodded vigorously. "So what are you going to do about it?"

He smiled unpleasantly. The few bystanders around us suddenly remembered they had somewhere else to be and vanished. Terrific.

HAUNTING SHADOWS

I looked around. The four of us were alone. The goons started walking toward me, spreading out to cut off lines of escape as they did so.

I thought for a moment. I could still run, gambling that they wouldn't be able to catch me. Or I could stand, and I could fight. The pins through my right fist gleamed, as if they were hungry.

All right, I decided. Fight it would be.

But I wasn't going to just stand there. I walked up to the closest one of the goons. He pretended not to look at me. I concentrated, and gave him an uppercut that lifted him off his feet. He went over backward with a crash. "Get him!" the leader called out, and the second goon came in swinging. I ducked under a flurry of wild punches, then rammed my fist into his gut. He staggered backward, waved his arms for a second and then toppled over.

The leader looked at his men, then looked at me, then looked for an exit. I'd barely taken a step toward him when he turned and rabbited. His buddies picked themselves up and ran, too.

"That was easy," I said to myself, and resumed walking.

Too easy, said my Shadow. *We haven't seen the end of this.*

You're such a pessimist, I thought at him. Just a couple of small-time slavers who bit off more than they could chew.

Oh yeah? Then what's that?

I looked up. "That" was a line of Legionnaires that had suddenly materialized across my path. They were armed and armored, and they looked like they meant business.

What the hell, I thought. I haven't done anything.

Try telling them that.

An officer stepped forward, his armor gleaming. "Attention," he said. "Would you do me the great honor of accompanying us to the Citadel?"

"I was just leaving town," I said. "Some other time?"

"I'm afraid not." And the soldiers closed in on me.

• • •

"What is your name?"

The Legionnaire sounded bored, as if he were just killing time by interrogating me. Nothing to see here, just a dull conversation between a couple of strangers. He sat across the table from me, Emerald Legion armor bright and shiny, figure relaxed as if it were no big deal.

Of course, I didn't quite see it that way. For one thing, on my side of the table I was in chains. For another, I was being held in the basement of the Citadel, the sort of space reserved for honored guests of the Necropolis who were wanted by Stygia or who ended up as desk lamps after a brief trip to the forges.

I had no particular interest in ending up as a desk lamp. Cooperation, at least at this point, seemed like a good idea.

"My name is Erik," I said. "And there must have been some kind of mistake. I haven't done anything—"

"What is your business in the Necropolis?" Again, that tone of boredom, as if he were just going through formalities.

"I'm just passing through." Which was true enough, though he'd never believe me if I told him where I was passing through on my way to. For his part, he made a couple of notes with a stylus, and then leaned forward.

QUESTIONS LARGELY UNANSWERED

“Do you know why you’re here?”

For the first time, there was a thread of interest in his voice. That struck me as ominous.

“I have no idea,” I answered truthfully. “I was just minding my own business—”

He interrupted me. “You have been reported as a threat to the Necropolis and to the citizenry thereof. You are furthermore suspected of being an agent of Oblivion. What have you to say to those charges?”

My guts turned to ice. “Agent of Oblivion” was fancy Legionnaire-speak for “Spectre,” and if they thought I was one of those, I was in even deeper trouble than I thought.

The question was, why did they think that. Charlotte wasn’t a huge Necropolis, but even so, dozens of wraiths passed through it every day. Why had I been targeted.

Because you’re so good at making new friends.

Shove it, I told my Shadow. Not the time.

Seems like a great time to me, he said, but then he subsided. Thank heaven for small miracles.

I thought furiously for a second while the echoes of my Shadow’s self-satisfied chuckle bounced around my brain. Making new friends...shit.

“Who reported me?” I asked the Legionnaire. He didn’t answer immediately, so I kept pressing. “Was it a stocky guy in hand-me-down armor and cargo shorts?”

The Legionnaire shifted, his armor clanking as he did so. “Did you get his name?”

“No,” I responded sulkily.

“Then that is none of your concern. How do you plead to the charges?”

“God damn it, you know who I’m talking about, don’t you? That son of a bitch tried to grab me for a thrall and it didn’t take. He gave you my name out of revenge.”

“Immaterial.” The Legionnaire’s stony face was expressionless. “How do you plead to the charges?”

I sputtered. “Not guilty. Get a Pardoner in here and you’ll see I’m not a Spectre. Call my friends in the City and you’ll get proof I’m not a menace. And if you did a better job of policing your own backyard, this never would have been an issue.”

His mouth twitched, ever so slightly. “I shall take your comments under advisement. You will of course remain here until such time as your trial can be scheduled. Apologies for the accommodations, but you must understand that under such circumstances, one can never be too careful.”

“Trial?” I blinked. “Do I get counsel? How long are we talking here?” The thought of rotting away for years while my case made its leisurely way up the docket was chilling.

“Long enough to give you time to consider,” the Legionnaire said, then got up and walked away.

The door slammed behind him and I could hear the key turn in the lock. No getting out the front door, that much was for certain. I turned my attention to my situation. My hands were shackled in front of me, and my feet were locked down as well. The relic table dominated the middle of the room, with a couple of cheaply cobbled-together chairs complementing it. I sat on mine and contemplated the future. It didn’t look great.

Looks like we’re stuck. Should have listened to me and put that putz into a Harrowing. That way he couldn’t have jobbed you like this.

Shut up, I told my Shadow. I’m not going to feed Oblivion and that guy was prime Spectre material.

HAUNTING SHADOWS

Yeah, and now you're prime desk furnishings material. I deeply resent you taking me with you like this.

It'll be fine, I say, out loud now that there's no one else to hear. Someone will vouch for me. I'll get out of this.

Sure we will. Whatever you say, boss.

And don't call me "boss."



The door creaked open. I stood up, or did the best I could considering the shackles. Framed in the doorway was my accuser, cargo shorts and all. He held a lantern in one hand and a sap in the other. I got the definite feeling I wasn't going to enjoy how this conversation was going to go.

"You," he said. "I've heard of you." He took a few steps forward and the door shut behind him. Now it was just the two of us.

"Well, I haven't heard of you. All I know is that you got me stuck in here on trumped-up charges that are going to go away very soon."

"You'd think that." He grinned that shark-tooth grin again. "Putting your faith in the Stygian justice system isn't always a good idea. Judges can be corrupted. Advocates can be swayed. And the entire thing can be knocked down and blown away by one good storm." He took another step forward. "Storm's coming, don't you know?"

"A Maelstrom? Shouldn't you be warning people instead of wasting time down here with me?"

In response, he brought the sap down on the table right in front of me. It hit with a dull thud that rattled the chairs. I jumped back.

"You'd think I'd be warning people. You'd think, if I were a loyal Legionnaire, I'd be doing my duty right now instead of coming down here to fuck with you. Thing is, you've got to think again." He put the lantern down on the table and raised the sap again.

It clicked for me. "Agent of Oblivion. You're a Doppelganger."

"Yup." He stepped around the table and closed with me. I shuffled back until I felt the wall behind me. "All this time, hiding in plain sight. Those idiot Anacreons have no idea. And they won't, until the wind rises and I open the gates and let my brothers and sisters in. But it'll be too late for them, too late for all of them. As for you." He swung the sap. I got one arm up to deflect the blow, but the strength of the impact shook me. Agony exploded out from where he had struck me. He feinted another blow and I flinched. He laughed.

"You," he said. "You're special. And so you get the special treatment."

I stared up at him. "What, you're going to knock me into a Harrowing? Is that why you're here?"

Good idea. Antagonize the guy with the blunt weapon while we're chained and in a corner.

"No." He shook his head. "You get to stay here, alone, down in the dark. When we take the Necropolis, we're going to leave you to rot. Nobody's going to come for you, nobody's going to let you out, nobody's going to rend you into a Harrowing. You get to just...stay."

"Then what's with the sock full of quarters?"

"That's just me having a little fun before the main event." He swung again, and I could feel plasm run sticky down my arm where he'd hit me. "This'll teach you to be a pain in my ass." Another swing. "Should have just let us take you to the forges. That at least would have been quick." Again the sap came down. "But this is what you get for being that guy."

QUESTIONS LARGELY UNANSWERED

“What... what do you mean?” I was huddled in the corner now, arms ineffectually trying to ward off the series of blows.

“You think I didn’t know who you were? Everyone knows about the guy with the pins in his hand. You talk to Ferrymen. You could have soured the entire deal.” He leveled a particularly vicious blow that caught me on the side of the head, then dropped the sap onto the floor. “Here. You can try and use it on yourself if you get bored.”

He turned around and stomped back to the door, snagging the lantern along the way.

“Wait,” I called out to him.

He stopped and turned. “Yeah?”

I tried to fill my voice with bravado I didn’t feel. “What if I tell the guards what you told me? Then your plan would be screwed, wouldn’t it?”

What the hell are you doing? My Shadow was frantic. I’d shaken him.

Trying to get him to finish the job, I thought. Wouldn’t you rather be Harrowed than just left here?

He took a couple of steps toward me. “That would ruin things, wouldn’t it?”

“Uh-huh.” I grabbed the sap and held it in front of me like a talisman. “Leaving me here could ruin the whole thing. You might as well finish the job and send me straight down to the Labyrinth.”

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you.” He loomed over me, lantern held high so his face was a craggy mass of shadows. “Just one thing.”

“Yes?”

“There are no guards. Have fun alone in the dark.”

And he turned and walked away.

My Shadow was quiet for a while after the door slammed, for which I was thankful. Finally, he roused himself. *Well that worked great. What’s next?*

Shut up, I told him. I’m thinking.

We’re bleeding. Well, leaking. You going to do something about that?

Eventually. Got to figure a way out of this first.

That’s brave of you. I’ll just sit back here and watch. Serves us right, really.

What does?

This. Getting ambushed by some two-bit Doppelganger with a half-assed scheme to take out a Necropolis on the far end of nowhere.

That’s a little harsh, don’t you think? Experimentally, I stood. The chains creaked as I moved.

Not really. We got caught up in our own little legend. Never thought about how dangerous having a rep could be, especially since we can’t back that rep up.

Slowly, I made my way over to the door. Can’t back it up?

Severus isn’t walking through that door; mister talks-to-Ferrymen. And we aren’t walking out it.



I was counting sheep when the door cracked open again. I’d gotten up to twelve thousand, despite my Shadow’s attempts to get me to lose count, when suddenly the door opened and the room flooded with light.

HAUNTING SHADOWS

“Easy there,” I said, and covered my eyes. The glare left spots in front of my eyes. “If you’re here to torture me some more, you could at least do it in the dark.”

“I’m not here to torture you,” came a female voice, and then she stepped into the room. She was medium height with short brown hair and glasses, and a matching skirt and jacket. There were gloves on her hands, and in her left hand she held a lantern. “I’m here to find out a few things about you.”

“I like pina coladas, long walks in the rain — what else do you want to know?” I could feel my Shadow cheering me on, instant proof that I was being an asshole.

In response, she walked into the room, shutting the door behind her. She set the lantern down on the table and took off her gloves. Her fingers were inky black.

Oh.

“You’re a Pardoner?”

“You can call me Sister Sarah. And yes, I am a Pardoner, and I’m here to determine who and what you are, and what we’re going to do about you.”

I blinked. “Wait a minute. The last guy in here said they were just going to leave me here to quietly go crazy. He also said no one else was coming down here. Why are you here? Is this a trick?”

“No trick. All I know is that I was told you were in the Citadel and that it was urgent that I find you. No more details than that, but the House Mother seemed rather flustered when she gave me the task, as if she’d been ordered to. House Mother Maria doesn’t take well to taking orders.” She rolled up her sleeves. “There you have it. And here I am. If you want, I can just leave you to yourself.”

“No. Please don’t.” The words came out faster, more desperate than I wanted, and I winced to hear them. “You have to understand, though, that the guy who put me here, he’s a Spectre. There’s a Maelstrom coming and he’s going to open the gates of the Citadel. If you get me out of here, I can help you stop him.”

Sister Sarah “tsked” at me. “Let me out is exactly what I’d expect a Spectre to say. Do you have any proof of this claim? Or am I just supposed to believe you?”

“Just believing me would be nice. It’s not going to happen though, is it?”

She shook her head. “Not even a little bit. So make yourself comfortable, because this is going to take a little while.”

“What is?”

“Figuring out if you’re Shadow-Eaten or not. If not, figuring out if you can be trusted. And if you can be trusted, whether or not I should recommend you be let go.”

I sighed. “You do realize that while you’re doing this, he could be letting an entire army of Spectres in the front gate. I’m just saying.”

Sister Sarah snorted. “You do realize that you could be full of shit. Trust me, the fastest way for you to get what you want is for you to help me do what I have to do. Obstruct me, and I can just turn around and walk right on out of here.”

“House Mother Maria wouldn’t like that,” I pointed out. She gave me a pained grin.

“Leave House Mother Maria to me,” she said. She sat down, straddling the chair across from me. Her lantern filled the room with a smoky glow, and I swear I caught a whiff of lavender from it. “Now,” she said, “let’s talk.”

“I’m not really in the mood to talk,” I said, but she cut me off.

“Not you. Your other half. Why don’t he and I have a little chat?”

Because I don’t want to.

QUESTIONS LARGELY UNANSWERED

“He doesn’t want to,” I said. My tongue felt heavy and the room seemed uncomfortably warm.

“That’s not good enough. We’re going to talk, and we’re going to talk now.”

Tell her she’s out of luck. My Shadow seemed agitated, unsure of himself for the first time I could remember in ages. *We’ve got nothing to talk about, her and I.*

I cleared my throat. “He says he’s got nothing to say to you.” It felt odd, actually relaying what my Shadow was saying instead of trying to keep it buried.

“Stop making excuses for him,” Sister Sarah said, and fiddled with her lamp. The flame inside seemed to grow, and the scent of lavender got stronger.

“I told you, I don’t want to talk.” I heard myself saying the words, his words, and suddenly I couldn’t talk at all. “You can’t make me.”

The Pardoner chanted something to herself sotto voce, then said, “That’s good. You’re responding to me. So now, why don’t you tell me what you want?”

“Oblivion.” I felt my face twist into a sneer. “Isn’t that what we all want, sooner or later?”

She frowned. “Don’t bore me with the obvious. What do you want now? Do you want to stay here?”

“With only him to talk to? Are you nuts? I’ve got bigger things to do. Much, much bigger things. Oops, shouldn’t have told you that.” He grinned with my face.

She snapped her fingers and I could feel my Shadow recoil. “You will show me respect,” she said. “Tell me why I should or should not let you go.”

“Lady, you’re asking the wrong guy,” my Shadow began, and she snapped her fingers again. “Arrgghhh. Stop doing that and I’ll answer you.”

“Answer me and I’ll stop doing that.” She was implacable.

“Fine, fine. Laughing boy is telling you the truth. The Doppelganger, the Maelstrom, the whole bit. If you let us go, maybe we can do something about it before it’s too late.”

“I could just leave you here and tell the Anacreons myself. Why should I let you go?”

I felt my Shadow sigh. “Because he has a habit of being in the right place at the right time to make a difference, no matter what I do. And I don’t think this time is going to be any different.”

“Enough.” She clapped her hands, and suddenly I was in control of myself again, an acrid taste on my tongue. My guts, such as they were, felt like they were tied in knots, and my head ached.

“You didn’t have to enjoy that quite so much,” I said, shaking my head.

“It was all on you,” she replied primly. “After all, that wasn’t my Shadow talking.”

I opened my mouth to respond, realized I had nothing to say, and shut it. Instead, I held up my shackled hands and gave a pleading look.

“Yes, about that,” she began, when suddenly there was a sound of armor jangling outside the door.

“Now might be a good time,” I suggested.

Instead of responding, she threw me a ring of keys. I snatched it out of the air as best I could, my fingers fumbling with the keyring.

The door shuddered open. Standing there was my nemesis. In the light from the Pardoner’s lantern, it was impossible to see him for anything but what he was. His face was cruel, his features sharpened, his fingers curled into claws on the hilt of the short sword he unsheathed.

“What’s going on here,” he demanded. “I gave orders that no one see this prisoner.”

“And my orders were to go see him,” Sister Sarah responded. She stood and turned, putting the chair between her and the Spectre. “Or do you really want to argue with House Mother Maria over who outranks whom?”

“House Mother Maria’s going to get hers soon enough,” the Spectre said, all pretense gone, and walked into the room. His blade was out now. It looked junky but functional, the same as his armor. The door swung shut behind him, meaning that whatever happened now was between the three of us and the three of us alone.

I tried a key on the shackles on my ankles. It didn’t turn in the lock. Quietly, desperately, I tried the next one. That didn’t turn either. The Spectre walked forward, blade held before him, face full of rage.

I tried the last key. It clicked and turned, and the shackles fell away. That left my hands. It also left no time.

“Bitch, you’re first,” the Spectre growled, and brought his sword down. Sister Sarah shoved the chair at him last-minute and it caught him in the midriff, disrupting his swing and nearly doubling him over.

“What are you waiting for?” she demanded, and reached for her lantern. The Spectre cursed and staggered straight, sword at the ready.

And I realized there was no way I could reach the lock on my manacles to get myself free. And with the shackles still holding me, I wouldn’t be able to use any of the Arts. Worse yet, I was still feeling sick to my stomach from Sister Sarah’s interrogation. The Spectre, on the other hand, had a sword and God knows what Dark Arts at his disposal, not to mention a mouth full of jagged teeth.

And Sister Sarah had a chair and a lantern.

It’s hero time. That is, if you think you’re up to it.

Help me, I pleaded silently with my Shadow. This is going to take both of us together, or he’s going to slice us up like a zucchini.

My other half considered for a minute. The Spectre took that opportunity to swing again. Sister Sarah blocked the cut with her lantern, throwing shadows crazily all around the room. I could no longer smell lavender. Instead, I got the odor of hot iron.

All right, he finally said. But it’ll cost you when we’re out of here.

We can worry about that when we’re out of here, I told him.

Keep telling yourself that, he said, and chuckled. Suddenly strength flooded my limbs. The pain from the interrogation was gone, and I felt almost good.

At the same time, Sister Sarah swung her lantern at the Spectre’s head. He ducked out of the way and riposted, opening a neat slice along her side. She gasped and stepped back, slamming up against the table. The Spectre smiled, showing those awful, jagged teeth, and advanced.

And I jumped over the table.

It wasn’t a smooth landing, but I managed to get my manacled arms up just as the Spectre swung down. The sword hit the chains with a screech, sending sparks everywhere.

“Wait your turn,” he hissed. I didn’t bother to respond. Instead, I crossed my wrists, trapping the sword in a loop of soulforged chain. Before he could react, I drew it taut and yanked, drawing on those reserves of strength my Shadow had lent me. I knew I was going to pay for it down the road, but at the moment the only thing that mattered was getting the sword out of his hands. He stumbled forward, off balance, and I slammed an elbow as best I could into his jaw.

He hissed and tried to bite. I leaned back to dodge and yelled, “Get out of here!” to Sister Sarah.

QUESTIONS LARGELY UNANSWERED

“Are you nuts?” she replied. I could hear her moving around behind me but couldn’t spare a glance to see what she was doing. The Spectre chose that moment to try to pull his sword free, yanking me forward. Rather than resist, I added my momentum to his pull and crashed into him, sending both of us toppling over.

We landed with me on top, the sword pinned between us. “I’ll feed you to the Void myself,” he snarled, and snapped at me. I jerked my head back just in time to avoid getting my nose bitten off, and he took that opportunity to pull the sword to one side and roll me off balance. I tried to press down with the chain, but he had leverage and rolled us over. Now he was on top and the sword was inches away from my face. He pressed downward, and I could feel the extra strength my Shadow had given me ebb.

What are you thinking? I shot him a desperate thought.

Sorry, there’s only so much I can do. The rest is up to you.

The Spectre snarled and pressed down. The sword blade came closer and closer to my face. “I’m going to cut you in half,” he grunted, “and then I’m going to flush the pieces straight down to the Labyrinth where my friends will be waiting for you. And you can’t do a damn thing about it.” He pressed down with renewed force and I could feel the blade bite into my cheek.

And then, a click. He stopped and howled, and I realized what had happened.

Sister Sarah had slapped my abandoned shackles on his feet. He was trapped now, unable to use Dark Arts and unable to run away.

Of course, he still did have that sword in my face. I heaved up with all of my might, taking advantage of his momentary distraction, and slammed my fists into his face. He jerked back, pulling the sword with him, and I twisted left as hard as I could. That rolled us over again, coming to rest with me on top. “You’re going to pay for this,” he snarled. I didn’t answer. Instead, I extended my arms straight over my head. The sword, still tangled in the chain of my manacles, tore from his grasp.

“No!” He scrabbled after the sword, but I shoved it out of reach. Realizing it was a lost cause, he instead reached for my eyes, but I caught his hands in mine.

Which, I realized, was a mistake. Bound or not, he was still stronger than I was, and this was only going to end one way unless I—

“Move!” Sister Sarah’s voice cut through my train of thought. I let go and rolled right, just as a gray blur came slamming down. The Spectre let out a scream, and I realized she’d slammed his face with her lantern.

I staggered to my feet as the lantern came down again, and again, until the Spectre was curled up and whimpering, “No more, no more.”

Shakily, I got to my feet. The cut on my face was still leaking plasm and I felt weak in the knees, but I was standing, and that was something.

“Nice work,” I told Sister Sarah, and nudged the Spectre with my toe. “Are you going to finish the job?”

She shook her head. “He’s not going anywhere. We can question him. Find out how deep in the Necropolis his corruption goes.” She put the surprisingly undented lantern down on the table which, by some miracle, had remained standing, and stooped to pick up the keys from where I’d dropped them. “Do you want out of those?”

“Please.” I held out my hands, and she inserted the key. One twist, and the shackles fell away. I knelt and put them on the whimpering Spectre, who put up only token resistance.

I stood. Sister Sarah and I looked at each other across his prone body. “I guess he won’t be opening any gates for anyone,” she said, a note of satisfaction in her voice.

HAUNTING SHADOWS

“He had two friends,” I replied, remembering the goons he’d had with him when we first met. “I don’t know if they’re Doppelgangers too or just idiots, but as long as they’re out there the Citadel’s still in danger.”

“Then we need to get out of here,” she said. “Are you all right to run?”

“I guess I’ll have to be.” I gestured toward the door. “After you.”

She stuck the third key in the lock and pulled the door open. “You’re too kind.”

Yeah. Kind. That’s what you are. And useless in a fight. Look at you, my Shadow said. You think you’re going to last five minutes on the walls in the state you’re in?

I have to try, I told him, and followed Sister Sarah out the door. Somewhere up overhead, the Maelstrom bells began to toll.



CHARLES ANDREW BATES

“What’s your name?”

The figure writhed on the slab, inner turmoil twisting his form. “Denngghhhh... Mmm...Max— Maxweeeearghh—”

“That’s a mouthful,” Georgie Caplan muttered from the corner of the holding cell.

The Inspector threw a dirty look her way. “I suffer your presence only as a witness to what this one claims.”

Georgie offered a contrite nod. She’d dealt with the Hierarchy enough to know the Inspector really meant “You’re all suspects until I get to the bottom of this.”

“This” being a ragged group of wraiths — Georgie and her crew — who’d been attacked by Spectres at the edge of the Tempest. Lumped in with them was another wraith, a stranger who’d literally dropped into the middle of the attack. His Corpus was so savaged by prolonged exposure to the Tempest that he could’ve been mistaken for a Spectre himself. But the stranger had helped Georgie and her crew to even the odds. They’d kept the Spectres at bay till another bit of good luck: a Legion patrol happened upon the skirmish and sent the Spectres scarping off.

That would’ve been an end to it, except the stranger started ranting about massive numbers of Spectres gathering in the Labyrinth beneath the Tempest — an entire army of murderous spirits poised to sweep through the Underworld.

Then the stranger collapsed, all twitchy and torn up.

The Legionnaires didn’t much care that Georgie, Alvin, and Shoreh — all that was left of an eight-person crew — had no idea what the stranger was on about. Legionnaires were like any other soldiers, living or dead: anything outside the scope of their orders got kicked up the chain of command.

So everyone was dragged back to Stygia. Which led to here: a holding cell somewhere in the Hierarchy, that autocratic organization which brought order to the afterlife through

(sometimes literal) soul-crushing bureaucracy. In theory, the Hierarchy claimed to keep the dead safe. In practice, it was geared more toward perpetuating blind obedience.

Georgie dreaded it almost as much as Spectres.

The Inspector who came to interview them was typical of his sort, radiating arrogance and distrust, but the Usurer he brought along to patch everyone up was a surprise. The Hierarchy never did anything out of the kindness of its heart — or whatever passed in the Underworld for a heart. The Usurer restored their damaged Corpus, but only enough that they weren't in danger of falling into a Harrowing in the middle of the interrogation. Sorry — *interview*. The Hierarchy weren't savages, certainly not. Just they got a touch...enthusiastic...at times.

Healing the stranger promised to take a while, so the Inspector started with Georgie and her crew. They were Tempest-divers, she explained in her Scottish burr, treasure hunters who plumbed the soulstorm for valuable bits of flotsam. The stranger was just some ned, and they knew as much about his ravings as the Legionnaires did. Which was to say, not a bloody thing.

Finally it was the stranger's turn. Not that Georgie, Alvin, and Shoreh were off the hook. They'd stew in this holding cell till the Inspector got what he wanted out of them. At which point, they'd either be set free or have their souls smelted into benches or spears or some shite.

"Now then; Max? I need you to— Can you stop him thrashing around? It's distracting."

The Usurer replied in clipped tones, "We were only told to stabilize him. You want to calm down his Shadow, find a Pardoner."

"No!" was all Max got out clearly, before dissolving into another string of garbled non-sequiturs.

"What does his Shadow have to do with it?"

"Ya tube." Georgie couldn't help herself. "Ye really don' know—? Smashin'. This Max: looks tae be his dark half's pretty strong. I'd say his Shadow's got a linkup tae the hive-mind."

"Oh, you would say?" The Inspector's death mask might hide his features, but the curled-lip sneer was unmistakable.

"Seen it before. Fact is, one of my crew done had something like that. Till the Spectres got 'im."

"I've done as directed." The Usurer rose from a crouch. Their Moliated form was genderless and stretched to easily seven feet in height, yet brought to mind a dolphin's powerful sleekness. They continued in a tone that made it clear they didn't appreciate being ordered to spend precious Corpus healing some strangers. "They're all stable. Whatever afflicts this one isn't related to his body."

"Very well," the Inspector said. By the second word, the Usurer was already out the chamber door. The Inspector spared a look at the pair of Legionnaires standing watch in the hall, then swung the door closed.

Meanwhile, Max had settled somewhat. He lay upon the bench in a muttered argument with himself, reduced to minor twitches.

The Inspector stood over Max in silent contemplation, then: "What was this about the hive-mind?"

"Spectres are what happens when wraiths give in tae the dark side, righ'?"

"Well, actually—"

"Not now, Alvin," Shoreh interjected. "Please continue, Georgie."

"All wraiths've got a dark half. The Shadow-self, tryin' tae corrupt us. I mean, we're half-Spectre, aren't we?"

“How dare—”

“Hang about.” Waving placating hands, Georgie realized she’d been drawing courage from the Usurer’s disdain for the Inspector. When the Usurer left, they’d taken Georgie’s backbone along with. Fact was, Georgie was mouthing off at a high-ranking member of the Hierarchy. Not a smart move if she wanted to avoid ending up as an ottoman. “Just trying tae make a point, is all.”

“Which is?”

“Shadows’re part of us, but also apart from us, righ’? They can dae ’hings we cannae; makes ’em so bloody seductive, righ’? Offer up help at the right time, long as yer willing tae pay the price.” Georgie was in danger of getting off-topic, so she cut to the end. “They can dae ’hings like chat up those who’ve turned already.”

“Spectres.”

“Got it in one. Everyone knows Spectres’ve got a hive mind. Tapping in to it can be handy. Assuming ye get yer Shadow tae tell ye what they’re saying — and assuming ye can trust what yer Shadow tells ye.”

“Doesn’t work like that.”

The stranger. Max. His voice was hoarse, weary even, yet with a strong timbre. The voice of someone who’s been through some heavy shite, and dealt his fair share along the way. He still looked like shite, too, even after the Usurer’s efforts — though no longer on the scale of *How’re You Even Still Walking?* More like *Had a Rough Night*. Seemed he’d wrestled his Shadow into submission, at least.

“Care to tell us how it *does* work?” The Inspector was eager to take charge.

Max propped himself on one elbow and gave the Inspector a once-over. “You’re calling the shots here?”

“Yes.” A sidelong glance at Georgie. “The Spectres told you they’re invading, is that it?”

“Nah. Stumbled across them deep in the far side of the Tempest. Lots of them. Forming up in ranks — well, sort of. Not like military, but definitely organized.”

“How’d ye see all this without getting caught?” Georgie interjected.

“I’m good at not getting caught.” A quicksilver smile flashed across his face. “Kind of my thing. Anyway, they were in a twisty cavern thing; lots of places to hide. Not that I got close. Hightailed it soon as I realized what I’d stumbled into. That took a while. I was lost all to hell — how I ended up down there to begin with — not to mention avoiding those murder monsters.”

Georgie felt a chill. “How long it take ye tae get back?”

“Damned if I know, but it was a while. You saw what kind of shape I was in. Going on instinct by the time I ran into you.”

“So all that’s old news, then, righ’?” Georgie waved away Max’s scowl. “I don’ mean it’s not *important*. I mean, if it’s *accurate*—” she almost said *true* “—then who knows how much time they’ve had tae plan? And how long before they mobilize?”

“If Spectres are organized in the numbers you say,” Alvin added, “it’s an imminent danger to Stygia.”

“Not only Stygia,” Shoreh said, “but all the Underworld.”

“There has been news; heightened Spectre activity...” All eyes turned to the Inspector. He tapped a finger against his mask of office, lost in thought. “But I will not file a report based on an unsubstantiated claim.”

“File a report?” Georgie was agog. “Sounds more urgent than that!”

HAUNTING SHADOWS

“The Hierarchy has rules. There is a procedure to follow. First: verify. I will see if what this one says is true.”

“Aye, right.” Georgie had been worried the Inspector was an oblivious bureaucrat. Instead, looked like he was a cover-your-arse, red-tape-loving bureaucrat.

“Hang on, pal,” Max said. “I’m not letting someone root around in my head.”

The Inspector’s featureless mask looked down upon him. “As if you have any say in the matter.”

• • •

“This is taking too long.”

Georgie thought the same thing. They’d been stewing in the holding cell ever since the Inspector waved a dismissive hand their way and flounced off with Max in tow. Georgie didn’t rightly know how long it’d been; telling time in the Underworld wasn’t easy.

She spent the time puzzling over the mystery that was Max. She didn’t know if he was full of shite about a Spectre army, but he did give off a stench. The more Georgie mulled things over, the less they added up. How to reconcile the selfless Samaritan who rescued her crew with the guarded wanker who suffered through the Inspector’s questions? Something was off. Unless...

Georgie sat up sharp as suspicion bloomed. Then self-doubt crept in on its heels. Even if her suspicions were right, wasn’t the Hierarchy best equipped to deal with Max? Hell, they’d probably tumbled to his tricks already.

Still, after further pondering, Georgie decided she couldn’t just leave it. If only for her peace of mind, she had to share her suspicion with the powers that be.

More than a little whispered bickering later, Alvin and Shoreh fell in line.

She rapped on the door, calling out to the guards on the other side. Silence. After a repeat with the same result, she quirked an eyebrow at Alvin and Shoreh.

“Nothing ventured,” Shoreh said with a shrug.

Georgie tried the door. It opened no problem. Sure, right, why lock it when there were Legionnaires on guard—

“Huh. Where’d the guards go?”

“Dunno, Alvin. Not like I’ve ever been detained by the Hierarchy before, have I?”

Georgie felt a right eejit. They hadn’t actually been told to stay put, had they? “Tae hell with it. Let’s get a move on, righ’?”

Finding the Inspector was their best bet. Alvin had a talent for tracking, but some quality to the building caused interference. He puzzled over it for a minute, then picked the most likely direction. Strolling through the bowels of the Hierarchy, they did their best to look like they belonged. Worst they got was some curious glances along the way. A sight better than some alarm going off and them getting thrown back in a room with a proper lock on the door.

With Alvin doing his bloodhound thing, they made their way to a side exit. It opened on a small courtyard with a Baroque-style bench crouching under a lone spindly tree. In the living world, it would’ve been a sad attempt at a park. Here in the Underworld, there was the added creep factor of knowing that tree and bench were formed out of wraiths, their metaphysical substance — Corpus — twisted and hammered like iron into these inert things.

“Georgie, what’s that?” Shoreh pointed to movement in the lower branches on the far side of the tree.

A thickset man was trying to climb the tree. One robed sleeve was caught on a branch, but the man didn't seem to notice. On the list of strange things you'd see in the Underworld, this wouldn't even place. Still, something gave Georgie pause. The man's robes...

"Ah, balls." Georgie dashed over and tugged the man free. He was in a daze, jowly face slack as he focused on the tree and nothing else. More muttered curses from Georgie. She grabbed the man's shoulders and gave a series of sharp shakes. "Snap. Out. Of. It!"

The man blinked, eyes flashing bright green for an instant before his focus sharpened. "What—?"

"Where is he?" she yelled, giving another shake for emphasis. Seeing the Inspector like this, Georgie's suspicion metastasized to full-on certainty. "Where's Max?!"

The Inspector frowned, face strangely naked without his mask of office.

"Who's Max?"

...

Carpenter hauled ass out of Stygia one step ahead of justice. It wasn't the first time he'd been on the run. In life — Prohibition-era Chicago — he was called Dennis Maxwell. It was "Dennis" only to his parents and teachers; "Denny" to his pals. He stopped that in high school (not that he finished high school). From then on it was the harder-sounding "Maxwell." Of course, the crowd he ran with never met a name they couldn't nick, so that became "Max" or "Maxie." Then his first enforcer gig for the mob, he went to town with a hammer on some fool, and "the Carpenter" was born (somebody else was already "the Hammer"). He acted like it bothered him, but secretly, it tickled him. Felt like his real name — who he really was. Not some no-account, lumbering, mutt-Irish kid. Nosiree, he was a bad man, and dangerous to know.

He never was the smartest or strongest, but he made up for it by being the sneakiest rat bastard of them all. Hadn't always been that way. He used to have a soft spot — trusting of those closest to him. That ended when his fiancée and best friend put him through a meat grinder so's they could run off together. Waking up dead, pulled out of the storm-tossed Tempest by a mob of assholes even more murderous and crazy than him, Carpenter wasn't going to make that mistake again.

He'd been dead a long time now — longer than he'd ever been alive. That was practically unheard-of for his kind. Spectres didn't have a long afterlife expectancy, what with the gnawing nothingness of Oblivion chewing at them from the inside. Sooner or later, Spectres crashed and burned. Carpenter survived thanks to a mix of luck and stubbornness, and a belly full of rage that kept Oblivion at bay. Barely, but it was enough. At least, it had been.

Getting fucked over by the Tempest almost did the job. He had some skill in getting around that place, but deep as he'd been flung into it — the why of which was a long, overwritten story for another time — forget about "getting around." It took everything he had just to survive. And even that hadn't been enough, in the end. Yet, as the screaming soul-storms tore through him, when the only thing left was the utter finality of Oblivion, Carpenter still said, "Fuck that."

Which is when his other half spoke up. It'd never done that before. Must've been saving up for that final moment, one last play to get Carpenter to change his ways. See the light. Turn over a new leaf. Pick your cliché.

His other half was everything he hated about himself. Carpenter kept it tamped down and muzzled, but there were times it slipped past his defenses, if only for a moment. Even then, best it could do was act like some bullshit excuse for a conscience.

He'd heard that, with Spectres, the other half was called the Psyche. Whatever. If Carpenter had to call it something, it wasn't gonna be some stupid fucking psychobabble word. "Max" would do.

The punchline was, ol' Max didn't wanna go bye-bye either. Probably thought they were destined for great things or some shit. Max offered Carpenter a deal: he could get them out with what was left of their shared hide intact. But Carpenter would have to let Max take the wheel of their collective consciousness. Max promised he'd hand things back over once they were out of that hell-hole of a hell-hole.

Carpenter knew it was bullshit. Even if Max *did* have some way out, how big of an asshole would Carpenter be if he believed he'd get control of his body back? But considering the alternative...he'd take getting fucked over instead of being totally fucked.

After they switched places, Carpenter wasn't aware of much. Like hearing people talking in another room — he caught the sounds but not the words.

When Carpenter tried pushing back out, the door was locked. He'd called it, hadn't he? Carpenter kept hammering away — har har — which took a while, but finally got back in charge and shoved Max, that sneaky fuck, back in his hole.

Carpenter had found himself on a slab, with a bunch of wraiths giving him the hairy eyeball. Looked like ol' Max had come through in the end. They were free of the Tempest, and patched up besides. Except he was in Stygia. That was trouble. Spectres were walking beacons of destruction, but some could pass as wraiths. Carpenter was one of the best at it. Even so, wraiths could suss it out if they were looking. Ironically, letting Max take charge had probably helped dodge that bullet on the way in. No sense pushing his luck, though. It was past time to get the fuck outta there.

Good news, it wasn't hard to put one over on the Hierarchy. Always thought they were the smartest ones in the room. He just needed a distraction. Long as they were focused on some external threat, they were less likely to take a hard look at him. Get them all wound up, then slip away in the resulting confusion.

That stuff about a Spectre army was the perfect distraction. Not that Carpenter knew anything about it. Max must've stumbled across it while he was in control of their body. The hive-mind could've filled Carpenter in, but he avoided tapping in to that. His willfulness didn't go over well with his fellow murder ghosts, and other Spectres had used the active link more than once to home in on him for a beating.

Didn't really matter. Carpenter simply had to play off the wraiths' assumptions and fears. That was the best part: half the time, Carpenter didn't have to do a goddamn thing. These assholes would do all the work and hand him the solution.

That Georgie, though; he sensed she was trouble. Her focus stayed on him during the interrogation, not on the bullshit he was spinning. Luckily, before she could put things together, the Inspector gave him a way out: the Pardonor. Granted, actually seeing one would be a disaster. Those bastards could spot a Spectre a mile away. But Carpenter would never get close enough for that.

Soon as they were out of the holding cell, Carpenter caught the Inspector's eye and pushed. It was a handy power, giving someone a shove to do what you want. Took a lot of practice to get the hang of. Trade off was, you had to look 'em in the eye, and your eye flashed green along with the push. Big warning sign to anyone else. The guards were in front of them and missed it, though. He dealt with them first.

"I won't be any trouble; can barely put one foot in front of the other," he told the Inspector. You didn't have to say anything to go with the push; just how Carpenter liked to work. "*Why don't you get rid of these guys?*"

Thanks to the push, the Inspector agreed. Sent 'em off with a wave of the hand. After that, it was easy street.

"Great. Now, *let's go someplace quiet.*"



Stygia was in the depths of the Underworld. Carpenter preferred being closer to the living. Their emotions — particularly hate, fear, and frustration — were the fuel that stoked the furnace of his dark soul. Took a while, but he slogged his way to the Shadowlands, the Underworld reflection of the living world. Chicago, to be specific. His old stomping grounds.

His ultimate goal was to find some way across the Shroud, back to the living world. He'd almost done it once. That hadn't worked, but didn't mean it wasn't worth trying; he'd just have to figure out a different plan.

The scream came out of nowhere — a freight train of sound that bounced him off a wall. His Corpus was still vibrating when another blast of sound hit. He caromed off a light pole and around a corner. Bad news was, it shattered most of his body. Good news, it took him out of line of sight of whoever the fuck—

He only caught a glimpse, but it was enough. Petite, sharp chin, short hair, dark eyes — Georgie. Her pals flanking her to either side — a stocky guy with muttonchops, and a willowy woman with straight black hair. Hadn't caught their names; not like it mattered.

"Eyy! Dropped yer mask, pal." Tiny girl with a big mouth, all right, but just a regular yell this time.

"Didn't fit anyway," he called back, crawling for cover as best he could. The Inspector's mask had come in handy leaving Stygia — a badge of office that encouraged others to give him a wide berth. Not much use now. "How'd you find me?"

"Alvin has a knack for tracking things, once he's got the scent. And ye've a right stink, don' ye?"

Carpenter extended his awareness to sense any consciousness nearby. Not enough to pinpoint, but that was fine. He just wanted to confirm that he didn't have to worry about anyone besides this trio of assholes. "Surprised you didn't pick up on it sooner."

"One-nil tae ye, Max."

"The name's 'Carpenter'." He tamped down on a sudden impulse to surrender. His other half, fucking with him. Ol' Max sure was feeling his oats these days.

Using reserves of power to mend as much damage as he could from Georgie's screeching, Carpenter spared a look around. He was in an old neighborhood on the South Side. The real world gave a hazy suggestion of a blocky post office building just down the street. The Shadowlands reflection was a ramshackle bundle of buildings that reeked of terror and death. Some nutjob had used it as a murder mansion over a century ago. Death had seeped so deep in its bones that, after the place was torn down, its husk had come over to the Shadowlands. Carpenter had swung by this place more than once to soak up dark emotions that powered his abilities. And maybe the miasma of corruption hanging over it might make things tough for Georgie and her pals.

He might even be able to use it for cover. Just needed to get there.

"Don' much care *what* yer name is, considering yer gonna be a greasy patch of Spectre goo in a minute."

"I'd like to see you try."

"That's what we're doing, ye dobber."

"Yeah, but why?"

"The Inspector wanted me tae get his mask back. Never hurts, having the Hierarchy owe ye a favor, righ'?" Her voice grew louder — they'd moved up, but paused before rounding the corner. "But mostly payback for yer mob o' nasties killing half ma crew."

“That wasn’t me. I really did try to help.” What was he saying? Who cared what— Max, again. Of course.

“Oh, all right. Sorry tae bother ye, then. There even an army?”

“I’ll give you this: Spectres are gathering, sure as shit. Just what for, and if they’re headed your way? Can’t say. Blocked from the hive-mind. Maybe that’s my better half. He’s a real sonofabitch lately.”

Georgie was trying to distract him, that much was obvious. But Max was in the mix too, lulling him into hanging around instead of hightailing it out of there. Goddamn Psyche bullshit.

A ripple formed on the wall across the way, then the surface split open like a wet paper sack. Just on the other side, the dark-haired woman. Farther back, Carpenter made out Georgie next to the stocky guy — Alvin — opening a portal. Impressive. It took heavy-duty mojo to pull off in the Shadowlands.

Carpenter focused on the woman in front. She’d warped her body, hands flashing wicked-looking serrated blades as she bounded forward on powerful, ostrich-like legs. Carpenter’s eye flared green. “*Back off.*”

The woman kept heading for the hole. The push hadn’t worked. What the hell—?! Then he saw. She’d warped her face as well, covered her eyes and enlarged her ears like a bat’s. Without eye contact, he couldn’t push her — but how’d they know that?

Worry about it later. He had another trick up his sleeve. Downside was, it took a lot out of him.

Carpenter lunged into the woman’s mind. He tore out the recent memory of Alvin standing behind her and Carpenter in front, then swapped them. It was sloppy work, but it didn’t have to hold long.

“What’re you doing?” Carpenter yelled at her. “He’s behind you!”

Halfway through the hole, the dark-haired woman stumbled in confused surprise — then turned and charged back, blade-arms flashing, directly at Alvin.

There was a yell — “Shoreh, wait!” — then the portal slapped shut.

Sagging against the wall, weak from channeling so much power, Carpenter barely registered the distant screams. He sensed the snuffing out of a consciousness. Then a screeching blast, followed by a second — neither at him this time — and another consciousness sputtered down to a low ebb.

He staggered down the street to the murder house. Crossing the threshold, he realized it’d be best if he didn’t stay there long. He sensed things in there in such rage and pain that they’d lash out at anything they came across. Still, the ambience of agony was enough to bolster his strength.

He was almost to a crooked bend in the hall when a screeching blast tore apart the entryway. Debris smashed into him, sending him to the floor.

Beyond the pervasive ache of his damaged Corpus, Carpenter sensed sudden agitation and hunger nearby. Georgie’s sonic blast had wounded the murder house, and the things inside weren’t happy. Most were a ways off, but not for long. Maybe going inside hadn’t been such a smart idea.

Carpenter scrambled for purchase on the cracked wainscoting and struggled to his knees. He turned back to face the jagged opening as a short, athletic figure stepped into the wreckage of the hall. Georgie couldn’t have much left after all that, could she?

“Nice set of pipes—” was all he got out before everything went silent. His rasping voice, the groans of the weakened floorboards, the flat smack of falling plaster, the crunch

of splinters and drywall beneath Georgie's feet — it was all gone, like turning off a radio.

Yet every word Georgie spoke was clear as a bell. "None a yer bullshit or mind-bendin'. Don' know how ye tricked Shoreh, but— ach; damn ye fer makin' her cut down Alvin, and damn ye fer makin' me hurt her, too.

"But nae mare. Yer done."

Georgie stumbled forward, using a chunk of doorframe as a cane — no, not a cane, Carpenter realized. A club. She'd used up all her power, and was going for an old-fashioned bludgeoning.

She was mid-windup when Carpenter noticed a flicker of something over her shoulder. A cold smile flashed across his face.

The thing that boiled through the shattered wall was once the spirit of some forgotten victim in this place. Now it was little more than ragged claws and raw fury, driven to inflict the same pain that consumed it. It smashed into Georgie, the force of impact carrying them through the opposite wall into a dingy sitting room. Sound returned in an explosion as Georgie dropped her silence to focus on fighting off the pain-thing.

Pure luck. It could've gone for Carpenter just as easily. And still could, if he didn't get a move on. Anyone's guess who'd come out on top — the pain-thing was a safe bet, but Georgie'd proven a wily one herself. Damned if he'd stick around for the result, though.

Carpenter wasted no time crawling past the thrashing violence. Stumbling down the steps outside, he felt a twinge — guilt? Regret? Did Georgie really deserve a fate like—

"Ahh; Max, you old softie," Carpenter muttered at his other self. "Nice try, but we're back to doing things *my* way."



MONICA VALENTINELLI

Scritch, scratch. Clash, smash. Lights snuffed out by skin and bone and beating hearts. No one's left to play the governor's room. What a shame! No audience, though. No round of applause. My turn to tickle ivory keys like my Pa did so very long ago. I cannot sing as good as Ma. Just a steel tube with a crank and a bunch of notes. No stringy muscles or voice box to vibrate sound from a throat and mouth I don't have.

"This is so cool, Jerry! Can't believe we're investigating House on the Rock!" That's not a voice in my head. Must be one of the living. Another admirer in a sea of tourists come to look at all the pretty, pretties animated behind sheets of glass. *"Wait, is that a room-sized automated orchestra? Oooooo, press play!"*

Scritch, scratch. Take it back! Can't gasp for breath I don't need. I slip into the controls and prevent the instruments from performing "Clair de Lune." Oh, how fun it is to ride and hide inside levers and cogs and metal sheets.

"Frank, I thought the tour guide said this one was broken. Think this is the haunted one?"

Can't see him, but just by the sound of his annoying voice I assume Frank is a middle-aged, balding drunk who spends all his free time in speakeasies. Every Frank I knew wore a shitty little hat and drove a shitty little car and treated his girl like shit.

"Not sure yet. Better grab the gear and signal the rest of the team, though. I have a feeling about this place, Jerry.Maybe this'll be the one."

"One what?"

"The night we prove ghosts are real."

Jerry sounds like he's in charge and knows *exactly* what he's doing. I stifle a laugh. Oh, ghost hunters. This'll be fun. I have news for 'em. Yes, ghosts are real. Hell, I'm dead. Just like Ma and Pa and li'l boy Chester and my ole mutt, Spots, and that dang, ill-tempered cat Mister Mousekiller. Murder, murder cha cha cha. Mansion went up in flames. Not my fault the wood was dry. Not I, said the fly. Nor I, said the fox. Bastards, all of them. Wealthy shits that needed to die.

Never did find out who started the fire. Don't wanna know, either. I got a secret, though. Hoo, hoo. I'm stuck. My Fetter is a tiny dollhouse filled with replicas of a life no one wants to remember. That house is stored in a room full of others just like it; parts and pieces have been rearranged for John Q. Public to traipse on by. Some wraiths might call being trapped in a museum "safe" — but I don't see it that way. This tourist trap is a temporary haven that won't last. Soon as someone sells my Fetters or loans them out to someone else, I'll be forced to go along for the ride.

That's the first smart thing you've said in a while, my Shadow says. Sure you don't want to light a match? End it now?

What? And miss out on all the fun? You know, for the deepest, darkest part of me — you're a real mood-killer.

"...and here we'll also tour the infamous Doll House Room, one of the many collections rumored to be haunted here at House on the Rock..."

Bushwa! Cameras here? Must be playtime. Skin suits are always entertaining even when I'm not haunting them, 'cause they don't know everything. Not even close.

"Tonight, our team of paranormal investigators will attempt an exorcism on the crown jewel of the collection. The—"

Oh hell, no. Exorcism? You've got to be yanking my chain. This ain't right. They ain't all the same, but the ones who know how to chant and what objects to cleanse? They're accidentally dangerous of the "I might be sent back to the Underworld" variety. What to do... What to do... Head-scratcher that one, but there ain't a lot of time — and there's a real good chance they'll find my Fetter. Damn.

Well, well. Well, a ghost's gotta do what we gotta do. I ain't no dewdropper. If the situation gets really dangerous, I'll slip right into a life-sized mannequin, oh yes, and put one of those bluenoses in the ground. First things first. I gotta distract 'em with some fancy footwork, yessiree. Ride 'til the sun rises. They gotta sleep even if I don't.

I flit and float, invisible to their human eyes, and hunker down in the corner behind four skin suits. I assume the two men are Frank and Jerry. The other two women I don't know. One is quite the dark-haired looker; the other's skin is pallid and has a bluish-yellowish tint to it. Almost as if a puppet was pulling a corpse's veiny strings. Wouldn't that be something? It'd be dangerous to meet another wraith in a museum like this on account of the secrets they know. Skinsuits don't know my weaknesses. Another wraith definitely would.

"Wait, what's that over there?" The speaker has a feminine voice, low and grating, as if she smoked one too many cigarettes recently. "Is that a...*ghost*?" she asks, pointing at me.

I don't know how the corpse-girl can see me, but she points to the center of my Corpus.

My Shadow is annoyed. *Aren't you going to say something? Do anything?*

"Wait just a hot minute." If I had a breath to hold, I'd be doing that. Instead, I float and flit, waiting to see what the other ghost hunters do. "Don't rush me."

Lucky, lucky. The rest of the skin suits start to laugh. "Shadows getting to you eh, Tink?"

"Tink" growls. "My name is Tina. Just because I'm four-feet-two and have white-blond hair doesn't mean I'm Tinkerbell from Peter Pan."

"Awww, c'mon Tina. Don't take it seriously. It's just a joke."

"Frank, it's always 'just' a joke with you. Why are you—"

While the two bicker like teen-aged siblings, I set aside my fears and look for a place to squish inside. Gotta find something small and inconspicuous like a phone or a... Gotcha! The security camera up in the corner will spy on 'em just fine. I float up to the ceiling, stuff my ectoplasmic body into the lens, and inhabit the camera. Once inside, I slowly tilt the

lens toward my first suspect: Tina. What can I say? There's just something about her that feels...dead. Like there's a puppet pulling that body's strings.

Why the camera? My Shadow sounds annoyed. *You could've slipped inside her purse strap or her shoes.*

Don't bother explaining why to my Shadow. Thing is, I don't need the camera. It's just poetic. I use their "eye" to spy on them. Sure ghost hunters are annoying, but so far? I'm having fun. I manipulate the camera and zoom in on Tina. I can see her through my ghost eyes just fine without it, but I want to test a theory. I have to know if she sees me. If she does, there'll be trouble. If she doesn't, then she's full of shit.

One, two. Buckle my shoe. Three, four, better shut da door. Goddammit. Tina smiles right into the camera, winks, and mouths the words "I see you." Doesn't matter anymore what Tina is or isn't. Have to assume she's here for me — or my Fetter, the one thing that's anchoring my spirit in this plane. She figures out what my Fetter is, no more Becky Nolan. Crap. Still, I gotta wonder which wraith is holed up in her body. Little ole Tina knows way too much. Which means one thing: this has got to be personal.

"Guys, guys, guys. Why won't you listen to me?" Tina bats her eyelashes at Frank. Key-ristmas she's even bad at using her feminine wiles. "I'm telling you there's a ghost haunting House on the Rock, and she's watching us RIGHT NOW."

A rail-thin man with tan skin steps forward. He wears a photographer's vest, a pair of loose-fitting dungarees, and a flannel shirt. "Look, Tina. I know you think ghosts are real, but they're not." I recognize the voice. Jerry. The man in charge.

This time, the other woman speaks up — but not before she shoots Tina a strange look. Interesting. "Then why are we here?"

"Jerry, what the actual fuck? You just said this might be the night. Aren't we here to prove ghosts are real? Why would I leave my parish behind to join you if we weren't actually going to hunt ghosts? Hell, I got paid better on a pastor's salary."

Yeah, you tell him former-pastor Frank. Why was a team of ghost hunters investigating House on the Rock after hours? I've haunted this place for years, and nobody's poked around in here with fancy gadgets and doodads. "C'mon, you guys. Seriously? Frank, Tina, Allison? You're all wondering why we're here?"

Nodding heads. Oh good, maybe they'll leave and all my troubles'll be over. "Guys, we are performers on a reality TV show. You know that, right?"

Allison grumbles. "How very capitalist of you."

Jerry points at her: "Ghosts or not. We're here to entertain our audience and make our sponsors happy. Of course I would love to prove ghosts are real, but the truth doesn't matter. As long as we've got an audience, our show will go on. You got it?"

Frank scowls. "Even if that means lying to me? A former preacher?"

"Look Frank. I know you believe, and that's all that matters. Makes for a more convincing show. We cool? Allison?"

Allison nods but doesn't say a word. Interesting. Jerry is definitely the boss.

Jerry claps his hands. "All right, let's put our game faces on and get to work."

"Right there with you, Jerry." Tina winks — at me? — then asks: "Can I take point this time? It's my turn."

Oh-ho-ho. I slip out of the camera's eye and float above her head. I can't — wouldn't — force my way into her bag of bones, but I want to see if she reacts. I glide over to her, but don't get very far. My Shadow flinches.

Yeah, I feel that, too. Hey, we agree on something! First time for everything. Something's not right. Something's very, very wrong.

"Yeah, sure Tina. What do you have in mind?"

Tina grins. My Shadow recoils, then screams so loud I can't think. What could possibly scare my Shadow — the part of me that always wants me to fail?

"We should split up. Frank can take the Streets of Yesterday, you can go through the Mill House exhibit, Allison can film the Organ Room, and I'll concentrate on the Doll House Room. We can cover more ground that way."

I hear the word "doll" and, for the first time in decades, I am afraid. *This one knows too much*, my Shadow whispers. *Too many personal details. Get rid of her. Make it spectacular.* My Shadow is right. See, my Fetter — the thing that connects me to the Skinlands — is in the Doll House Room. But how would Tina know that? Do the rest of them know that?

"Wait, are you telling me to murder Tina? I do that, and the ghost hunters will never leave. I can't kill her."

Worth a shot, my Shadow says. *Got me that time.*

"Right, just remember folks. The word 'haunted' is great for tourism," Jerry laughs. "Hey, let's get our spook on! Okay, everybody, grab a handheld camera and whatever gear you think is appropriate for your area. The audience will follow our lead, so the older and creepier the artifact, the better."

Allison chimes in: "And research? What about that?"

"Just Google it, silly. There's plenty of information on the web."

Allison groans. "Right, because we're supposed to believe everything we read online."

Tina smiles, then shrugs. "Why make our job harder than it is? As long as the audience believes we're hunting ghosts, then we'll be entertaining. Right, Jerry?"

What'll you do? My Shadow asks me. Tina's got a camera, communication equipment, and god-knows-what-else. *That Tina has you pegged.*

"Why do you care? Tina's not your problem."

You're right, my Shadow says, pecking at my heels, *she is your problem. Sure you don't want to murder her? Hell, I think I like her.*

I ignore that nagging voice, the one that will never leave me, and float, float, float disincorporate from the room-sized orchestra back to my home, the velvety red Doll Room filled with antique dolls, houses, and tiny furniture. Some dolls date back to the Victorian era; their hair is human, their eyes are glass, their cracked skin is porcelain, their dressing gowns worn and fraying.

Others are older, fancier, creepier. They look real enough, maybe because their owners, the kids they were modeled after, lived and breathed and died a long time ago. Kids just like my sister, who were happy with a doll because it was a friend they could talk to. Only, she took her doll — the only gift I'd ever given her — to her grave along with the identity of her abuser.

Awww, shucks, my Shadow says. *Didn't know you cared. You don't remember the fire?*

"I don't. Now shut the fuck up."

The houses the dolls live in sprawl from one end of the labyrinthine room to the other; some replicas are centuries old, far older than any toy here. Some are just painted to look that way. Some are shuttered or have real glass windows. Others are open to show off the many, many occupied rooms inside. So many houses; too many dolls. Got that going for me.

"Shit," I hear Tina say. "There's more here than I thought. Ah well. Can't be too hard to find it."

HAUNTING SHADOWS

If my Shadow knew how to smile, it'd be grinning from ear to ear. *Now she's talking. Imagine that. Somebody wants to dump you in Oblivion.*

"Hush, you. I need to think."

Figured I'd be honest for once. Oblivion, my Shadow said. Tina figures out what my Fetter is, my Shadow will simply laugh, and I'll inch closer to permanent darkness.

Fuck.

I pay close attention now. Gotta figure out who's stuffed themselves into Tina and how they know me. Tina looks around, then turns her communicator off. She tosses all her shit — camera, too — in a heap behind her. Then, she peels off her leather jacket, exposing the rotting flesh on her neck and chest.

Well, at least I was right about that much. Some sap is riding poor, little Tina. Somebody murdered that girl just to get to me. Fun, fun.

You know you got options, my Shadow hisses. *You could destroy your Fetter first. Beat her to the punchline.*

Always the comedian. Here's the way I see this: either I let Tina inspect each doll and tiny purse and miniature sofa to find my Fetter, or I expose her to the rest of her team. Give the ghost hunters what they want: a ghost.

Why not hand yourself over to her?

"Monday's child is fair of face. Tuesday's child is full of grace," I chant. My Shadow hates nursery rhymes. I don't know why. "Wednesday's child is full of woe. Thursday's child has far—"

Fine, don't kill her. How are you going to convince her team she's not only dead, but she's also possessed?

Easy peasy. Ghost hunters are easy enough to spook. A little chill down their spine; a little hair on the back of their neck. They're not smart enough to guess there'd be two ghosts flitting about. Uh, hopefully. Sometimes, ghost hunters are smart—like Anders Izassi was back in the good ole days.

"Looky, looky. Kind of...spooky?" Tina giggles, then pulls out a small set of lockpicking tools. I'd seen my fair share of thieves before. Haunted one or two of 'em back in the day, too. "Aw shucks, what do I have here? There's a lock on this display case. Whatever will I do?"

I don't say a word. Doubt Tina could hear me, but I don't want to give her — or the wraith puppeteer — any ounce of satisfaction.

"You know what's funny about all of this? Tina's grandmother donated a doll to this place. She had planned on stealing it back. What's one, little—" I hear a click, clack, clicking noise as she jimmies the lock and slides the glass door open "—doll in a neighborhood of doll houses."

Should I tell her? Ooooo, let me do it, my Shadow nudges. *Won't she be surprised? Or is that disappointed. I can't tell.*

I know what my Shadow's referring to. My Fetter isn't a doll. Well, not *exactly*. Still, rifling through the Doll Room is not something I can ignore. I leave and get her crew? She might find my Fetter. I stay? She could still find it, and I'd be forced to watch.

Fuck. Stick to the plan. Okay, have to do something interesting. Something that'll bring the cavalry in. While Tina is concentrating, I slip down, down, down into her communicator and flip the switch. Hopefully, she'll say something stupid.

Tina's no longer paying attention to me. She's climbed inside the display case and is rifling through the dolls like they were made out of paper and tape. "Hey, do you think the curators will know a doll or three is missing? Tina's such a little shit. Millennials. Am I right? So easy to steal and blame it on a ghost. That's all I gotta do, you know. Just find the

one thing keeping you in this world and destroy it. Right after I sell the rest of this crap off.”

Okay, that’s enough talking. I float inside the camera body. If she could hear me I’d say “Smile!” Instead, I click the button and take several photos — the corpse-skin, the cold sweat, the jimmied lock, the damage she’s doing. That’s evidence. That’s something she doesn’t know I have.

“Hey, Tina. What are you doing?”

It’s Frank. Oh shit! I leap out of the camera. It clatters to the ground. My Shadow taunts me: *Whatcha going to do now, genius? Murder would’ve been easier.*

That pisses me off. “Why do you keep saying ‘murder’? Tina’s dead.”

Is she?

Oh god. Oh god. If she’s not that means—

“Tina, you okay? I finished early and...”

Tina smiles at me. “Yeah, sorry. I took the battery out of my communicator.”

Crap! I don’t get scared, but I do feel my Corpus quake with fear. I watch, frozen with shock, as Frank puts a hand on Tina’s shoulder. The second he touches her, Tina’s body goes slack, and a flickering, ink-black puddle of soul lurches onto Frank. He screams. Then begs — *nonononononononono* — then shrieks again.

You should kill him, my Shadow says solemnly. It doesn’t matter what I do. Kill. Don’t kill. Frank the ghost hunter is corrupted from the inside out. Just like Tina was. Just like poor, shivering, whimpering, frightened, hurting Tina.

“Leave him alone!” Tina croaks. Then, she glances over her shoulder, looks up, then down. “Can’t you do *something*? Frank is my friend. We dated once. He doesn’t deserve this!”

At first, I think Tina is shouting into the ether. That’s when it hits me: she’s talking to me. She knows, because that corrupted soul inside of her knew, that I exist.

Whatcha gonna do? Can’t slip into your Fetter and start walking off. Too obvious.

My mind is racing. I don’t like the feeling of being trapped. I can float through walls; I should be able to figure this out. As soon as Frank is lucid, that thing inside of him might kill Tina, and continue going through each and every doll. The way I see it? If he does keep her breathing, he’d force her to start popping off doll heads, too. Takes two to party.

Fuck.

Watcha, watcha, gotcha. My Shadow sounds amused. Almost...happy. I’m standing at the edge of Oblivion and I can feel the weight of that unending darkness pressing on my Corpus. My Shadow is nudging me toward that unhappy fate — but I don’t want to go into the abyss. It is too dark there. Too final.

You gonna float around and mope all night?

No, I’m not. Should I let whatever-is-attacking-me win? Don’t care about the skin suits, but some acts are hard to swallow. Corrupting a living body? Heinous.

Nah, can’t give up. The communicators are down; I know the camera has enough evidence to show something’s not right. What I need is a way to get the crew’s attention and draw them to the Doll Room — or float on over and drag them back.

Got a match? Those fire trucks. I love how they scream.

Start a fire? Strange question. I ignore my Shadow and Frank’s eager investigation of the display cases and look around. Fire truck. That reminds me of somethin’. Picking the display case’s lock should have set off an alarm. Right?

Frank taunts me. “I know what you’re thinking. You want to know what I am, why I’m here, why I want you dead.”

HAUNTING SHADOWS

Nah, that's not what I want to know. I want to figure out why no alarms went off.

"You know we can go anywhere we want. Do anything. Right? We've got the run of this place. There's nowhere for you to hide. I will find it."

Must've signed an agreement. Scritch, scratch. Fingernails clawing against the wood. Splinters. Fog — no, smoke — and lots of coughing. Right. Alarm!

I float over to the next area and squeeze my Corpus into the fire alarm. Just as I get ready to pull, Frank rushes in.

"Is that it? Is that alarm keeping you here? Interesting choice."

Too good. Frank can't hear the sound of my laughter. I pretend to be scared. I ooze out of the alarm and slide over to an unblemished display case. Then, I slip into a doll and pounce on the glass.

"Oh, what beautiful irony," Frank says with a grin. The skin suit's living flesh is showing signs of rot — it's mottled green, then yellow, then blossoms of purplish-black bruises. "I think I'll pull it."

I waltz around in the doll and pretend to be scared and nervous and all the things a wraith should feel when facing Oblivion. Frank yanks the alarm, then rips it off the wall — how he suddenly has superhuman strength I will never know — and pulls out a utility knife. While the alarm is blaring loudly, an impossible, never-ending BRRRRR-RING, he quickly tries to destroy it, so I play along. I pretend I'm struggling to stay inside the doll.

Don't you wanna slip inside that knife? Just a little cut. Murder, murder cha cha cha.

Shadow, that alarm is not my Fetter — but it will bring the cavalry. I don't have to kill Frank to win.

Oh, the irony. Frank pulled the fire alarm.

So?

You don't remember, do you? Can't stomach the thought you'd—

"Frank, what the hell? What in the actual fuck are you doing?"

"Jerry, so glad you're here! I think I found something!" Frank stashes the alarm in his pocket, then runs over to the display case, and braces against it. "A haunted doll!"

Ta-daaaaaaa! What a guy. You know, you could show Jerry you're real. Just slip inside that shirt of his and start unbuttoning it. Pop, pop, pop. So sexy.

"Frank, Tina's out there scared out of her wits. She thinks you're possessed! We've got to call an ambulance. Can you hear me? That ringing. It's so loud!"

Ah, Jerry. Can't see what we see. Ain't gonna like the truth. Skeptics never do.

"Give me a second." Frank smiles, walks over to the wall, and cuts the wire to the alarm. No more ringing. Dunno what Jerry thinks is happening; what I see are black teeth ready to fall out of a blistering mouth. "Jerry, Jerry... This is an opportunity in disguise. Think of the ratings."

Smooth. Oily slick.

Jerry pauses, then glances over his shoulder nervously. He drops his voice to a whisper. "I think Tina is really hurt. Our release forms don't cover mental breakdowns, but... The fire trucks are on their way. They'll take care of her."

Oh, Jerry. Remind you of anyone? A particular oil magnate? Sure you don't want a match?

"Now, that's what I'm talking about! Say, you still got that exorcism setup?"

Shit. As soon as Frank's distracted, I zip around to find the other ghost hunter — Allison — who must've heard the fire alarm by now. Allison was assigned to the Organ Room.

Carpeted in red, it houses an organ, a collection of kegs and grousers, and other odds and ends. At the very back, a host of winged angels flutter down from the ceiling, caressing a jewel of a carousel. I shoot straight for the carousel, hoping that Allison hasn't left yet, but assuming she has. As soon as I get there, I'm shocked to find her sitting on one of the carousel's painted horses — talking to no one.

Not no one. Someone. Someone she knows.

Fuck. Another ghost?

"I can hear you, you know," Allison says. "The others don't know, but I'm a medium."

I'm careful, but blunt: "And you want to excise me?"

"No," she says. "Not you. Whatever got ahold of Tina. Don't want that thing to possess me, too, though. Hard to fight something you can't hurt."

Smart one. Fire won't kill what it can't burn.

"I don't know if I can trust you."

"I wouldn't. I'm a medium, remember? Scary."

"But we do have a common interest. Help me get rid of that suit-hopping asshole, and I'll help you get footage of a haunting."

Allison smiles, then pulls a lock of her hair around her ears. "Good for Jerry." She sounds sad.

"Yeah, good for Jerry."

"How about you answer a question, instead?"

"You want me to do that now or later?"

"It's, um, better if you answer now."

"Okay? But we don't have a lot of—"

"Do you remember why you started that fire? There had to be a reason why all those people died. Did your owner deserve it?"

My Shadow hisses. *Owner? You weren't a slave. Indentured, maybe. Them rich fuckers take and steal and hurt and rob some more. Your parents had no choice. Not after what Carlson did to you and your sister.*

I freeze. I don't have time to stroll through my memories, and Frank's gonna be pissed when he finds out he didn't find or destroy my Fetter.

"Becky, I know about your sister. It's okay." Her voice sounds quiet. There's compassion in it. Sadness. Regret. Emotions I haven't felt in a long time. Can't remember the last person to use my real name.

"It's not," I admit. I say the words out loud, praying like hell my past doesn't swallow me whole. I'm more scared of what I did than slipping into Oblivion. Fuck. I do not need this right now. "Got what you needed?"

Allison nods. "I think so? What do you want me to do? Jerry had all the stuff for the exorcism, but I probably have a Bible or two around here."

"There any way to protect yourself? The others?"

"From what?"

"Possession."

Allison's lips make the shape of an 'O'. "I think I got something."

"Okay," I tell her. "Then stay here. I'll bring all of them straight to you."

HAUNTING SHADOWS

Flit, flutter, zoom. Got few options, so it's back to Tina. Poor little Tina who's so frightened she can't talk and she's questioning all she knows. I slip neatly into her phone and manipulate the digits to send her a text. Then, I play with it, make it ring, force her to answer.

FRANK IS TAKING OVER THE SHOW. JERRY IS FIRED. NOBODY'S GETTING PAID. LOVE, ALLISON.

Lie, lie, lie. You're so good at that? Oh, this'll be great.

All lies. But Jerry's a fool who only knows one thing: greed. Mess with his ego, and the monster will come out. It always does.

You should know.

I block my Shadow from my mind. After I send the text, I rise higher into the ceiling to avoid Frank's piercing gaze, and slip into the alarm. I "connect" the wires, and make it ring, ring, ring-aling BRRRRRIIIIIIIINNNNNNG.

"Didn't you cut those wires, Frank?"

"Yeah, I did. I—"

Tina, poor little Tina, bursts into the room. "What the fuck, Frank?" I knew she wasn't gonna buy the whole Frank-is-posessed notion. She'll be questioning her own mind for months. Easier to make it seem like a trick, oh yeah.

"Tina? You okay?"

"Yeah, Jerry. Allison just told me what's really going on. You might want to drop all the act, Frank."

"Act?" Frank (inhabited by whatever thing is corrupting him) squints, then makes a face. He tilts his head, and makes it obvious he's looking for something. "Come out, come out wherever you are!"

Got 'em on the run! What a plan. Good girl, baaaaaaaad girl!

I give Frank exactly what he wants. I materialize in front of the ghost hunters, and flit, flutter, flit, guiding the trio back to Allison. The ghost hunters scramble behind me. Jerry is so freaked out he drops his backpack filled with his exorcism gear. Groaning, I dematerialize, slip inside the straps, then float the fucker in front of them. Carrot on a string. Rabbit, rabbit.

"My gear!" Jerry yells.

As soon as we enter the Organ Room, Allison takes her cue. "Here! Here!" I float the backpack over to her waiting arms. She unzips it, dumps out the contents, then tilts her head. She grabs the book, *that* fucking book, the one every ghost wants to burn, and starts chanting. While she does that, I manipulate my Corpus into the other objects — holy water, white paint, salt — and prepare the ritual.

"Exorcizo te, omnis spiritus immunde, in nomine Dei Patris omnipotentis..."

She stops for a brief moment, then yells: "Everybody hold hands! Frank, I need you to bless the circle. You were a pastor. Pray with me and stand inside! Everybody else, jump back!"

"No," Frank says. "Not a chance."

Now, the rest of the crew understood that wasn't Frank.

Allison continues to chant; she motions to the others to stand back. It's now or never. I ooze my Corpus into Frank's pants and drag his ass into the circle. Frank screams, and I can feel my Corpus starting to burn. No time to waste. Don't care who that oily soul is. I flutter-flit up, up, up to the ceiling, up past the roof and let them finish up. Send that bastard to hell! I hear something — a siren — and see lights blinking in the distance.

Good. Guess I'm not going to Oblivion. Not yet, anyway.

Not yet. Scritch, scratch.



ERYKAH FASSETT

Side A

When our friends introduced us, you could barely hear my name over the din of the opening band playing in that tiny dive bar in some back alley of the Castro. I, on the other hand, could barely hide my interest.

“Cassette? Like a cassette tape?”

“No, Cassidee! Like David Cassidy.”

“...who?”

I don’t think I ever laughed so hard at anything else. It’s what initially endeared you to me — your guilelessness and your lack of knowledge of 1970s teen-aged heartthrobs our own mothers lusted over. Well, that and how you desperately tried to apologize even after I told you it was alright, and no, I didn’t take offense.

“I didn’t catch your name,” I lied. A friend told me before he pointed you out, but I wanted to hear it come from you.

“Noa,” you replied, glancing up through those uneven, self-cut bangs. Those moments seared into my memory. Your eyes, shy and bright, told me everything I needed to know.

We didn’t know it that night, but that was the beginning of the story of us.

Us.

Just thinking of it sends chills up my spine — or would if I still had one. I still feel them, though, so maybe I still do? It’s difficult to explain, but it’s a lot like how your hair sometimes stood up on end when you walked past a graveyard. Just those weird, almost déjà vu moments that make you think that may there is a glitch in The Matrix. You have a form, but it’s not...corporal? I think that’s the word. I mean, I do sometimes still have a form, when I focus myself enough I can kind of manifest what they call a Corpus.

Ha. Corpus. I never noticed that. Corpse. Corpus. Corporeal. All meaning a physical form, which is something I'm lacking.

Anyway...

Fast forward to a week later. I begged our mutual friends to invite you to one of our regular outings. I didn't want to seem too eager. It was nothing special — just a bunch of aspiring artists of varying stripes at a nearby park with a couple cases of beer, some snacks, and my guitar.

You know how rom-com's make it seem so easy? Guy likes girl, guy tries to woo girl, girl is reticent but eventually won over by the big romantic gesture, and they ride off into the sunset all happily-ever-after? Well, it's less "guy likes girl" and more "girl likes other girl a whole lot", but you get the picture.

Looking back, my attempts to woo you, guitar in hand and raspy vocals on tap, was clumsy at best and probably ran up a lot of red flags for you. It took a lot for you to even come out — figuratively and literally — and you were probably anxious about the whole thing. We barely knew each other outside of occasional, passing glances in a noisy bar.

At some point, while I stumbled through playing Wonderwall for probably the third or fourth time that night (much to everyone's chagrin and annoyance), you sidled up next to me and quietly crooned along.

"Just maybe," you half-spoke, half-sang as you tapped your fingers on the body of my acoustic guitar in rhythm, occasionally glancing up to me through those same, uneven bangs.. "You're going to be the one that saves me."

How could I know, in that moment of time, that you were speaking a prophecy of sorts? Truth is, I couldn't. I was absolutely beside myself when, before parting to take the last train home, you leaned up and placed a timid kiss against my cheek, slipping me a small piece of paper with your phone number on it. You know how God "breathed life" into Adam? Your kiss did exactly the opposite — it sucked all the air out of me and leaving me utterly bewildered.

I could've died that night, hand on my grandmother's Bible, and I would've gone merrily if old man Grimm came calling. Your lips left an indelible, searing mark on my face and soul. That moment changed everything I knew of myself. The scars of previous relationships faded, the baggage of my own hang ups were less heavy, and all of those what-if regrets were no more than faint echoes.

To be honest, my excitement at the prospect of seeing you again was heavily weighed down by anxieties and fears of my own. My previous relationships never really went anywhere, and I confess, it was largely on account of my own stupid mistakes. Everyone loves the feeling of falling in love, but there's more to a relationship than just a feeling.

You made me believe in something far greater — my past relationships could not define me and we would somehow make it in the grand scheme of things. That night in the park gave way to regular phone calls late at night — a time when most of the world is asleep and only artists and lovers remain, my phone propped up against my ear, held in place by a worn, tear-stained pillow. The sound of your voice, whispering against my neck through the phone, was the single-most calming thing. Anything that had been bothering me just vanished — all because of you.

It was easy to talk about myself and in hindsight, I probably seemed self-centered, but you never once complained. The more I talked, the parts of myself I rarely spoke of came tumbling out. Despite your reticence to be equally vulnerable, you never once judged. You challenged my perceptions, yes, but never once judged. Sharing these hidden parts of myself with you became as easy as breathing, and on those nights we couldn't talk felt like I was going to suffocate.

Then one night, the flood happened. Not an actual flood, but a deluge of emotions, fears, and anxieties came that came tumbling out of you with such a force it was almost terrifying. I will own my shocked silence at your revelations — not because the things you revealed were shocking by any stretch of the imagination, but on account of never having put two and two together when it came to you. You were scared these things would ruin our still-nascent relationship, and by not being upfront with them in the beginning, you somehow had damaged trust between the two of us.

Despite pleading assurances given, nothing I said could make you believe any differently. So certain it wouldn't work out, you tearfully hung up on me. Crushed isn't even the right word to describe how it felt — to be so entirely certain you had found the “one true thing” in life only for it to blow up in your face and for the first time it wasn't your fault. Others in my situation might have turned to the bottle, but in the aftermath I found myself just going through the motions of life. Everything seemed muted — joy wasn't really joy. Even music, the other love of my life, ceased to be a grounding influence for me. You were more than just some girl I dated — you were the oxygen I breathed, and the water that I needed to live.

In short, I was fucking miserable without you. My lack of liveliness made our friends so concerned that I would waste away due to the loss of you. People talk about being lovesick like it is a quaint disruption, a trope used in melodrama, but let me tell you - it's not a damn joke. I couldn't sleep, barely ate, I ignored invitations to go out with friends, and even bailed on paying gigs. If there is such a thing as terminal lovesickness, I had it and the prognosis was bleak.

Weeks passed like this and stretched into months. Eventually, some color managed to come back into my life. I picked up my guitar again, taught some lessons to a few kids who were keen on starting their own garage band, and had grand ol' dreams of getting signed to a label once they made the move to Los Angeles. Godspeed, I wished them well. They would at least have better chances of getting a deal in LA than finding affordable housing in the Bay Area. That singularly depressing thought was enough for me to go back down to a dive bar in the Castro.

That bar. Our bar. Where we began, but not where we ended. Fate is kind of a bastard like that; taking you to places where the ghosts of your life seem to pop back in and shake their chains at you, bemoaning their wretched fate. I felt, and probably looked, absolutely wretched.

A brief break to touch on the things I've learned while dead: ghosts are nothing like what we see in films like “Crimson Peak” or “A Christmas Carol”. Instead, we are just as boring and insufferable in death as we were in life. Such a disappointment, I know. It's surprising how banal being dead is opposed to what you imagine it would be like. Being a ghost isn't all it's cracked up to be. Sure, you can kinda haunt folks, but the pay is lousy and you're constantly hounded by that voice in the back of your head — when you're not dodging Spectres, that is.

Sitting down, the barkeep set me up with my usual and I was oblivious to the entire world. Someone took the stool next to me, and I was so ensconced in my own head I didn't notice you until a voice broke through the static that was my internal monologue.

“Hey there, Cassette Tape.”

Well, fuck me. I didn't know whether to laugh or to cry. When you get to the point of a depressive episode where any manner of actual kindness or warmth breaks you almost as badly as the actual event which caused the depression? That proves how desperately, mindlessly, needed that person is in your life.

What followed was honestly a blur. Between me breaking into half-choked sobs and you apologizing through tears, we managed to walk from the dive bar back to my apartment. We

probably should've hopped a BART, but honestly? We needed time to let it all out. Sitting on the playground swings at Mission Dolores, swaying back and forth, side to side, as the sun crested over the hills. You apologized for the way things went, that you didn't know how to cope with someone like me being so into someone like you. You listed so many fears, anxieties, and worries about an inevitable rejection when you told me the truth - your truth - that played a major part in an emotional, snap judgment. Slipping from the swing and falling to the sand on my knees, I took both of your hands into mine.

Okay, so maybe this part was just a smidge rom-com inspired, but in that moment? It felt so right, so natural that there was no point in fighting it.

Eyes peeking through bangs, you looked at me with restrained trepidation, and asked: "Are you sure it doesn't bother you?"

I shrugged, squeezing our hands together. It was such a small gesture, truly, but it was the most we had ever physically been in contact other than that stolen kiss in the park. I understood the whys, now, and this? This was more than enough for me. Those past months of being so heartsick I could barely function? None of that mattered.

"Why would it? It doesn't change how I feel about you. Don't think anything could. So you have some excess baggage — we all do. We can work through it," I paused. "Together, if you want. I know you have some things that I won't be able to relate to, but it doesn't mean I won't try."

Slipping from your swing, we both sat in the sand, the shadows of the playground shifting as the cosmos moved above us. Hours passed without a word, your thumb running over the top of my hands in a soothing, rhythmic gesture. Those months of being apart, of feeling like a shadow of my former self in the wake of losing you, dissipated completely. There, in that silent moment, all felt right with the world, and everything — including us — was in its place.

Things moved pretty fast after that, making up for the time we lost when we allowed fears to overcome our feelings. We made a home together in my closet of an apartment, adopted perhaps the ugliest cat at the shelter ("But he's so cute! Look at that face!"), and on the anniversary of the first time we met, surrounded by friends and our chosen family, we dedicated ourselves to one another.

God, everything was going so right. We even talked about starting a family together and the logistics of which soon became an almost comedy of errors. My new music project began taking off now that I had my muse — you — back. Life was good.

Then came the potholes. You always know they're coming, but you never expect them to be so brutal either until your suspension bottoms out — just like your emotional stability.

We lost a potential pregnancy, and it felt like such an indictment against us that we both didn't quite know how to grieve, but grieve we did. Things fell out with my job and my band, which meant we were scrambling so we could make rent. There were moments where you wanted to throw in the towel again, but I wouldn't let you. We survived; battle-scarred and stronger for it.

Eventually, life got tired of kicking us around long enough that my meager attempts to get scouted with my new band finally paid off. Sure, it was an indie imprint of a label, but it was something. We celebrated, and our friends wanted to go out and celebrate. You opted to stay home, and in hindsight, it was the right decision to make. The party was kind of a bust anyway, in more ways than one.

Sitting here now, on the other side and looking back at all the things I wish I had done or said better. Hell, even wondering how it is I am still even partially, for the lack of a better word, alive. It's not like Beetlejuice where they hand you a "Handbook for the Recently Deceased" and shuffle you through a bureaucracy (although there is some of that), it's a kind

of feel-your-way as you go affair. Most spooks have an idea of why they didn't pass over entirely, while others are like me: wandering aimlessly and trying to make sense of it all.

The details are a bit fuzzy on how it all happened. The last thing I remember before waking up here was driving up the coast, just passing Stinson Beach and heading toward Point Reyes. There was such a stillness in the air, it felt like time had stopped. I can still hear raucous laughter before it turned into nothingness and I felt myself adrift.

Headlights. Horns blaring. Screaming. A dizzying blitz on the senses. And then...

Well, there's no point in even trying to wrap my brain around how to explain any of this. Christ, I'm sitting here looking out over this sea of Oblivion talking aloud to myself like a lunatic and hoping that maybe when you were packing up my belongings you found some of the old mixtapes I had made.

Part of me hopes you find them, because maybe it would give you some closure and help you move on; you never struck me as the particularly mournful type who would waste away. Another part doesn't want you to find them, because I don't want to cause you any more pain than circumstances have already caused.

For your sake, for the life you claimed for yourself, and in the memory of the life we made — take your time.

I'll do my best to hold on until we're reunited again.

Side B

Death exacts a heavy toll. When you have all the time in the world to relive scenes from your life, you begin to realize what a real piece of shit you were. Even worse is when your death is imitating your old life in that you find yourself sitting in a haunt in the presence of other, equally shitty people and reminiscing about what was.

Do you remember meeting in some scummy dive bar filled by equally scummy people? It was necessary I presented myself as being above those types. Our mutual friends introduced us, but you either weren't paying attention or were just absent minded, and I hated that.

"Cassette? Like a cassette tape?"

It was hard to not be somewhat insulted, but I shrugged it off. You were cute, I was easy. Sometimes you just have to roll with those punches.

"No, Cassidee. You know, like David Cassidy?"

Sigh. You didn't even get the reference, but I laughed it aside put on a snaggle-toothed grin. It would've been easy to let it go because goddamn Millennials don't know anything about pop-culture outside the nineties at best. Christ, the things you'll let slide when you are so desperate for attention, affection, and any minute possibility of intimacy.

You apologized, I downplayed the irritation. I knew I had it in the bag. It's such a scumbag thing to say, you know? Like something some douchebag, frat boy would say, and this is coming from a self-professed crust-punk butch who barely cleared five and a half feet while wearing Docs, but it's the truth. If all this work I had put in turned out to be for nothing, I would've been pretty damn pissed; I was ready to punch a wall or a face as it was.

You drove me to fucking madness, and I didn't want to see you again — I needed to see you again. I felt like I was suffocating until a week later when we found ourselves in each other's presence again. The way I begged my friends to put us in the same place came off as stalker-like, but I didn't care. All I cared about was making you mine.

I poured my heart out to you with guitar in hand, but you remained irritatingly coy. Fuck romantic comedies and the positive, rainbow-laden bullshit they sell. Instead of wooing you and doing other amateur-hour shit, I should've listened and committed everything you said to memory, so I could break down how your mind worked and use it to my advantage.

Let me be completely honest for a second here: real life is less “Fifty First Dates” and more “Single White Female”. You were the Allie to my Hedy, and there wasn’t nothing about you I didn’t want to know, and nothing I wouldn’t do to learn all I could.

Anyway, my shitty rendition of “Wonderwall” seemed to do the trick, and you started crooning the lyrics drunkenly along with everyone else who had circled about to watch my horrible game unfold in real time. Your fingers tapped against the body of my acoustic, dull thuds throwing off the tune and making it difficult for me to keep the rhythm while inebriated. Fuck, I wanted to slap them away, to tell you to stop ruining my moment. But no, I had to let it go. If I didn’t, all the work I’d put into you would have been wasted.

After about the third or fourth play-through of “Wonderwall”, you took the initiative and rested your head against my shoulder and looked up at me through those uneven bangs you obviously cut yourself. Makeup smudged to hell, you croaked out I was going to be the one to save you.

I guess saving you from cutting your hair again and buying you some waterproof mascara would have been a been a start; it was distracting as hell. Catching the last train home, you kissed my cheek and slipped your number to me, and murmured about how much fun you had and how we should do it again sometime.

Finally.

Did it matter I was following in the footsteps of all of my previous and failed relationships? Abso-fucking-lutely not. I was filled with endorphins, adrenaline coursing through my veins as fast as my heart could pump. For some folks, cocaine was their drug of choice. It was that initial flush of reciprocated feelings.

Some folks call it the “honeymoon phase”, I call it for what it really is: pure, Grade-A fucking dopamine. And baby, I am an addict. Pleasure, in all of its various forms, is my drug. As soon as the high in my relationships wore off, I found any reason I could to move on and away in search of my next hit.

So why you? Nothing excites like the thrill of the chase, and when the target is a rare sort of prey it entices me that much more. And you were a rare sort of prey. Honestly, I had never felt anything like this before and that alone drove me mad. I had to have you.

Our night in the park led to numerous late night phone calls. The conversations didn’t matter, but keeping your attention did. You listened, completely believing every word I said. Why wouldn’t you? Hardly anyone ever digs into a person’s past, looking to corroborate the stories, and you bet your ass I was going to use it to my advantage. Even now, most spooks will tell you to keep your story to yourself, but here I am in a Haunt just letting it all out.

Being dead gives you some real fucking hindsight, sometimes. They tell you to not give into that digging voice in the back of your head, but I tell you: it’s fucking hard.

As I cried crocodile tears, lamenting my ill-luck in love, you soothed my pains with comforting, genuine words. You had no idea it was all a lure meant to lull you into a sense of security with me, but in a small way I appreciated that aspect of you. After months of this shit, listening to me being a selfish prick, you finally snapped.

Ah, anger. The other face of love’s coin. It has a heady high all of its own and this biblical flood near put me over the edge. All of your emotions, all of your anxieties, and all of your fears came pouring out of your mouth like a torrent of waves crashing against the rocks of the bay. It was my turn to be silent and understanding, cooing it was all right and nothing would change how I felt about you.

It didn’t matter what I said. Maybe your subconscious figured me out, about how it was all a show, and you broke it off with me. And just like that, all the hard work I put into winning you over was smashed and I was livid. All I wanted was one more chance, but you wouldn’t hear of it — insisting this was the best thing for the both of us.

What did I have to do to make you understand you were making a mistake?

What did I have to do to make you want me?

Then you disconnected the call, and all I saw was red.

How dare you, how fucking dare you hang up on me?

In a fit of rage, I trashed my entire shoebox of an apartment — the endorphins from this destructive act filling the void where our relationship had been. Lamps, dishes, art, even the guitar I played “Wonderwall” incessantly on I thought our friends were going to break it over my head. My blood was running so hot that breaking everything I owned was my sole release.

It would have been easy, once I cooled down, to just move on and find another partner upon which to siphon off the “new relationship energy” I desperately craved. Easy, yes, but worth it?

No. There was just something about you, about how unobtainable you made yourself only drove me sheer self-destructive bedlam. Every sleeping and waking was consumed with the thought of you, how to get you back, how to keep you, and in some dark corner of my mind, hoping you would realize what a horrible mistake you made.

Weeks passed in this state of anger and torment, wracking my brain on how to confront you, to put us in each other’s path once again so you couldn’t avoid my phone calls, texts, and snaps. I started leaning hard on our mutual friends. I showed them how miserable I had become. I elicited their concern, their understanding, and their pity. I’m fairly certain they were scared I would jump off the Bay Bridge. I wasn’t even good enough for Golden Gate! Hell, at this point, any bridge was not outside the realm of probability.

If I had done that, then, would I be in this place now? Fuck, jumping into the arms of oblivion feels like a great idea right now.

No. I need to stop thinking like that. Focus!

They bought the entire act. Hook, line, and sinker. Sure, it meant not doing any performative personal hygiene to look as disheveled as I did. Luckily, the bay is known for it’s homeless, so I blended in. Thanks AirBnB! At some point, the cops got called on me for loitering outside a bar. Our bar.

Once the barkeep waved the cops on, recognizing me as one of their regulars, I plopped onto a stool as my usual drink order was placed in front of me. In the usual practice of barkeeps, there was an attempt at small talk, more of me attempting while the barkeep awkwardly stayed silent. Otherwise, I mostly just nursed the gin and tonic and kept to myself. Eventually they got the idea I wasn’t in any mood to talk and just kept the G&T’s coming. At some point, drunk me figured it was a good time to pull out my cell phone and start texting you.

There was the usual fare of “I miss you”, “I can’t live without you”, and “Baby, come back”, but it was probably the ones where I talked about drinking myself to death or drinking enough and then wandering out into traffic that made you show up an hour or so later.

“Hey there, Cassette Tape.”

I froze; the memory felt too real. Snapping from the wallowing reverie, my attention was brought to the spook behind the bar polishing glasses as he gestured to his right.

Then I felt the tapping on my shoulder.

“Hey there, Cassette Tape,” the voice repeated.

Why was that voice so familiar? And no one had called me Cassette Tape in eons, it felt like. Shrugging off the hand, I muttered something about being left alone. Yet, the hand persisted and at this point, the barkeep just threw their arms up and disappeared into the back.

HAUNTING SHADOWS

Finally I turned around and felt the shadows receding from my thoughts and vision, and it was like an electric shock: a crooked smile, unevenly cut bangs, smudged eyeliner, and that unspoken shyness that never abated.

Well if it isn't that bitch who moved on—

Silencing that damnable voice, I just stared; unable to form words or comprehend the how, never mind the why. My mouth formed the shape of her name, but the sound never left.

The crooked smile only grew only grew wider, knowingly, and lanky arms opened wide to me.

There was a moment's hesitation. Was this a trick? Had the barkeep been so tired of my maudlin angst that they tipped off the Hierarchy to me? No, that couldn't be it. At the very least, I earned my keep by ensuring that most nights this dive drew in a reasonable crowd thanks to my music, and he'd definitely lose business if he was outed as a narc, so that was right out. Even the circle of friends I made had all but given up on me. I was a lost cause.

But this...? Could it be?

Don't you do it.

She took a tentative step toward me, arms bouncing expectantly as if to say, "Well?" There was something about her so pure, so angelic, so inviting...

Don't you fucking do it!

I went to her, and felt those arms envelop me with a warmth long forgotten and even longer missed. No clue as to how much time passed, us just standing there, but what did time matter in this timeless place?

As I looked up to take in her face, I knew it was really her.

"Noa..."

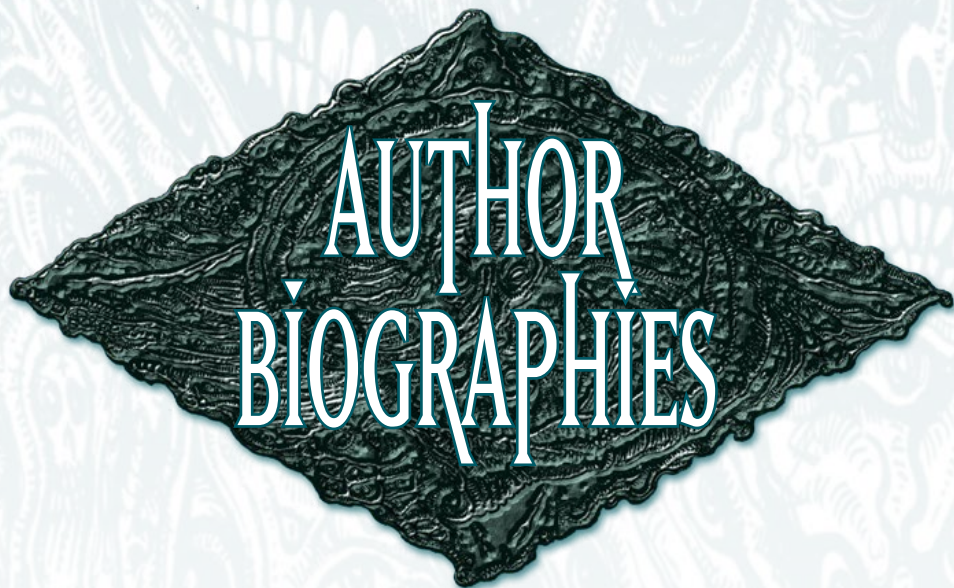
A finger gently pressed to my lips, silencing me.

"I've kept you waiting for so long," she spoke softly. "For that, I am sorry."

Always so understanding, always so eager to listen and console. It was one of the things I loved...no, do love about you. Was this real? A dream? It all seemed to blur so much and sometimes it felt like the light surrounding you was going to blind me. I wanted to apologize for leaving you, for languishing in this place and being useless, for thinking such awful things as I watched you live your life out as I had wished for you.

"But you're here, now, with me," I finally spoke. "We can start over. I know it's not the same but..."

Once more, she smiled a strangely knowing smile and rested her forehead to mine. My face felt wet. Not sure if it was because I was crying or we both were, but we kept there, just swaying back and forth. You were humming a song — one of the ones I had left behind for you — as we held each other, drifting away awash in memories, before we closed our eyes one last time.



If you enjoyed these stories, we encourage you to support the authors by visiting their websites for more information. Author names are listed in alphabetical order.

Charles Andrew Bates

Charles Andrew Bates is an easily distracted polymath. He's the author of four novels, including the Year of the Scarab trilogy, and has written extensively for tabletop and electronic games. Also a professional illustrator, he's created countless comic strips, book illustrations, roleplaying and card game art, storyboards, and concept designs. He has the dubious distinction of having created the Spectre Carpenter, with whom he shares no personality traits whatsoever. He makes sporadic appearances on Instagram and Twitter, and can be reached via his website, devilbear.net.

Richard Lee Byers

Richard Lee Byers is the author of forty horror and fantasy books including *Citadel of Gold*, *The Things That Crawl*, *The Hep Cats of Ulthar*, *The Shadow Guide*, *This Sword for Hire*, *Black Dogs*, *Black Crowns*, *Ire of the Void*, *Blind God's Bluff*, and the volumes in the Impostor series. He's also written scores of short stories, scripted a graphic novel, and contributed content on tabletop and electronic games. A resident of the Tampa Bay area, he's a fencing and poker enthusiast and a frequent program participant at Florida conventions, Dragon Con, and Gen Con. He invites everyone to follow him on Facebook and Twitter.

Jackie Cassada

Jackie Cassada started writing for the games she loved so much, beginning with *Rage Across Appalachia* for **Werewolf: The Apocalypse** and going on to write for most of the White Wolf Storyteller System® game lines, in the mid-1990s. Many of her books were co-authored with Nicky Rea, with whom she also played in several bands and composed the score to a musical version of *Pinocchio*. When the **Changeling: The Dreaming** game line moved to Arthaus Publishing, she and Nicky served as developers for the line until its end. They also developed **Ravenloft** for Arthaus.

HAUNTING SHADOWS

In 1995-1996, Jackie wrote the Immortal Eyes trilogy: *The Toybox*, *Shadows on the Hill*, and *Court of All Kings*. Her most recent novel, *The Cup of Dreams*, is the fourth book in the Immortal Eyes trilogy.

Richard Dansky

Richard Dansky was the developer for **Wraith: The Oblivion 2nd Edition** and **Wraith: The Oblivion 20th Anniversary Edition**. He also developed numerous books for the line, including **Charnel Houses of Europe: The Shoah**, **Shadowplayers' Guide**, and **Ends of Empire**. All told he contributed to over a hundred titles in his time with White Wolf or as a freelancer.

He is also a noted video game writer, with credits on titles including **Tom Clancy's The Division** and **The Division 2**, **Driver: San Francisco**, and **Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell: Blacklist**. An advisor for the GDC Game Narrative Summit, he also curates the narrative track at East Coast Game Conference. He has published seven novels, including the ghost stories *Firefly Rain* and *Vaporware*, one short fiction collection, and numerous short stories and magazine articles. Richard lives in North Carolina with his cat and an ever-changing number of bottles of single malt scotch.

Erykah Fassett

Erykah Fassett never outgrew playing pretend nor listening to the multitude of characters voices in her head that drive her creative writing. Now a nominally-functional adult with a full-time “normal” job while moonlighting as a writer, she likes to howl at the moon, capture pocket-sized seizure-monsters, and corral her trio of pugs — a Cerberpug, if you will — during mysterious rituals totally not meant to summon extra-planar entities to the prime material world. You can find some of her arcane work in the **Roll of Good Dogs and Excellent Cats** for *Pugmire*, as well as the **Pip System Primers** and **Part-Time Gods Second Edition** from Third Eye Games. She is currently writing for **Scion Second Edition** from Onyx Path Publishing.

Catherine Lundoff

Catherine Lundoff is a Minneapolis-based award-winning writer, editor and publisher. Her recent stories and articles are available or forthcoming at the LMHP Podcast, Fireside Fiction, American Monsters Part 2, Queer Voices, The Cainite Conspiracies: a Vampire the Masquerade Dark Ages 20th Anniversary Edition Anthology, and the SFWA Blog. Her books include *Silver Moon*, *Out of This World: Queer Speculative Fiction Stories*, *Unfinished Business: Tales of the Dark Fantastic* and, as editor, *Scourge of the Seas of Time (and Space)*. She is also the publisher at Queen of Swords Press found at www.queenofswordspress.com.

Joseph Nassise

Joseph Nassise is the New York Times-and-USA Today bestselling author of more than forty-five novels, including the Templar Chronicles series, the Jeremiah Hunt trilogy, and the Great Undead War series. He also writes a modern retelling of the King Arthur myths under the pen name Rowan Casey. He is a former president of the Horror Writers Association, the world's largest organization of professional horror writers, and a multiple Bram Stoker Award and International Horror Guild Award nominee. You can find him on the web at www.josephnassise.com.

Lucien Soulban

Lucien Soulban was writing for RPGs since the early 90s, when he worked on such brands as **Vampire the Masquerade** and **Wraith the Oblivion**. He even helped create **Orpheus**, wrote for Green Ronin's **Mutants & Masterminds** line, and went on to pen novels for **Dragonlance** and **Warhammer 40K**. Then the bastard sold out and became the Lead

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Writer for videogames like **Warhammer 40K: Dawn of War**, **Far Cry 3 & 4**, **Watch Dogs 2**, and **Rainbow Six: Siege**. Smug bastard even got married and lives with his husband, Etienne. Nothing good ever came out of a happy writer.

Monica Valentinelli

Monica Valentinelli has worked on dozens of hobby games including tabletop RPGs and supplements, card games, interactive fiction, miniature games, and more. Known for her attention to detail and considerate worldbuilding, Monica has lent her talents to beloved gamelines such as **Dungeons & Dragons Fifth Edition**, **Vampire: The Masquerade 20th Anniversary Edition**, **Vampire: The Masquerade 20th Anniversary Edition Dark Ages**, **Vampire: The Requiem 1st Edition**, **Hunter: The Vigil 1st and 2nd Edition**, **Shadowrun Fifth Edition**, **Eclipse Phase 1st Edition**, **Prince Valiant**, **TORG: Eternity**, **Scarred Lands**, **Unknown Armies 3rd Edition**, and many, many more. You can find her online at www.booksofm.com.

HAUNTING SHADOWS

REMEMBER THOSE NICE STORIES THEY
TOLD YOU ABOUT WHAT'D HAPPEN AFTER YOU DIED?

They were wrong.

There is no Heaven and there is no Hell. There's only the Underworld, with the ravening maw of Oblivion at the bottom and the impossible dream of Transcendence at the top. And, somewhere in between, are scores of Restless Dead.

ARE YOU READY TO JOIN THEM?

This collection of stories is inspired by **Wraith: the Oblivion 20th Anniversary Edition**. You'll explore the Underworld, roam the streets of Stygia, the eternal city, visit a haunted museum, and walk new and exciting locales. This anthology includes tales by classic and new Wraith authors such as Richard Lee Byers, Jackie Cassada, Rich Dansky, Monica Valentinelli, Catherine Lundoff, Joe Nassisse, and more!

