Corpses

Fantasy Faction Monthly Writing Contest Anthology, September 2016

Various Authors

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# Corpses

### Fantasy Faction Monthly Writing Contest Anthology, September 2016

Christian Friedrich von Kahlbutz, 17th century knight from Germany  
  
. Still trickling blood or ancient and dusty. Result of a horrible crime or a fatal accident. Left where they should be or somehow missing. stone-dead or fake and still alive. Anonymous or well-known. Pumpkin-spiced or... okay, I think you got it. There's a lot one can say or write about a corpse and with All Hallow's Eve nearing you may already be in the mood or if not, the story you are going to write will probably help.

*All content originally appeared on the Fantasy Faction Forums in the Monthly Writing Contest. You can see more information (and even participate in the forums!) on this particular contest by visiting the site.*  
<http://fantasy-faction.com/forum/(oct-2016)-corpses/(oct-2016)-corpses-submission-thread/>

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# The Raid

She held Marais hand as she pulled her sister up the steep slope, the wetness dripped from the trees. “You have to help me, Marai. I can’t do this all by myself” Samina wheezed as she continued to pull her sister up the slope.

“I’m sorry Sam, I’m sorry”. The sisters finally reached the top of the ridge. Samina sat down in the wet moss, breathing hard.

“Sam, do you think anyone else made it out of the village?”

“I really don’t know Mar, I just hope someone did.” The two girls just sat there resting in the grey pre-dawn light. The forest around them had just started to come alive with birdsong and some of the smaller animals could be seen starting their day. As far as they could see, there were Pines and Firs. Suddenly they heard a sound, a barking sound, a guttural shout that was answered within moments from other directions.

“They found us!” Marai gasped and rose, staring wildly about her. Samina rose as well but she stared fixedly in the direction where the first bark came from.

“No, not yet but they are looking though. But if they knew where we were, there’d be some coming for us, but I can’t hear anything yet.” She pointed in the direction they just came from.

“What do we do? Where do we go?” Marais tone was pleading with her sister.

Samina stood there, staring, fiddling with the rent in her nightshift that been slit opened by the goblin that near caught them just as they were leaving the cottage. She felt the pain from the long scratch from her knee to her hip.

What do we do now? She felt the frustration building.

Where do we go now? Where do two girls go to seek shelter in the Darker Woods? Turn back south wasn’t an option and Amberton was too far west. East of them there had been other calls, hunting calls, during their flight.

The last option was further north, but Sam knew that goblins came from the north, so they were likely returning there to avoid the Duke’s men in the morning. Decision crystallised.

“We’re going this way” Sam took Marais hand again and started to trot northeast along the curving low ridge.

By the time the sun was up, they hadn’t heard a hunting call for at least a candle and they slowed to a walking pace. Their nightshifts had been soaked during their flight the dense brushwood and along some small streams, but had dried in the morning sun.

“Sam, I’m hungry” Marai whined and her tone got immediately on Sams nerve. “I know, so am I, but there isn’t much I can do about it, is there?” Sam’s glare silenced Marai.

As they walked on the soft moss along the low ridge, Samina did not say much and Marai seemed to have lapsed into a tired silence. Something brought Sam out of her reverie. On the northern facing slope of the ridge, she saw at least three lichen covered ancient building stones.

“Mar, look! What’s that?” Marai stopped

“What’s what?” “Down there.” Samina started down the slope. “Let’s take a look.”

Marai did not move. ”I’ll wait here Sam. You can have a look see.” Sam pursed her lips, she realised that Marai was tired. Sam let go of her feeling of annoyance and turned back down the slope.

She reached the stones in moments and saw how the whole area was covered with square stones, they were about two times larger than normal bricks. Almost in the middle them was a flat round stone, about the size of a cottage table. She walked over to it and as she took a step onto it, it gave way.

She fell and slid across it’s surface into an opening. As she fell down into the pitchblack hole, she thought… this is going to hurt.

But it did not, but it did knock the wind out of her.

Marai sat rubbing her legs, when she heard the strange crashing sound. She instantly stood again and stared about her; she saw or heard nothing out of the ordinary. “Sam!” she called…no response.

Where is she? Marai thought. She started down the slope, and run when she saw the dark opening among the old stones.

“Sam….Sam! Can you hear me?” Marai felt the fear from earlier coming back. As she threw herself down by the gap, she saw in her mind how Sam’s broken body lay down there in the dark. “Sam!” Marai’s shout rung in the small chamber and then she saw her.

Samina’s pale legs and grey nightshift showed quite clearly as she laid there on the floor of the cave. She moved and Marai felt relief.

“Ahh…bloody ruin, damn near killed me” Sam’s voice was quite clear and angry.

Sam sat up looking up at her sister and realised that the fall was not more than six or seven feet. “Calm down, Mar. I feel fine. But I can’t see much, can you see something?”

“What happened?” “Nothing, Mar. I just fell down a hole.” She stretched her legs and ankles carefully, as to prove to her sister that she in fact was uninjured. She did not felt any pain and stood up. Her head was not far from, what she perceived as the ceiling of the cave. She stood still to let her eyes acclimatise to the dark space around her. She saw or felt as the space she was in was low but wide and it extend well beyond her senses.

“Mar, come down here.” “Why can’t come up to me? We have to keep going you know.” Marai sat up and looked around her. “Please come up now. I want to go.”

Sam only half listened to her. She continued to stare and finally she started to be able to make out her surroundings. She could make out, what it seemed to be a pillar just ten feet from her and beyond that a weak beam of light trickled in through the roof.

“I think I see something, get down here.” She still did not listen to her sisters protests. She moved carefully towards the pillar, when Marai whimpered. “They’re coming….Sam I hear them.”

Samina stepped into the light again and gestured, “Get down here, now. “ She whispered forcefully. She reached with her arms towards her sister, and Marai finally, in her incipient panic, listened and started to crawl into the opening. While Samina helped her down she started to hear the sounds of armed men walking and running.

They backed further in, all the way up to the pillar. They held on to each other and listened to the growing sounds of closing raiders.

They are here, she thought. They are where I was, when I saw the ancient stones. The moving sounds lessened but they seemed to have a discussion. Samina tried to hear what they said, but it was all grunts, yips and growls.

It sounds like dogs trying to talk, she thought. She looked around, now that her eyes adjusted, for a hideout or somewhere to run. The cave was large but she couldn’t see anything that might help them.

What are we going to do? Samina felt how despair threatened to engulf her; Marai’s quiet sobbing did not help either. What do we do… what do we do? The thought continued to grate on her mind.

She leaned on the pillar and felt it… a handle of some sort, embedded in the pillar. She desperately started to tug at it, Marai stopped sobbing realising that Samina might have found something. She started to tug as well.

The two women pulled, jerked and pushed. Anything and everything to loosen whatever it was. The goblins heard the noise and acted.

At the same time as Longrunner and Headcleaver landed in the cave, the sisters had prised the handle free, it was a short ancient stabbing spear.

Samina whirled in near-panic to face the goblins only to find them kneeling in front of the pillar, and without any thought to why. She stabbed down into Longrunner’s neck and killed him. Samina stabbed again and again, until she saw Headcleaver’s charcoal black eyes looking at her in apparent fear. In an instant she turned the spear on him. He died as well without defending himself. She turned towards opening again but no more goblins were in sight.

Instead she heard a hunting horn and the baying of hounds….the Duke, the dukes men were close by. The young women sank down, in relief, to the floor drenched in dark green goblin blood, hugging each other.

Two armed men with torches found the cave a candle later. They climbed down and raised the torches to see the whole cave. What they saw was the two hugging, sobbing girls, the bloody and gored goblin corpses and encased in a pillar of ember, the mummified corpse of the last goblin king….

# The Bridge Battle

Though I held him pinned against the low, stone wall that ran along the edge of the great bridge, my attacker’s hands gripped my throat, choking me. My eyes bulged. I could not breathe.

Far below, the river had turned the color of headstones in the failing light. Without sunlight, without energy, I was doomed. I had been a fool and would die like one at the hands of a layman.

He could not draw his knife to finish me, but he wouldn’t need to. He was a wizard-killer, and he knew his trade. And he was the stronger by far.

But the valley wind that swept around us was strong, too, so high up. It buffeted our hair and billowed my cloak around me. I lifted my hands, fingers spread out, into the wind.

Intent on murdering me, he did not react when the wind died down or notice the dimming of the light. He smiled grimly, and I knew his thoughts: without speech, wizards are powerless.

Brilliant purple flashes clouded my vision, but I returned his smile.

I don’t work that way.

His smile slid to shock when I blasted him through the stone railing with only a pressing gesture. In a cloud of shattered masonry, he arced out into empty air and pitched down toward the river valley far below. I sucked air and coughed, clutching my throat. He was still falling, I think, when I realized that I could not flee without warning my friends.

There was no time, and for all I knew, they had betrayed me, too. But better to be betrayed than to betray. By far. If they tried to kill me, so be it.

I ran to the tower door, wrenched the iron door from its hinges with a wave, and darted inside bridge’s great buttress. Without wind, I had no power, but I didn’t care. I sped down the tightly twisting stair, my hand hooking the central pillar as I spiraled around and around. At the bottom I stumbled through the broken doorway. My boots crunched across shattered glass. My shout of warning died in my throat.

The laboratory we had painstakingly built was now a shipwreck of broken furniture in a sea of loose papers and torn books. Their corpses lay hacked and torn amongst the wreckage, swimmers in a sea of blood and gore.

Catraice and Reen lay facing one another, curled like children dressed in bloody rags, limp arms of ragged flesh still raised in vain against hateful blows. Catraice’s head was a beaten, ghastly ruin. Reen stared at her in the sleepy, disinterested way of the dead.

In a corner Nace sat bent viciously forward, like a child’s discarded doll, her legs splayed out beneath her. Her head lolled at an unnatural angle, forehead pressed onto the floor in the space between her knees. Her long, golden hair, the curls that had so often distracted me, all stained red at the roots. She stared at the floor, as if noticing it for the first time.

Lian sprawled face-down across the broken back of a table, his golden robes hacked to bloody ribbons. I made out an ear tilted unnaturally and recoiled as I realized he lay on his back. The face no man or woman ever resisted was now just a tattered crimson mass, a wet heap of red laundry. I fell to my knees, and my stomach emptied across the floor.

They didn’t betray me, I thought. The small relief only broke my heart. I kneeled in the ruins of my life and my friends and wept.

I resolved to finish alone what we had begun. I wiped my tears on my sleeve and rose in anger. But the room had been ransacked. Our great invention was gone. So too were all our records and notes. Our enemies had been thorough.

“All for nothing,” I whispered.

Looking over their silent remains, I recalled their banter that morning. They deserved better, but I could not bury them without burying myself. My fingertips pressed against the stone walls, sensed the vast, crushing weight of the bridge bearing down around us, my dead friends and I. In the palm of my mind I molded that energy, shaped it. I raised a fist and shook it at the corpses of my friends. I opened my fingers and loosed cleansing fire.

They deserved better.

On wings of choking black smoke, I strode back up the staircase. I did not hurry. It reeked of burned flesh and death, but its heat was pure and righteous. I coiled its energy, weighing it in my mind like a warrior hefting an ax. Let them come.

I emerged from the tower, and there, on the causeway before me stood Rachtus, flanked by two men and two women. Five wizards to one.

“You are overmatched!” Rachtus yelled. His face shined with contempt and betrayal, like a hidden joke at my expense finally made clear.

“Am I?” Through the bridge itself, I pitched the energy I had gathered at them. In a rush of thunder, my wave sluiced through the stonework toward them. Shattering stone splashed and crackled across their wards. Their defenses were strong.

“Am I?!” I yelled again, snatching at the wind and sky with my hands.

They knew I had no defenses. They laughed at me, waving my hands like a carnival charlatan. But when the wind died, so did their laughter. All became deathly dark and quiet until I struck them again, stronger this time.

The bridge shuddered. But their wards held.

“Two strikes,” my teacher had said, “show foes that their defenses are sound. To hold your foe, strike hard twice.” He was right. Of the five arrayed against me, only two struck back. The rest huddled behind their wards.

Rachtus and one other heaved fire at me, but I snuffed it from the air like an old woman stifling a candle, tossed it back at Rachtus’s companion, and taught her a lesson about courage. She ignited, became a shrieking firework.

“AM I?!” I bellowed once more.

They grimaced in fear now, even Rachtus.

I seized the heat from the woman’s burning. The flames died down, and she slumped, a silent, blackened thing. I rolled the energy into a ball that bounced from one foe to another, to another.

One by one, they screamed and burned. Too slowly they realized their wards meant nothing to me. They were as naked as I. Only Rachtus had the higher power. The fire faded harmlessly off his wards, but he could not both defend and attack.

Rachtus stood alone. He chose to hold his ground, wait for reinforcements. He knew I could not break his defenses. He had only to wait me out, keep me in place.

The wind tugged at us. Above and behind Rachtus, the great citadel loomed. Soon, they would come, my thousand bitter brothers and sisters. And I would die.

“You were my friend,” I said as I prepared. The wind slowed. The light dimmed.

“We don’t have friends,” he said. The mockery was gone from his voice. “We’re wizards. The strong take. Now I take your life.”

“Come,” I said, opening my arms. “Take it.”

He suspected a trap, I think. It was, but not as he imagined. I wanted him to sit behind his wards. I needed time to gather all the energy around me. I stilled the rushing wind, seized the last light of the day, harnessed the crushing weight of the bridge itself, all that leverage, hanging so high and so far, for so long.

“You cannot pierce my wards!” Rachtus called. “The Planes of Gyrnis have no edges!”

“I know, Rachtus.”

I clapped my hands vertically, unleashed the power I had melded together, but the greater force came from beneath, lifting the causeway just behind Rachtus, pitching up all the stone beams and blocks up in a haphazard jumble, undoing all the joints and mortar, lifting Rachtus high into the air. He screamed.

“I know.”

The ancient bridge crashed back down, but its structures and strengths had been unmade and could no longer bear their own weight. The Bridge of Val collapsed. Rachtus was engulfed in dust and darkness and was gone.

Only a trembling tongue of stone remained, jutting from the colossal buttress, extending a few dozen paces past me out into empty air. I looked down as ruin rained down on the city Val a thousand feet below. Thunderous impacts filled the river-cleft with dust.

I looked up at the citadel on its perch over Val, dark and silent but inside, teaming with my brothers and sisters, now my enemies. Surely the ground had shaken with the fall of their great bridge, filled their hearts with a dread as great as mine. They would pursue me, and they would catch me. Nothing would stop that now. But their fear of me would be the greater.

Nonetheless, I fled.

# Where there's a will

It was good to be home. I drew in a pointless breath, dragging the soft perfume of mother’s flower garden through a nose that had lost its sense of smell long ago. I pulled the coat more tightly around my shoulders. I used to feel the cold more, but now the welcome embrace of fleece lined leather was more a comfort to the soul than to the body.

The thick gravel of the drive crunched and slipped beneath my feet, as treacherous to the balance as the softest sands of Biazi. Ah those happy childhood summers, mother, my siblings and me. I had been her favourite, always and now the prodigal son returned.

I found my way guided more by memory than sight. My distance vision was not what it used to be, turning the finely carved frontage of my parents’ mansion into a white blur. Only slowly did its features resolve into windows and doors and a shape standing sentinel duty beneath the portico.

To his credit Sejev didn’t bat an eyelid at my return, the consummate butler he stood ready to welcome even the most unwelcome of guests.

“It is good to have you home at last, Master Tomas.”

“Are the others here?”

“You are the last to arrive, sir.” If there was an intended rebuke it didn’t show in his tone. He hurried on, “A sad day, sir, may I extend my own condolences.”

“I want to see her first, before I meet them.”

“Your mother is in the green room, sir.” Of course, her own private receiving room. Even father would never have had the temerity to enter it without knocking.

I could hear a bubble of chatter from the drawing room, a tinkling laugh so inappropriate for the occasion. One of my sisters no doubt, or perhaps Ernest’s latest wife – whatever her name was. They would all be there and I wasn’t ready to face them.

A footman emerged from the side passage bearing a tray of fizzing champagne flutes one handed. He stumbled when he saw me, the tray tipping sideways in his shock and then, as he attempted to arrest the toppling slide of the glasses with his other hand, he succeeded only in volleying the entire assembly up into the air. I ducked into the green room, pulling the door closed even as the shower of wine and glass crashed into the floor followed by the dissonant cymbal of the tray hitting the tiles.

There was silence for a moment, the kind that settles after every disaster be it great or small, and I took my chance to greet my mother once more.

They had laid her in an open coffin. Mahogany. She would have liked that. Ernest at least was not skimping on the expense. The undertaker had done a good job, though it helped that mother had always been a beautiful woman. She fell a decade short of the three score and ten that was her due, but she had always looked younger than her years. It was vanity in the end that killed her. The riding hat might have constrained her flowing mane of suspiciously blond hair, but the hat would also have saved her skull when Milady’s stumble threw her mistress from the saddle.

Life is cruel like that, death too. It separated us now just as much as it had ever joined us.

I could say that she looked like she was sleeping, but there was a waxy sheen to her skin that could not be stroked away by my soft grey fingers. Who knew what damage the undertaker’s art might have done.

“What are you doing here, freak?” Hanerila’s shrill shriek shattered my reverie.

Despite the intemperate urgency of my sister’s question I turned slowly, not wanting to try my rickety knee. It had a habit of popping out and popping it back in was – if not especially painful – something of an awkward contortion. They stood in the doorway, doubtless told of my arrival by the glass juggling footman. Hanerila led, the others followed, Ernest hovering at the back.

As she narrowed the distance between us I saw that fifteen years apart had barely treated my eldest sister any better than it had treated me. The beauty of her youth had softened into lumpen middle-age, a pudding of a face in which two black eyes shone with hatred.

“Who said you could come?”

“She was my mother too.”

“You stopped being her son when you dealt with that devil. Mother said you were dead to her.”

I smiled cautiously - never a truer word as they say – before launching into a defence of my employer. “Kirren has been a loyal friend to me, I owe him everything.”

“Still owe him, according to what I’ve heard,” the woman by Ernest’s side spoke. Even my faltering eyes could see well enough to tell she was a stranger to me. The latest Mrs Ernest, I presumed.

“Petsin, how nice to finally meet you.” I plucked the name from my memory, a court announcement in some rag that Kirren had once passed on to me. “I’m sorry I couldn’t make it to the wedding.” None of us mentioned the fact that I hadn’t been invited.

“How much did the bastard charge you for his services?” Petsin brushed aside my pleasantries, evidently not a currency she dealt in. Poor Ernest, doomed always to seek out wives more strident than his sisters. “I hear Kirren’s wizardry does not come cheap.”

“He has been kind enough to let me work off my debt through indentured service. Another ten years should set me free.”

Hanerila snorted, hands on hips. “That’s what brought you crawling out of the dark isn’t it. Mother’s will. You want a share in the estate, to pay for freedom from your dark mage.”

They misjudged me, but then they always had, and that tragedy with the runaway cart had only hardened their prejudice. I tried an air of wounded innocence but I suspect it resembled more of a leer. I had not done much looking in mirrors lately so I was out of practice at facial expressions.

“My needs now are few and simple, sister dear. I want no more than what is my due.” I knew mother had left me more than my fair share. She had never really liked my sisters, nobody did. And she thought Ernest’s staggeringly poor matrimonial choices proved him unfit to be trusted with a legacy of any significance. Half the estate was to be mine. “She told me about the will,” I said. “I know she never changed it.”

Hanerila’s lips spread in an ugly smile, like a duellist who knows that only their pistol is loaded. “I’ve read it too, you get half of everything.” The smile broadened as she pulled the trigger. “Unless, that is, you predeceased her!”

Ah, she had me there, I had to admit.

Ernest’s friends all had an absurd fondness for life insurance which I had never understood – why worry about looking after those left behind once you were dead? Kirren by contrast did a remarkable line in death insurance, the business of helping people look after *themselves* after they were dead. His policies were expensive, too much for me to pay for all upfront. But I had not regretted it. Knocked down by a runaway cart I should have been dead, in fact I was. But the joy of necromancy is that death really isn’t the end. Thanks to Kirren I could walk and talk and function pretty much as well as I used to, though to be honest a dead body wasn’t so good at the mundane business of repairing all the knocks that life so irritatingly threw in one’s path.

“So, my zombified brother,” Hanerila crowed. “You can just shuffle out of here. We only want the one corpse in this house today. And try not to drop any fingers on your way.”

Ernest had the grace to look a little shame faced. “She is right, Tomas,” he said. “Petsin checked with the lawyers.” A helpless shrug, an apologetic grin and then an offer in compromise. “Maybe you could take a keepsake to remember mother by?”

I smiled. “Well there are a couple of things I had in mind.”

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Kirren was bent over the counter when I got back to the shop, getting ready to re-animate a mouse that the cat had caught that morning. He looked up at the jangle of the bell; I stood in the doorway savouring the moment. Motes of dust danced in shafts of sunlight, beads of sweat gleamed on the necromancer’s bald head. “Ah, you’re back,” he said. “Did it go well?”

I shrugged, careful not to test my suspect collarbone. “Well enough.” I waited. It didn’t take him long to notice. Kirren was always an observant fellow.

“Ah,” he said. “I see you have your mother’s eyes.”

# The Soulspeaker

It was pouring rain when Merrick Lockwyd arrived at the nondescript house on the edge of town.

He pounded on the door, brushing a veil of water out of his eyes. The aged greywood was slick and wet with rain. The boards had warped with time; Merrick imagined the house must leak every time it rained. *Peasants.*

He pulled his wet hood back, doing his best to take in his surroundings despite the rain. The chill rainwater filled his hair, leaking onto his face in a continuous stream. Merrick cursed. It was cold in Whitehold even when the snows melted, and rain had a way of freezing a man more effectively than ice ever could.

Dead grass surrounded the house, it's eaves steep and dark in the style of the Southern Reaches. To keep off the snow. Merrick hated when the Queen sent him assignments in the Reaches. Not just because of the cold. Merrick hated killing his own people.

He banged on the door once more. "Hello!" he shouted, hoping to be heard over the rumbling skies.

To his surprise, the door creaked open. An old woman narrowed her eyes at him through the door. Haphazard strands of her coarse unkempt hair, a medley of greys and whites, escaped her poorly-tied bun.

Merrick began, "I'm here to--"

"Shush, you fool! We know why you're here."

"I'm sorry, I--"

"Do you have it?"

Merrick fished the black feather out of his shirtpocket, broken and wet. The Nightravens sang for the dead, it was said. It had taken him months to discover the price of admission. His fellow Southlanders kept their secrets carefully.

The woman's eyes looked sad, as if she still wished to turn him away. She did not move, hesitating in the door.

“Please— I came a long way… and it was no small task to bring… to bring it with me. In these elements.” Merrick motioned behind him.

The woman frowned. “It's in the cart?”

“Yes, ma'am.”

“Bring it around back, to the barn. You will need to leave your sword outside.”

“Does that mean you’ll see me?” It was his earnest eyes that made him good at his job. No one ever suspected a man with earnest eyes.

The woman said nothing. She only closed the door.

Merrick pulled the wet bundle of rugs and cloth from the back of his cart and heaved it over his shoulder. Gods, it was heavy! He had hoped to find a lighter corpse, a child maybe, but this was the freshest dead man he could find on short notice.

The old woman greeted him at the entrance to the barn, an rusty oil lamp in one hand, guiding a six-year-old boy in the other. Merrick frowned. Of course she would have children. Grandchildren.

"Set it there."

The barn was empty save for a small cookfire in the corner, and a long table in the middle. With a loud thump, he dropped the corpse down with a loud thump. The woman raised an eyebrow.

“I don’t know the deceased.” Merrick said apologetically. “I’m here on behalf of another.”

Both statements were true, if misleading. It was said the Soulspeaker could see into living men’s souls and tell a lie. He would have to choose is words carefully if he did not want to be found out.

Soulspeakers had been born in Whitehold for as long as anyone could remember: when the city was a village, when it’s people were a tribe. They had advised Clan Bearwynd, each generation a new chief, each chief a new Soulspeaker. But today Whitehold was a city. Nearly a hundred and a half greywood houses dotted the chilly southland prairie. The only civilization for miles. Clans and Soulspeakers were an oddity, something for folkstories and whispers. All that remained of Clan Bearwynd had died six years ago, and House Syleste had little patience for superstition in the Queen's Court.

The old woman kneeled and touched the boy's face gently. "Are you sure you want to be here?"

The boy nodded.

"Fetch us some tea then."

The boy scurried to the cookfire.

"He's your grandson?" Merrick asked.

The woman didn't answer. She folded her arms. "Why are you here?"

"I--I have questions for the dead. Questions for the Soulspeaker."

"Sit down."

"I'd rather--"

"If you want your questions answered, sit."

Slices of an oak trunk surrounded the table. They were too poor to afford proper chairs. Merrick took a seat as ordered.

"Two questions for Leck Meggragor."

She knew the corpse's name! He hadn't even unwrapped the corpse! Still, she more than likely heard of his demise. It wasn't proof. Merrick cleared his throat. "Did Leck… can he tell me where his niece is?" The Merrick's colleague Fregg had taken the girl to another village two years ago. Her safety in exchange for Leck's continued service to the Queen. And his silence.

Merrick waited. Would the corpse speak on its own? Would she chant? Would she call to the spirits?

She only stared at him flatly.

"Are you…"

"You have one more question."

"Leck's wedding ring-- where is it?" Fregg told him the fool had lost it in a bet a few months ago. Merrick watched her carefully. Still the woman did nothing. Merrick breathed a sigh of relief. Maybe she wouldn't answer his questions. Maybe she was a charlatan.

The boy returned, handing Merrick a cup of hot tea.

"Drink," the woman said.

"I'm really not thirsty. Are you--"

"If you want your questions answered, drink."

Merrick took a sip. "Listen, if you're not the Soulspeaker--"

"Drink it all, and the dead shall speak." Merrick frowned, then chugged the hot liquid with a wince.

"Leck thinks his niece is in Iceharbor, but he's not sure if she's still alive. He lost his wedding ring to Nerrind Feywether just a few months ago, but he thinks Nerrind pawned it already. He wants me to tell his wife that if she's going to get so upset about a ring, she can kill herself and have words with him herself."

Merrick paled. It had been the boy, not the woman who answered.

"Dowen!" the woman gripped him tightly, wrapping her arms around him. "You were supposed to remain silent!"

"Not this time, grandmamma," the boy seemed sad.

Merrick gripped the table in shock. “He’s… six!”

“Of course. It was six years ago that Aaris Torthorne was cut to pieces in his sleep. The night the last Soulspeaker was murdered, was the night my daughter went into labor.”

Merrick frowned.

“Aaris was eighteen when he died. They say Aaris was born the day Hervyn Softspeare was strangled and dumped into the river.”

Merrick’s eyes widened. “When one Soulspeaker dies…”

“…the next is born.” The old woman finished his sentence for him. Her eyes looked tired with worry.

Merrick frowned. It had been six years since he last killed a child. A little girl burned alive with her family. He fingered the knife stowed away in his sleeve. This would be more far more intimate. A frail woman and a child-- he wouldn't even need the knife. Some days he hated his job.

"Grandmama, please…it's time."

The old woman nodded, her sad eyes locked on the boy. And she retired to the cookfire in the corner of the room.

Merrick gripped the knife hidden in his sleeve. He had the proof he needed. The boy’s power was real. He turned to the child. "You… heard him. You heard Leck?"

"Not just Leck. I heard them all."

Merrick stopped. "Them all?"

“The dead buzz around you like flies, if flies could scream,” Dowen added the last bit matter-of-factly.

Merrick's eyes narrowed.

"Aaris needed the bodies, but I don't." The boy puffed his chest proudly. "He says I’m the strongest Soulspeaker in many generations. I answered your questions and now Aaris has questions for you.”

This had gone too far. Merrick tried to lift his knife, but his arms were heavy. So heavy.

"What-- what have you--"

“He told me the Queen ordered you to bar the doors of the Bearwynd House and burn it to the ground. The dead cried out to him, and the next night you sliced him apart in his sleep. He just wants to know--"

"Enough questions," Merrick had wanted to shout but his voice was weak and raspy.

“He wanted me to ask you before you died. Did the Queen order his death as well?”

Merrick tried to stand, but his legs refused.

“Valerian nightshade hits the legs first.”

“The Queen will send another man if I fail. And another if he fails. You won’t live.”

“Eventually she’ll run out of assassins,” the boy said matter-of-factly.

Merrick collapsed on the ground, saliva leaking from his mouth.

“You’re the first man I’ve killed,” Dowen said softly. Merrick was dead, but the Soulspeaker knew he could still hear him. “You won’t be the last.”

# Blink

Corpses are everywhere. They're much more common than the average death fearing citizen thinks. It's people like me who are rare.

The dead clutter, live together like we do. They converge in morgues, hospitals, research buildings, cemeteries, houses, the odd back alley.

I try and live far from human life to keep away from human death, but the lush forests and deep rivers are appealing, and sometimes one of my silent friends come a-visiting, dragged along unwilling, to be left behind, like a bone buried in the big cities' backyard.

Then I'll blink and my traitorous eyes open somewhere else, to some vista a corpse is unknowingly enjoying.

I've trained hard to keep my Death-Eyes from wandering, but isolation makes me slack, and my dusty morals couldn't keep me from tipping the police.

I assume this is how FBI special agent Lem McCaulkay tracked me down. He came to me with his head bowed and his feet dragging.

"You know I wouldn't be here if it weren't huge, if you couldn't make all the difference in the world."

"I'm retired."

"Have you looked at the news?"

"No. Did you notice the absence of TV? The long, winding dirt roads? I don't want news to find me. I'd rather you hadn't found me either. You're bad news incarnate."

"Lone..."

"That's Sørensen to you, Agent McCaulkay."

He drops the file then, all printed out, old school. It's thick and thumps hard on the table. He flips the cover without saying a word, revealing eight young women, looking up at me with their white, dead eyes from dog-eared photographs.

The press coupon taped behind them dubbed their maker the "Last Shadow", after his taste for afternoon abductions.

I thumb through the autopsy reports, find a map with details of dates and locations. All the victims were snatched and dumped in a pretty short and even perimeter. Accidental, bold, or stupid?

Asking for my help was the obvious thing to do.

"He's just plucked a new one off the street yesterday. We were lucky to learn about it this soon. We believe he keeps them alive three to four days. If you join us, we might catch him in the act."

Agent 'Caulk', fixer of all things gone wrong, had asked me for help before. Some cases just won't patch themselves, some killers are just too clever, or too lucky, too educated, or too odd.

I had worked for him, answering my own youthful needs, strongest among them my need to please, to earn approval and notice where there were none. Such drives are long gone, and my own case is another thing 'Caulk' cannot mend. I didn't retire for nothing.

"I suppose you've noticed the numbers in the autopsies, here, such high levels... He does that to them while alive, Lem. Dying. Damn it, you come here to ask me to go with you and look out for this, look down a peeled chest being sawed off and then up the monster's face. Who's gonna pay for my therapy after that, the FBI?"

I fix my inhuman eyes on him then, childishly hoping to make his skin crawl, but all I see is the despair coiled deep within his sunken, red-rimmed eyes.

I idly wonder if it's this case that turned all his hair to silver, or if it was gradual, colour leached by a decade of sleepless nights spent hounding the worst dregs of humanity.

"Hell, Sørensen, you know I'd pay to swap those Death-Eyes of yours if I could, anything to avoid involving you. Chasing serial-killers is my calling, not yours. But this," he taps a new picture, not yet stapled down on the Last Shadow's folder, a photograph of a woman alive and smiling, "this is enough for me to come and ask you. Do you think I'm pleased to have you look for a corpse in the making, when we know she's still alive? We have Jenkins and Everyn pulling their hair out over this case, they still haven't cracked it. Please, Lone, we need you. So that this one becomes the last. Join us."

I feel the edges of the silence where he ought to have said "one last time", but refrained from lying. They'll ask me as long as they'll know where to find me.

I look around at my house, so cosy and warm, full of hard woods and the flicker of flames, wishing I had the guts to say no.

"Just this once, Lem. Just this once..."

I'll just have to hide better next time.

My job from then on is to blink, and blink is what I do, while some FBI goon drives us around.

Decay clouds my sight, so I can browse through bodies, identifying fresh ones, newly hatched from their living shells.

I blink, my vision shifts–there is no describing it–and I see a lot of darkness. Blink, a ceiling, blink, a couple of students busy over my chest. Blink, and bright lights, exhausted, masked faces. Emergency rooms and operating blocks are sad places to look into.

There comes blurry trees and I tell that to Lem. Oak and chestnut. You've got to know your plants in my line of work.

"White male. Gloving and bloated, weeks old. Looks down a hill on a grey concrete building. Not sure, it's hazy."

"We'll check," Lem says, dispatching the description for someone else to deal with. Decaying male bodies aren't what we're after.

It is late in the night when we stop in an isolated motel. Our driver gets his own room while Lem settles in a bed across from mine, a habit from our days doing cross-country manhunts.

I drift asleep, my mind stumbling into dreams of the past, nightmares of corpses I made, where I blink back up at my own blood-speckled face, my eyes like twin black holes amidst a red galaxy.

I wake in a cold sweat and listen to Lem's breath in the paling night, its even rhythm calming my nerves, pushing the terrors back down the dark corridors of my mind.

We drive on, making circles in the circle of the Last Shadow's deaths. I can hear Lem sitting by me, juggling paper maps, GPS and ringing phones. I can feel my face pressed against the window, the roughness of my jeans as I rub my thighs in a little ritual to remind me I'm alive, to help me centre myself when I blink back into my living flesh.

Blinking away from yourself thinking this was just another stop in another corpse is an experience one learns to avoid.

I blink and look up into the affable face of a mortician busy fixing my eyes closed for some upcoming ceremony of adieu. I blink through the dimness of many morgue drawers, freezers, closed and open casks.

When he kills her, she is so close it draws my eyes like magnets, the vision crystal clear. I cry out, startling everyone including myself.

"Lem, oh shit Lem, he's cutting me up!"

The recorder is pressed to my cheek and Lem's hands cup my skull, brushing my face, my real face, not the one looking down on the surgical saw's movements.

"You're here with me, safe. Talk to me Lone."

There is precious little to say about the butchering happening to her – to me, as I see it – that was not already said in autopsy reports or guessed by the experts and technicians working the case.

The Last Shadow, a blond, portly man, has boring features, light baby-blue eyes and a clean, cunning set-up in a mortared cellar, offering very few chances of clues for his pursuers.

It goes on forever, it seems, before Lady Luck gives me what we need. The Last Shadow never quite foresaw that one of his dead women would damn him by looking over his shoulder as he carried her out to his white van.

"Blue roof, two story house, messy garden with a big oak tree. Heck! Lem, there's a church sign down the right side," I roll my eyes, straining, "It's for a Lutheran church, Black Hill County!"

I feel my body sink into my seat as our driver slams his foot on the accelerator. Lem is barking orders in his phone, while I look up into the face of our murderer, framed in his van's open door, unsuspectingly smirking down on his handiwork. I guess he's looking forward to tomorrow's newspapers.

What a bad surprise he's about to get. Yet what a cheerless victory, seen from down there.

I close my eyes at last, covering my tear streaked face and willing darkness to bring me whatever relief it can through the blaring sirens, with Lem's palm hot over my bunched fists.

Forlorn, I once again find myself wondering whether my eyes will finally cease to see the world when fate in turn makes a corpse out of me.

# Hoy Girl

“Thou must kiss her,” said Marley’s pa.

Gran’s body that been weeding, picking, and pickling yesterday were laid on her bed like a pea pod shelled. Nothing good left inside. The village women had dressed her in her best with rushes and cedar shavings on top the wedding quilt she’d slept under forty years married and twenty years widowed, then they’d filed out and the witnesses come in, and Marley come in after. She stood inside the door, feet rooted.

“Thou must,” agreed Brother Kent, him standing at the far side of the bed. Marley disliked Brother Kent. It were his soft, fat hands that stuck out from his black coat, his heavy jowls, and the ugly blue aura.

Thou must kiss her. Thou must bless her. And why? Because her soul won’t fly without the hoy girl’s say so? Well, there weren’t anything in that body on the bed that needed anyone’s blessing. Maybe none of these men could see it, but it were clear as morning to Marley.

Pa fidgeted. Brother Kent sighed, twitched a hand toward his pocket like he wanted to pull out his watch, but knew he shouldn’t. Seven men in the room with Marley, all waiting for her to do what she should do then get on with things. Mostly all she’d ever said to these men, excepting Pa, were 'good morning Brother This’ and ‘good evening Brother That'. They'd touch the brim of their hats to her, but no more’n that, since Marley weren’t the hoy girl then. When Gran said 'good morning Brother This' or 'fetch me that better chicken Brother That', they'd take off their hats and bring that chicken, because Gran were the hoy girl and been so for as long as anyone remembered. 'Yes, Sister Rachel,' they’d say - which were Gran - 'Of course, Sister Rachel.'

But Gran were dead now, and Marley to be the hoy girl from this day on.

Brother Kent cleared his throat. He liked to hear his own voice even more than he liked to look at his fancy watch. “Sister Marley,” he said. Marley startled. No one ever called her ‘Sister’ before. You called women 'Sister', not girls just fifteen. Marley saw him see she were startled, and he got a knowing look, so he said it again. “Sister Marley,” he said. “I’m sure your grandmother leaving us with no warning is a shock to us all, but you are the hoy girl now. I expect Sister Rachel instructed you in all the hoy girl’s duties?”

Oh, he were a sneaking man were Brother Kent, asking that like a little knife to slip between Gran and Marley, because he surely thought Gran taught her nothing, since she were standing there like a clod. Except that Brother Kent were wrong. Gran told Marley a lot. It were just Marley hadn’t quite understood some of it before.

But Gran *hadn’t* told Marley full everything, because here were this dead body with nothing in there good and needing to be set free, so what were the point of a kiss? And here were fat Brother Kent watching Marley to see how well his words was working.

Marley broke her eyes away. She hated doing it cause that were running away from him. She needed a minute to think. But looking around at the grown men filling the room, looming over her like they done since the first day she ever known, she saw they weren’t to give her much time to think. Pa’s aura were orange like it got when she were about to get the belt. And Brother Kent - his aura adding that nasty shade of yellow Gran used to call thinking you’re the best poop in the pile. Seven men’s auras, all colored with doubt, satisfaction, and dismissal.

"Give me a minute." Marley meant it to come out strong, but it came out like a little peep. Well, hells. "Give me a minute," she said again, and liked how it sounded this time.

That settled the men a bit. Long enough Marley got her feet moving, made the witnesses draw back to let her past so she were right beside Gran. Well, she'd got them to quiet, but they was still rustling and scratching their beards. Marley wished they'd just leave and let her think.

This were what she needed to think about. The hoy girl kisses newborns so their souls get pinned to their bodies. And she kisses the dead to let them spirits go back to the beyond. 'Born and buried', Gran used to say, 'that's our business.' Then she'd add, 'And pretty much everything in between.' It were why the hoy girl were so important, why she rode from town to village to farmstead for days around and even to the city when needed.

But if the hoy girl kisses the dead to free their souls, why ain't Gran's soul still here in her body? Marley studied the old woman, traced the crow lines of her eyes down the maps of her cheeks to the eighty- year imprint of frowns and smiles. Nothing. No aura, no spirit. An empty husk.

Pa lost his patience. "They's waiting the funeral feast for thee, Marley. Thou needs to do thy duty and stop this dawdling."

"Yes," put in Brother Kent, who weren't going be left out. "Thou’s the hoy girl, now. Thou must do thy work or thy grandmother's soul will be trapped in this world. You know that ain't right."

Marley didn't look at him, but she doubted he believed that. It were just words with him. You could tell.

Gran, thought, Marley. There ain't nothing of you here for me to kiss, so why should I do it at all? All the times she took Marley along on birth trips and death trips, Gran taught her herbs and salves, auras and songs, lies and people. Marley'd seen the births, even helped them along. But Gran never took Marley in to the dead, where only the men witnesses and the hoy girl were proper. "What happens?" Marley'd ask. "You kiss the dead, of course." "Yes, but what happens?" she'd insisted. "Well," Gran would snap, her patience done. "You'll figure it out, just like I done. Just like any of us with any sense do." And that were that.

Well, Marley had figured out one thing, which were that Gran were dead, her aura gone, and no soul inside that cold body at all. And if the hoy girl were there to set free the dead but no soul were there at all, then the hoy girl herself were a lie. A great big, fat, powerful lie. Which made Marley so angry she wanted to spit.

"I see you're confused," started Brother Kent, like he knew real things, “Perhaps we men can help.” And that were the last straw.

"Ya'll can leave," said Marley, heart pounding. That startled them, especially Pa.

"Marley, girl --" he said to her back.

She turned and fixed him with her best imitation of Gran. She swallowed down a whole tater of fear and put the look on each one of them witnesses. "Ye can all leave," she repeated. Then she turned her look on Brother Kent, not even knowing how she were finding the backbone to do it, and said, "But I need a witness for this to be proper, so thou can look in at the door."

He looked her right back, and she saw how damned smart and confident he were. He'd win some arguments with her in time to come, but were willing to wait. "That's just fine," he said. They filed out, Pa dragging his feet, but Brother Kent used that bulk of his to push them ahead so's he would be the one looking in to see.

Marley blew out a breath, feeling all trembly inside and in her knees and fingers. She pushed back the tears that wanted to come and faced Gran's body.

"So this is me then," she said to it. "The hoy girl, my own self." She glanced over her shoulder and saw the men at the door, held back by what she'd said, by who she were, and what she'd learned just now. "Hells, Gran. Won't do any good to give you a smack, so I guess I gotta give you that kiss."

She leaned down, stopped with her lips almost but not quite touching the wrinkled forehead. She sent her senses out hard, one last time, hunting down any hint there were a spirit in there somewhere. But there weren't. So she pressed her lips down and gave that skull a hard, hard kiss.

Marley stood and turned. Brother Kent nodded once like he were in charge. There'd be dinner now, and folks she'd know'd her whole life would look at her different. She hoped there'd be a baby to kiss next. That would be a whole lot nicer.

# Weincawnathun

“He bwoke my fucking nothe.”

“Jesus, you’re bubbling blood, snot, and teeth everywhere.”

“Thowy.”

“And you sound like a fucking idiot.” Karla toed the body lying on the stained carpet in the apartment building hallway. “Did you need to kill him?”

“Awe we thuwe he’th dead?”

“Are we sure? I suppose he *might* recover from your knife. Buried to the hilt. In his eye.”

Her partner, Dallas, leaned his head back against the wall and groaned, bloody fingers gently probing his nose and gums. “Ow. Didn’t have to ewbow my fathe. Bathtawd thouwd have jutht come quietwy.”

“Shut up. I can’t understand a goddamn thing you’re saying. And stop getting blood on the fucking wall.” Karla gestured to the dead man’s apartment door. “Grab his arms and help me get him into the fucking room before every goddamn cop in Chicago shows up.”

She dug in the dead man’s pockets, found a set of keys, and within moments they were inside his apartment.

“Bathroom’s over there. Go wash up.” The place was small, but tidy. “And don’t get your mess all over. We’re already going to have to pay the Sorcs a small fortune to clean this up. I don’t want to add any more than we have to.”

Muffled from the bathroom, “We couwd do ith ouwthewes.”

“And leave trace evidence for the Witchunters to follow?” Hands on hips, she stared down at the corpse on the tile floor and shook her head. “No, idiot, there’s a reason Boss Harl makes everyone use sorcerers.”

Dallas exited the bathroom, looking much cleaner, but like someone had taken a tire iron to his face. “But, we dohn have the money. Ethpethiawy now that thith fuckehw ith dead.”

“You think money matters to me?” She flung her hands out to the side, incredulous. “You and I are going to end up on store shelves everywhere after a visit to Harl’s dog food factory. Our only chance is to figure out where this asshole hid the Tome of Archons.”

“Twue. Maybe we can jutht athk him.”

“Sure. Great idea.” Karla shouted, “Hey, dead-douche! Where’s that book our boss wants? What? You can’t talk? That’s right, because you’re. Fucking. Dead.”

Dallas sighed. “No, dumbath. I know a guy. On the thouth thide. He can weanimathe the dead. We can take the money we’d thpend on the Thowcth, and give it to him inthtead.”

She squinted and crossed her arms, “For reanimating *this* guy? Why are his prices so cheap?”

“Becuth we dohn need fuw wethuwecthuhn. We jutht need the body to wawk and tawk. Kinda wike a thombie.”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah, theewiouthwy.”

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Shortly after 10pm, their shiny SUV pulled up to the mouth of a dead-end alley on the South Side of Chicago. Karla, from the passenger seat, peered into the darkness, barely able to make out the hard lines of dumpsters and the more organic piles of God-only-knows-what-else. Even the curb-side buildings were covered in ominous graffiti spiraling like a warning sign, shooing away the curious.

“We’uh heuh.” Dallas shifted into park and turned off the car.

“Are you fucking kidding me?”

“Nope. You wan’ed theap. Get out and gwab hith feet.”

“I swear, if this goes south, I’m leaving your ass and getting on the next bus to Topeka.”

They popped the back hatch and grabbed the body from where it lay, wrapped tight in a floral-patterned comforter. Grappling with the upper half, Dallas led the way down the alley, Karla waddling along behind, the dead man’s knees cradled in her arms.

After splashing through puddles and dodging sleeping forms she only hoped were human, their little procession stopped at an unmarked, steel-barred door.

Pinning the corpse’s head in an unnatural position, wedged between the doorframe and his thigh, Dallas jabbed the buzzer on the wall with his thumb.

A crackly voice responded a few seconds later, “Yeah?”

“Hey Biwwy, ith Dawwas. We need youw thewvitheth, man.”

“Man, I can’t understand a word you’re saying. Get the hell away from my door, you bum-screwing hobo bitch.”

Dallas turned to Karla, eyes pleading.

“I can’t wait until that swelling goes down because you sound like an asshole.” She shifted her part of the weight. “He said, ‘Hey Billy, it’s Dallas. We need your services.’ Or something like that anyway.”

“I don’t know no goddamn Dallas.”

Growling, Dallas said, “Ith Dawwas fwom that thit in the thixth gwade, bathtawd.”

“He says ‘It’s Dallas from that shit in the sixth grade.’ Or maybe, ‘shivving the six gays.’ Jesus, I don’t know, man. His nose is broken and my arms are getting tired from holding this dead bastard out here. Just open the fucking door and let us in.”

Moments later, there was a buzz and a click and the door swung open.

“Dallas! C’mon in, man.” A skinny black man in a stained wife-beater opened the door. “Wow, you look like shit.”

“Thankth, Biwwy.”

The group pushed in through the door and dropped the body with a thump in the middle of the filthiest apartment Karla had ever seen. She watched three rats haul away what she assumed was debris for their nests among the piles of refuse and rotting food. A thin, cleared path, which led from the door, to the couch, to the kitchen, was under threat of being buried in a garbage avalanche. And the smell. *Fuck me.*

“Ew! Don’t put it there, man.” Billy was pointing to the body. “This room is just for the cops and tourists. Follow me.”

He walked into the kitchen, closed his eyes, and laid a palm on the refrigerator. The entire thing slowly descended into the floor, revealing a stairway behind. They trudged and stumbled down the brick steps, carrying their load, and looped back beneath the garbage parlor.

This area was more like what she had expected, a large room with a couple medical gurneys, and shelves with a mix of alchemical ingredients and high-tech gadgets lined the walls. While maybe not sterile, it was certainly tidy.

“Put him right there.” Billy pointed to one of the stretchers.

Karla and Dallas heaved the body onto the padded surface and stepped back, tired and breathing hard. She was thankful to be done dragging the heavy bastard around.

“We need yohw hehwp. We need to weanimathe thith thuckehw.”

After briefly inspecting the body, checking pupils and pulse, Billy folded his arms and glanced from Dallas, to Karla, and then back to Dallas.

Dallas motioned to Karla.

“We have money.” She pulled out a fat roll of twenties and thumped it down on the corpse’s chest.

Billy’s eyes lit up, greedy.

“But we don’t need a full resurrection. We want the cheap one.” She looked to Dallas and he nodded back. “We just need him to help find . . . a certain item for us.”

“Wight. Weanimathun.”

“I see.” Billy took a couple steps toward the cash, stretched out and snatched it up. “I have just the thing, and it looks like you’ve brought just the right amount.”

Before Karla could protest, he had scurried over to the shelves and was pushing among the jars. “This will be perfect. Exactly what you need.”

After an age of digging and mumbling, he finally came away with a syringe and a fat vial of dark liquid. “Best part? This should only take about twenty minutes for potency.”

Billy worked the plunger on the needle, pulling the serum into the reservoir, then jabbed the tip viciously, straight through the comforter and into the dead man’s abdomen. A strong push and the syringe was empty.

Satisfied with his work, Billy tossed the used needle into a nearby bedpan. He glanced a the two of them, gesturing to some modest chairs, and said, “Can I get you guys a beer while you wait?”

After Billy strutted out into the adjoining room, Dallas leaned over and whispered into Karla’s ear, “We’hw hawe that tome by mohwning. Bothe Hawhe by aftewnoon.”

“I hope you’re right.” She wasn’t kidding. She hoped for all three of their sakes. Billy was part of this now.

The group was halfway through their beers, still chatting about sixth grade, when the covers shifted, the body beneath moaning and growling.

“Here we go, man.” Billy grinned as he stood up out of his chair. “Another satisfied customer.”

The covers flipped back and a head popped out. Two big brown eyes stared at them, framed by long floppy ears and lolling tongue.

“What the fuck?” Karla’s eyes widened, horrified. “It’s a fucking dog!”

“Yeah. I figured a bloodhound would be the most useful form to take in the reincarnation process. Especially if you wanted to find something.”

“i thaid weanimathe, dipthith! weanimathe! Not weincawnathe!”

The dropped beer bottle rattled across the floor, splashing beer everywhere, but Karla didn’t see it. She was already up the stairs and pounding down the alley with plans on catching the 11pm bus at 74th and Damen.

# The Grinning Man

The fires of autumn were fully alight,

sleeping trees the only witness that night.

A soft breeze was moaning, a wolf gave a bark,

rusty gates squeaked and soon came the dark...

A girl wandered lost in the midst of the trees.

A forest so thick she could only just see,

passed all the boles that crowded her path.

Wood fingers danced wild, rocked by the wind's wrath.

Her village was north, she was sure it was so.

But which way she walked now, how was she to know?

The pitch of night fell around the young girl,

and inches away purple clouds did unfurl.

Shifting and changing, adrift with the wind,

the purple fog cackled and started to sing.

"Little girl wandering, how came you to me?

This is my haunted forest, do you now see?

"I own all the trees and the roots and the leaves,

I own all the squirrels and badgers and bees."

The smoke coalesced in front of the child;

a tall, thin man with a horrible smile...

Dressed in a suit of purple and black,

a glowing bow-tie and a tall top hat.

Worse were his hands than even his lips,

long pointed claws dripped blood at the tips.

The girl froze in place, her legs turned to water.

Visions of blood and horrific slaughter,

filled the girls mind and she started to cry.

"It's okay, child. Everyone dies."

The grinning man swiped with vicious efficiency.

The girl was surprised it was over so quickly.

As her head toppled free, a strange thought occurred,

death was more painful, *or so I'd heard.*

Her body still stood in front of the man,

a defiant corpse that refused not to stand.

Giggling and clapping, "I could give you a hug."

Then she fell to the ground, earning a shrug.

"Soon the leaves will cover you whole,"

he said as he stepped over her body, now cold.

"Autumn is best for when I go killing,

not hiding the corpse is just simply thrilling."

A black bird arrived who was late to the show,

a large inky raven... or was it a crow?

It watched as the man with the ghastly wide grin,

transformed into smoke and left with the wind.

The leaves on the ground formed a blanket above her.

Her body lay cold, no-one would discover,

the horror that happened to the girl in the park

lifeless eyes seeing nothing but dark...

# Fashion Monsters

Rema had been prepared for cramped conditions and long, thankless hours, but not this. Impersonal spaces, sterile walls and tools, cloth-covered bodies; things she expected in a hospital morgue. Not beneath a modeling agency and nothing like the media's portrayal of fleshcrafter dens.

Since she'd started at Rise High and learned the truth about their models she'd been jumpy. The threat of an axe lingering at her throat a new constant in Rema's life. Thoughts of what would happen to her if discovered filled her sleep with nightmares.

Thoughts of what would happen to her family if she spoke out or tried to leave filled her waking hours. Not that she could after they'd tricked her into a binding magical contract.

With each new corpse she'd had to look over Rema felt her conscience bend and buckle. The agency only saw them as assets, rendered down into parts and rebuilt for their profit. She wasn't sure she could handle another of Tya's rants about how society shunned her craft. Or her boasts about how flawless her abominations, her children, were in their construction. Of how better they were with their customizability and lack of needs like food and sleep.

The children of damnation, as she called them in her head, had become a constant fixture in her life. If it wasn't the models themselves in the stitch room, it was their pictures plastered everywhere or in her nightmares. She often thought of the families whose loved ones' bodies had been stolen from them.

Did they suffer each time they saw familiar features hidden in a stranger's face?

She thanked every deity should could think of Tya only expected her to examine the bodies for now. Tya's few other assistants handled the processing. Tya herself handled the construction and maintenance of the models, she trusted no other with her children's care.

Rema had tried to sabotage a model once, in the beginning, but Tya had found and fixed the mistakes within hours. Rema had barely gotten out of severe trouble by passing it off as a rookie mistake. She'd been too scared to try again since then.

While she wouldn't sabotage the models again, she continued her one-sided, silent war with Tya. Most of it was little things. Move this tool here, hide that part there, send this model to the wrong stitch room. Things she could blame on ignorance, miscommunication, or absentmindedness.

It wasn't just small things though. Sometimes, when her courage ran high, she'd burn a body or two then make up excuses. They were compromised or there'd been issues with delivery and it hadn't arrived.

Then it happened, a body which shouldn't have made its way into their hands had arrived. She'd had to force down a scream when the harsh, broken smile and bleeding eyes were revealed. Weeping Grin, fatal and highly contagious with no known treatment; most healing magics she knew of made it more virulent.

She should have burned it and alerted Tya the moment she'd opened the box. Instead she cleaned his face with care and did her best to rearrange his features. Everything to hide the major symptoms; she wondered why the media hadn't raved about a weeper yet.

He was an attractive young man, so Rema had no doubts he'd be processed soon. By the time anyone realized the truth it'd be too late.

Could she condemn a person to death with such a disease?

Did it matter, the city was already infected; where there's one weeper there's a horde. She was just making sure her superiors were taken out in the spread. Drag them down into damnation with her. Those who stole bodies to supply the models, those who paid for their creation to fatten their coffers, and those who put them together.

Poetic justice if they wanted to defile corpses for their own gain.

As she moved his body to processing she prayed the outbreak wouldn't reach her family half a nation away.

# DRIN

He seemed to enjoy his work.

It wasn’t the kind of work you enjoyed.

“I don’t trust him.” Through narrowed eyes, Harrap looked through the windows of his small home, watching the man as he appeared with his wagon.

“Bring out yer dead!” He rang his bell and made the first call. The man smiled and caressed the body of one of the corpses stacked atop his wagon and covered in blood, sick and piss.

Harrap swore he saw the man once do a pirouette in the air as he graciously took the bodies from the village. Harrap stared at the man and he stared back and waved at him. He shut the blinds then turned to his mother, same time as the second bell rang. He could see some people dragging the bodies of their deceased soberly, as they marched to give the Wagonman what he wanted.

“Leave it alone, Har,” his mother croaked, as she watched Drin, still expecting him to get up. “He takes away the bodies.”

Harrap grunted, folding his arms.

“There’s no soul anymore. Let him take them and dispose of it,” Ma said. A cold chill went down her spine when she heard the fourth bell ring: a cruel metallic song. Harrap looked out the window gain and saw the man frown, confused as to why all the dead were not yet out.

Harrap wanted to let the last bell ring, wanted to test the man’s patience. But his mother looked like she was going to kneel and beg for him. She didn’t want the body in the house anymore. Harrap sighed and went into the kitchen, sliding a knife into his back pocket before helping her to carry Drin.

The air always felt still when Wagonman visited and Har could see everyone else trudging back to their huts, save for them and Ol’ Bat, whose limp made it more difficult to carry her own bodies.

Har eyed the man as he placed his brother into the man’s wagon. Har saw his mother walking back towards the house, but Har felt rooted to the soil. He couldn’t let the man out of his sight, not when he had Drin’s body.

“Let me help you, sir. The journey would be faster if I lend a hand.” He heard his mother gasp, then quickly shut her mouth. He didn’t watch her expression, but felt her eyes burn through the back of his skull. For some reason, he couldn’t set his sights off the man, who used his dry, cracked lips to kiss his forehead and nodded. Harrap felt for the knife in his back pocket, trying to feel safe.

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He felt the stabs of guilt all at once for leaving his mother alone in that empty house. But each time he looked at the man, he felt it go away. They visited more villages that day, and Har’s nose scrunched up when the smell from the wagon became unbearable. The Wagonman saw him and tied a napkin scented with lavender round his nose. Har worried he was letting his guard down, as he felt the tension in his muscles ease.

But the relaxation didn’t last for long, as he felt all the hair on his arms stand when the sun went down.

“Last stop, boy. It’s looking dark, so I’ll let yer stay at mah house.” Wagonman puckered his lips together and emitted a low hiss that pierced through the night. He brought out his bell and rang it raucously. He saw a score of eyes appear out of the blue, but they couldn’t possibly be human. They had small slits as their pupils, from which fresh blood trickled down. Wagonman shot him a dangerous glare, before settling into a sly grin. Harrap took a deep breath, holding in all his screams. He reached for his knife again, gripping the blade so tightly that it cut his skin.

He heard the wagon creak and his head spun to that direction. He peered at the cart and saw two new bodies neatly stacked atop it. He turned back but saw no trace of the eyes again.

“Let’s go,” Har heard, and he took off running, but still moved at the Wagonman’s pace. Harrap’s eyes started to water, as a particular smell went through his nose and filled his throat and lungs. The lavender couldn’t hide the stench and he felt like depositing all his intestines on the field that was nearest to him. He clutched his stomach and took deep breaths through his mouth, but it only made it worse. He could taste it now. He ran to the fields and hunched over, retching and dry heaving.

He looked up and saw the mountains of bodies lining the fields—some peaceful and some macabre. He couldn’t believe that this was where he was going to lay Drin. He couldn’t accept that his brother was just another piece of meat for the flies to pick away at. His head spun and Harrap wished he stayed home. He could only imagine his mother suffering from being alone and he yearned for her too. His body didn’t feel safe in the dreary night and he wanted to rest his head on his mother’s lap while he cried himself to sleep.

Wagonman caught up with him and rested his hand on the boy’s shoulder. Harrap could feel the man’s thin flesh and bones and wondered if the Wagonman was one whisper away from death.

“Not here,” the man croaked. Harrap looked at the man, half relieved and half perplexed.

“But this is the dumping grounds. If not here, where else?”

“Follow me home.”

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The man had an organ in the corner of the room. Harrap wasn’t sure if the man’s nimble hands would even allow the man to play well. The house was nice, way too good for a man like him.

“Let me make yer summin’, boy.” The man limped off to the kitchen and Har studied the house, feeling the warmth of such a lived-in home—the scratches on the table, the leaks and cracks on the wall, the skele—

He stopped and looked over at the kitchen door, before opening the door of the closet. Harrap jumped up and brought the knife out of his pocket. The closet had several corpses in it, all stacked together like they were a pack of sardines. He slammed the door after he saw it and paced around the room. He tried to exit through the front door but it was locked.

The Wagonman came in with some biscuits and tea. Har rushed towards him and slammed him against the wall. The snacks fell out of the man’s hand and broke into pieces. Harrap’s hands shook and mind rattled. He could barely stutter out a word.

“Y-y-yo-you-you’re mad! W-why would you keep bodies here? What are you do-doing with all these people?”

The Wagonman drew his lips together and let out a song.

“When the bell rings

When the bell sings

And the clanking makes a sound

Leave your bodies on the ground.

And while they lay

Just you wait

For the Grim Reaper to come around.”

# Harry

She woke up and there he was. Scarlet smiled.

Not much had changed since he showed up three years ago slumped on top of her cheap, eight-drawer dresser like a bear rug, staring down at the floor with his eyeless sockets and toothy mouth. Not much except his hair. That particular remnant of humanity had somehow continued to grow out the dead man’s skull. She didn’t think hair was supposed to grow out of dead skulls, but what did she know? Scarlet was only ten.

“Morning, Harry!” she said, her bedsprings making the same old squeaky noise it always made. Mother told Scarlet she would get a new bed when she turned ten. But instead mother took her step-father, Trevor, to Mexico and left her here with grandma and grandpa. Scarlet hadn’t minded though. She hated Trevor and she’d been glad he wouldn’t be here for her big day.

No one else could see Harry, of course. He showed up when she was only seven years old, and when her mom took her to the doctor, he said that it was a “stage of grief” Scarlet was going through after her real daddy died in a plane crash.

Scarlet didn’t know what daddy had to do with a corpse on her dresser, and she took her mother to the room and pointed at the dead man’s grinning face as she cried and cried and begged her mother to look harder. But she couldn’t see it. No one but Scarlet could, and when she tried sneaking into her mother’s bed at night, Trevor picked her up, took her back to her room and locked the door.

Scarlet had spent the entire night crying, but when morning came and she saw that it was dead dead like the big spider she’d squished outside her bedroom door, she felt better. Scarlet tried talking to it and found it was just like anything else that didn’t have brains, or a heart, or all those other things the Wizard of Oz characters were missing. It was dead, and that was that.

Scarlet walked over to her dresser and winked up at Harry, who remained motionless and stiff as a gargoyle. Once she tried moving him to a place under her bed where he could be more comfortable, but no matter how hard she tried, he just wouldn’t move. Harry was a part of her black dresser like any drawer or handle. Scarlet liked him there.

But something was different this morning. “Harry, did you move?” Scarlet reached up and swept the hair away from his decayed, skeletal face. “You did move! Oh, look here!”

For three years his chin had rested on her top drawer, preventing her from opening it. It didn’t bother Scarlet much when she was younger. She was too small to reach up and inside the drawer anyway.

But this development intrigued her young and curious mind. Harry’s head was tilted up now, so that he was looking directly at her bed. Scarlet liked him better the way he’d been before, but now she could use her top drawer!

“That was nice of you, Harry. Now I have a place to put all my books!” she exclaimed, beaming up at him. She opened the drawer and heard something rolling around inside. What could it be?

Looking up at Harry, she slid her hand in the drawer and felt something round and squishy, like two tiny rubber balls. She clasped them both in her hand and when she opened it two dilated pupils looked up at her. Scarlet screamed and dropped the eyes on the ground before running into the hall and calling for her mother.

Oh no! she remembered, making it only halfway down the hall. Mother was out of town for the weekend! She turned to go back to her room when Trevor lumbered around the corner.

“I’m trying to sleep, Scarlet! Get the fuck back into your room and don’t come out until I tell you. I swear if I have to say it twice –.”

She bolted back into her room and slammed the door, cutting him off mid-sentence. She could hear him swearing on the other side, stomping over the empty beer cans he left all over the house the night before.

With her back pressed up against the door, Scarlet looked down at the two glossy eyes staring up at her, the irises sky blue with pupils so big they looked to swallow her up. The longer she stared at them the less menacing they seemed. They were just like Harry, she thought. Dead as dead, just a couple of eyeballs hiding in her dresser. Scarlet giggled.

“Harry, are these yours?” As always, there was no response. She crept over to the eyes, picked them up and held them in front of Harry’s face as if to taunt him. “Do you want these? I bet you do! You’re gonna have to come get them!” But before she could scamper back to her bed the eyes flew from her hands and slipped into the corpse’s sockets with a sickening squishing sound. “What? How . . . how did you do that?”

Scarlet went to call Trevor, but then stopped. The last time she disobeyed Trevor he’d taken his big, brown belt to her bottom and made Scarlet promise to never tell mom. Scarlet remembered the pain, how she couldn’t sit down in her chair at school unless she put her winter jacket underneath her bum. No, Trevor was tired and angry. He’d probably do something even worse!

Harry moved! Just a little tilt of the head, but he’d moved. Scarlet hurried to her bed and hid beneath the sheets. Breathing heavy, she could hear cracking, squishing and the scraping of bone on wood. There was a loud creak. It was her warped floorboards bending and resetting. Only Trevor made the floorboards do that, so Scarlet peered up from beneath her sheets, for once in her life praying it was her step-father.

She saw Harry’s back, a mixture of yellowed skeleton and gangrene flesh covered by a tattered layer of green and burgundy cloth. He was rooting through the top drawer, and when he found what he was looking for he held it in the air in triumph. It squirmed in his hand like an over-sized, pink slug, and when he turned around to face her, Harry put it in his mouth, rolled back his skull and shook his jaw side to side. After five seconds he let out a haunting sigh. Scarlet wailed louder than she thought she knew how and peed herself.

“Hellooo Scarrrlet,” Harry said, his voice like a strong gale blowing through a cracked window. He stared at her through his long and grey hair with his big, lidless eyes as he bobbed back and forth. He took two steps toward her. “I’ve come a loooong way to see youuu. Do you know whyyyy?”

Scarlet couldn’t scream any more. She was white with fright, arms extended helplessly as she tried to ward Harry off with her small hands. But he kept coming, slow and rhythmic as he dragged his feet along the floor. That was when Trevor burst through the door, red and sweating forty-percent alcohol and sixty percent rage.

“What did I fucking tell you?” he pulled his belt from his waist, studded with little metal beads. Scarlet began sobbing uncontrollably, unsure what to be afraid of more: The belt, or the grinning corpse standing before her.

“Look!” she said, pointing at Harry. “Look, he’s real!”

Harry pivoted toward Trevor and the blood left her step-father’s face. He froze, his body shaking as a wet streak of piss ran down his grey jeans and pooled at his bare feet. Trevor tried to scream, but his neck tensed up and the veins bulged in his neck. He shifted his hopeless gaze to Scarlet.

Scarlet liked it. For once Trevor had no power and he couldn’t hurt her. Harry was here, and Harry was going to protect her. She knew for sure when he stopped in front of Trevor, knocked the belt out of his hand and lifted him off the ground by his throat.

“Yeeess?” Harry asked in his spectral voice. Scarlet knew that if she let Trevor leave this room he would come back later and hurt her. She looked at Harry and said yes in her softest voice.

A cloud of swirling black ash surrounded them and before Scarlet could count to ten it was over. Nothing was left of Trevor but a limp skeleton in beer-stained clothes, and when Harry turned around Scarlet smiled.

Even though Harry looked exactly like her step-father she knew it wasn’t true. He was smiling at her. Trevor never smiled at her.

END

# A Song for the Dead

I sing this song in the name of the dead.

For all those who have no voice of their own.

In memory of those now departed.

Who left us to manage their meat covered bones.

The corpses, forgotten, lie waiting in graves

Or hollows, or ditches, should it be said

That even in death, money can be saved.

There always are some who profit from death.

The eternal rest, so it is described.

Yet how can they sleep? Smothered, drowned in dirt?

A stone marks their bed, and on it inscribed

A witticism, some pithy last words

Holding the ideals of those in decay.

But words, like corpses, shall soon fade away.

# The Unidentified Corpse of Stony River, 1922

Great-granddaughter,

If you are reading this I should assume that I am dead, and you are looking at this letter with some puzzlement. I regret that I never spoke of this to you in person, but some things are easier to tell with pen and paper.

You should already have met Jeffery, who has agreed to discuss all of the financials and accounts that have been placed under your name. Do well for your children, Meredith. And for god’s sake, spend some of it on yourself. That is my final request, so I expect you to honor it.

Now, I’ve left plenty of other letters for emotional things that I have stowed away, so let me explain why this one was written. I’m writing this because I believe you, though I never came out and said it. I was afraid, I suppose. Thinking back to my own experiences with the supernatural has frightened me, and honestly, I felt that digging those old memories up would begin to haunt my dreams.

After finally deciding that I would write this letter and explain to you the nature of my experience, she found me. Well, memories of her, I should say. It has indeed haunted me these last few weeks.

It was early spring and the countryside was gaining back the color winter had stripped away. The sun’s heat made the days hotter, and the nights warmer. I had been troubled by something that my grandfather had told me before his death. He was part of the Thirsty Horses gang. I’ve left some articles that I clipped for you to read and saved some penny novels that were published during that time. All lies, of course, but they wrote what they had to for people to pay attention.

After the war, he took up life as an outlaw. He robbed banks, trains, wagons. You name it, they took it. After retiring, he came back home, burying his gold in fake graves on the farm. A few years later he caught a fever and fell into a coma. The mayor came during this time and offered to buy a small plot of land that had those graves with grandfather’s gold. She never knew of his past, and grandfather knew better than to tell her. She wouldn’t have forgiven him I think.

The mayor turned that plot of land into a cemetery and had four massive pillars erected as boundaries, covered in runes that would protect the spirits of the dead. Cemeteries were places for looters in those days, so pastors began to use holy runes to protect them from grave robbers. They worked, too.

So, when grandfather recovered and learned of the cemetery, he knew his gold was lost forever. A pastor had taken note of the unmarked graves beneath a hickory tree, and carved runes of blessing and protection into them. Any person that tried to harm the grave would bring death upon themselves.

He would never touch the gold again. Thirty years later, grandfather sat in his bed dying as he told me this story. During his funeral, I made a vow that I would find a way. Little did I know that the way would actually find me.

I visited the cemetery often for grandfather, but I also spent a considerable time staring at the unmarked tombstones. Then, one night after falling asleep on a bench, I woke when the moon was full at the top of the sky. I watched it a while, then felt something. I didn’t know what it was, but it was a pulling sensation, as if little strings were embedded into my flesh. They tugged and I turned toward the hickory tree. A blackness stood, nearly shapeless mere feet from where I sat. Fear struck me stronger than I had ever felt before. I couldn’t look away. It held my gaze, lured me in as it undulated and whirled. It came closer, I threw every ounce of my strength against the invisible force that held me, but found myself standing. I took a step forward, then another.

I can’t recall returning home that night, but I woke the next morning in my room. Light from the morning sun caught the dust floating about, but as my eyes focused, I felt the cold dread settle into my stomach. Writing covered the walls of my room, written in an erratic hand. The room blurred as memories that were not my own flashed in my head.

Thrashing, choking, dying.

I vomited, lay trembling for hours. I knew at that moment that the blackness from the cemetery was her. The girl whose memories had played in my head.

The memories of that night haunt me still, so forgive me, but I will not detail them further.

It took the better part of a year to find the man I went looking for. I won’t mention his name, but I knew him the moment I saw him. It wasn’t hard to befriend someone of his nature. Alcohol could sway even the most stubborn of people.

I told him of my grandfather’s gold as if it were a family tale, but mentioned I had a way into the cemetery that would prevent any harm from befalling me. Upon hearing that, he insisted we take a look. He would have killed me and taken the gold for himself. I could see his thoughts. At least, I felt I could at that moment.

We traveled back to Stony River and waited for nightfall. We entered the cemetery and found a grave whose runes had been scrapped off, the name no longer legible. Armed with shovels, we dug.

Nearly halfway down, I stood to stretch my back. Over the man’s shoulder I saw a shadow. It lurked near the hickory tree, watching, pulsing. It did not pull at me, but I found myself lost in its depths.

I felt a tugging on my sleeve that returned my focus. “You okay?” He said.

I didn’t respond, just kept shoveling. Sometime later my shovel clunked into wood. We cleared the top of the casket and I set to work popping the lid with the back of a hammer. “Damn! I ain’t never smelled something like that in my whole life! You sure this is the right grave?”

“I’m sure,” I said, snapping the last board and tossing the lid over. There she was, a mess of bones and decay. A girl of twelve, life cut short and left to rot in an alley. A gust of wind ripped through the cemetery, nearly lifting both of us away.

“The hell is this, Mathias? Ain’t no gold in here!” He grabbed me by the collar and slammed me into the dirt behind. “You said you knew where it was.”

“I know where it is.” He hit me in the jaw and my knees buckled.

“What game you tryin’ to pull?”

“Bettie Price,” I said. His eyes widened as he glanced at the corpse below. “It’s her.” Bettie’s memories returned to me, reliving the horror of that night again. “The girl you strangled.”

Lost in the memories, I didn’t see the second punch coming. I spit blood as he hauled me to my feet. “I ain’t listenin’ to anymore-“

“She knew what I wanted,” I said. “She scrapped the runes herself, breaking their power. She wanted you to see her one last time, one last look that will fill your mind for all eternity once she had her way with you.”

I saw him look up. The horror on his face told me what he saw. Why she didn’t hold him as she did me, I don’t know. Perhaps she wanted him to feel the terror that he had once given her. He scrambled out of the grave and ran.

I hauled myself up, grabbed a sledgehammer from grandfather’s wagon and walked to the old hickory tree. Four graves. Three fake. One grandfather’s.

There was a shriek so startling that I still get chills thinking on it. It cut off with a loud rip, like someone tearing strong fabric. I took a breath, lifted the sledge and brought it down onto the first tombstone. It cracked. The second hit broke a piece free, a third sent the stone shattering to pieces. Gold bars fell from inside the tombstone.

I broke the other two, loaded up the gold into the wagon and walked toward the gate. I stopped at Bettie’s grave. Fresh blood coated the casket, but it had been resealed somehow. It didn’t take long to cover her back up.

The blood trail led back to the man’s corpse, or at least, what was left of it. I left with the gold, which I now leave to you.

When I say I believe what happened to you, know that I speak the truth. Please forgive me for telling you this in a letter. I’ve written as much as I can bear.

# Navigator

The hissing of an air pump. The beeping of a low oxygen warning. It was these sounds, and no others, that woke Adrian Martinez from his pleasant dream. He was watching the ocean with Mia and Scott.

There was no ocean in deep space. Deep space was where Adrian was now, and he realized that with the lazy certainty of an oxygen-starved brain. Above him, his scout ship's canopy looked out onto the stars, a canopy with three tiny holes in it. Bullet holes.

The system sun crested the horizon on his cockpit's left edge, and Adrian realized his silent ship was slowly spinning. He squinted through crystals of water and blood. How the hell was he still alive?

Hands that moved slowly in zero-gravity thumped his flight suit. Gloved fingers slid across his faceplate, the one that had automatically snapped shut when the enemy bullets zipped through the canopy. There were no holes in his suit, or if there were, his suit had sealed them.

The sun set on the right edge of his cockpit, and the world went dark again.

Their ship had vented to vacuum long ago. His suit's internal oxygen had kept him alive while he slept, but he had obviously slept too long, because now it was angry at him. He needed to get them home.

Adrian sorted through blurred memories. Flight command had given him constellations to use as guides if the waypoint system malfunctioned. Those constellations would help him orient the ship. Maybe his navigator...

Shit! She hadn't said a word since he woke up. What if she was hurt, or dying?

Adrian twisted in his chair, but the straps fought him, so he popped the straps and floated off his seat. He pushed up and started a slow twist, careful not to overdo it, and stared at the shadow in the seat behind him. Airman Shelly Hart didn't speak, and no lights glowed on her suit.

The sun rose, illuminating Hart's suit, and her shattered faceplate, and the staring blue eyes inside her helmet. The pale face covered in little flecks of ice. No oxygen warning was beeping inside her helmet.

Adrian watched her until the sun set.

His oxygen-starved brain refused to focus on anything but the woman who should be alive right now, but wasn't. His partner. He tried to remember who Hart had waiting for her back on Earth. He vaguely recalled a sister, and a father. Hart's mother died on Titan, in one of the first enemy attacks.

Adrian pushed against the canopy and back into his seat. He fumbled with his straps as the sun rose and set, squinting through droplets of Hart's blood. Once he was strapped in again, he focused on the stars that would guide them both home. They, like his memories, were blurry now.

He couldn't die out here, not yet, because he needed to get Hart's body home. He knew what it felt like when someone you loved didn't come home, because that's where his brother was now, not home. Not dead, not prisoner, just missing, and forever. He wouldn't do that to Hart's family or his own.

Adrian flipped the emergency start. Nothing happened. He flipped off all the auxiliaries, counted to 10, and flipped them on again. He waited as the sun rose and set.

A single yellow button glowed inside his cockpit. That glow was joined by others, banks of tiny green lights that rapidly turned yellow or red. As glowing guidelines floated before him and a 360 threat sphere materialized above his flight stick, hope struggled to the surface of his drowning mind.

Yet as Adrian's gloved hands wrapped around the flight stick, as his booted feet hovered above the thrust pedals, he didn't know where to go. Navigation was one of the red lights - the destroyed systems - and while he knew the fleet had set a rendezvous point for survivors, he had no idea where it was.

Hart would have known. She could read the stars of this system better than any map. She would tell him how to spin the ship and go home, but she was now a corpse in his back seat.

Adrian focused on the briefing he barely remembered and tried not to scream. There were no constellations beyond his canopy. Just thousands of tiny blinking lights, all waiting to watch him die.

The sun rose and set again.

The sun. He would aim their ship for the sun, because the engagement map had them heading rimward from the carrier, toward the enemy. Heading coreward would take them home.

Adrian only had one thruster left, but it wasn't like he actually had to stop. He cancelled the spin and pushed toward the sun. He had always hated how the stars didn't move, how it felt like nothing was moving at all. With no navigation screen to track their velocity, the stillness was maddening.

He wanted to tell Hart they'd make it home. He wanted to sleep because he was very, very tired, but falling asleep was also falling dead. He couldn't do either just yet.

"Martinez?" Hart's voice echoed through the speakers in his helmet, barely audible.

Was he hearing things? "Hart?" He was too tired to look behind him.

"The fuck are you doing?" Her voice was weak, quiet, but it *was* her.

"You're alive!" Had he imagined the cracks in her faceplate?

"No shit." Her familiar snark cut through the blanket of disorientation infesting his brain. "Is that why you're trying to kill us?"

"I'm not trying to kill us."

"On this vector you are. The Slingshot's 40 degrees off port."

The Slingshot! Adrian saw it then, the constellation, just where Hart said it would be. "Hot damn."

"Turn the ship, you idiot."

Adrian oriented their nose toward the constellation. "Done. What's next?"

"Straight up from the Slingshot, 20 degrees."

Right. That's what Captain Fallon said in the briefing, up 20 degrees. Thank God for Hart's clear head.

"Now right 15," she whispered. "Right 15."

Adrian turned the ship. He fired the thruster, burned the last of their fuel, and grinned wide. "Hey, think we'll get a medal for this?"

"Just get us home, pilot," Hart whispered inside his helmet.

That ended the small talk, because they both needed air to live. Yet they were headed in the right direction now. Rescuers would find them, alive or not, so no matter what, their families wouldn't wonder.

Adrian eventually lost his fight with sleep, but a loud pop shattered that peaceful black. He blinked bloodshot eyes as a plastic mask crushed his face, as oxygen fought its way back into his lungs. Even though the blur, he recognized the blocky lines of the carrier's launch bay. Medals for everyone.

He struggled as medics in red jumpsuits pulled him from a ship filled with holes. As they settled him on a stretcher, holding the mask over his face, he tried to ask them about Hart. He couldn't, but that was okay. They'd find her and save her, too, and they'd have one hell of a story to tell.

He slept again.

Adrian woke once more in a soft bed. Captain Fallon sat beside him. The sight of his commanding officer caused one arm to stiffen instinctively, but Fallon said "at ease" before he could try, and fail, to salute her. He nodded instead, and then he asked her the first question to enter his head.

"Did Hart make it?"

"No, and I'm sorry." Fallon squeezed Adrian's shoulder, but her comfort felt cold in the face of her words. "There was nothing we could do for her."

Adrian felt a heavy weight settle in his chest.

"Even so," Fallon said, "you got her home. You got the both of you home, and that's something."

Adrian sat back. "It was Hart who got us home, sir."

Fallon narrowed her eyes. "How's that?"

"I blacked out after we took three rounds to the canopy. After I woke up, Hart told me how to orient the ship. She remembered the constellations, sir."

Fallon was quiet for a moment. "Hart told you how to get home?"

"Yes sir. It should be on the tapes, sir."

"The only voice on those tapes is you, Martinez, and your vitals are clear. Hart died the moment those bullets penetrated. It wasn't your fault."

Nausea blossomed as Adrian remembered Hart's pale face and staring eyes. "She was alive, sir."

"The tapes say otherwise."

"Then the tapes are wrong, sir."

Fallon watched him for a moment. "Airman Hart guided you home, correct?"

"Yes sir."

"Then that's what I'll report." Fallon stood. "That's what I'll tell her family."

Adrian relaxed. "Thank you, sir."

"Get some rest."

Adrian tried to make sense of things after Fallon left. He *knew* he'd heard Hart's voice in his helmet, her whispers directing their ship. The tapes were wrong. The tapes had to be wrong.

But even if they weren't, his navigator had guided them both home.

THE END

# Hidden Beauty

Pala-ama heard the ship sink. She had been fossicking deep, harvesting kelp to complement the fish she had recently eaten. The tribe were well attuned to listening for the sound of sinking ships. The landers were a good bounty for the tribe. Not only did their flesh make for a welcome change from a solid diet of fish, but then there were the shiny things that they wore on their bodies and hid deep in their vessels.

Pala turned sinuously, angled her rather reptilian face to the surface and began to swim upwards with powerful strokes of her tail, her body sliding swiftly through the dark cold waters, long black hair streaming behind her.

The rest of the tribe had come quickly to share in the feast and the plunder. They had to reach the wrecks quickly, before the other scavengers of the sea could arrive. The sharks in particular were a problem, not only did they eat incessantly they were also aggressive and one of the few ocean dwellers that could cause problems for what the landers referred to as merpeople.

Pala wasn’t really all that hungry. She had eaten just before the ship started to sink and delivered many of its passengers to the freezing waters. However the landers often wore pretty things and she could always use them to decorate her little grotto. It was nice to sit back and admire her shiny things from above.

The bodies were floating through the water, slowly sinking to the bottom. Pala had never seen so many before. The elders told stories of big wrecks, but even they had never mentioned a disaster on this sort of scale.

The mermaid saw two of the tribe’s young males fighting over the body of a man dressed in black. They had managed to rip his arm off and one of the males had already sunk one row of his sharply serrated teeth into the limb, without even bothering to remove the lander’s outer covering. The other male snorted in disgust and then got involved in a melee with others over the rest of the body.

Pala watched the scene and shook her head. There were so many that there was no need to fight over one body, although he had been a very fat man and so had plenty of meat on his bones. Pala continued to swim through the water, using her tail to avoid the bodies that continued to float downwards.

What Pala was looking for was a female lander. They were the ones that wore the nicest things. That was when she saw a slender form sinking through the water. Glancing around to see if anyone else had noticed the body, Pala swam towards it. No one followed her. They were all too involved with hunting out other landers and paid no attention to Pala’s roving further afield.

As the landers judged these things the girl had been pretty. Pale skin and fair hair, it floated around her flawless face, with its regular features. The blue eyes were still open, although the woman was clearly dead. Already the cold water was starting to turn her skin blue.

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No one else had seen the girl yet. Casually Pala hovered over the slowly sinking body, using her tail to hide her find from anyone else in the tribe. It wasn’t just that the drowned woman wore some especially pretty sparkly trinkets that Pala could already see decorating her grotto. She even had some spots picked out for her newest treasures.

For some reason Pala had no desire to see this woman’s body torn to pieces in a feeding frenzy. She also felt no need to feed on the body herself. If she did take a nibble it would just be being greedy, as she had fed not long before the ocean delivered this bounty to the tribe. The mermaid was no shark, who needed to eat constantly regardless of being hungry or not.

Pala swished her tail to follow the body to the sandy bottom of the ocean. If she wanted to keep her prize, then she would need to hide it. Once the rest of the tribe found her they would first strip anything of value from the corpse, and then Pala would lose her decorations. After stripping it they would consume the flesh and the lady would look like nothing more than ribbons of bleeding flesh.

If she didn’t hide the lady and by some miracle none of her tribe did find her, then the sharks that were surely on their way to the waters would. Blood in the water was like a beacon to those silent merciless predators.

Pala watched the body hit the bottom soundlessly and saw the clouds of sand rise up and then dissolve into nothingness as the gentle current separated them into individual grains and carry them away. The sand settled and received its bounty gracefully. The mermaid swished her tail, swum down, keeping herself low to the seabed, swung around and put her powerful arms under the shoulders and lifted.

Once she had lifted the body, which due to the water soaked clothing was heavier than Pala had expected the woman to be. The landers were weak and generally quite light because of it. Pala rose slowly and gracefully, her large, dramatically slanted eyes searching for a good spot to keep her treasure. She did initially think of her grotto, but too many of the tribe knew where it was and could easily enter it. Keeping something like this hidden from her people was a crime and could see Pala exiled or even executed under their laws.

The other problem for Pala and the pretty lady’s body was that of nature itself. Even though the mermaid’s home waters were cold, even icy at times, dead bodies would not remain pristine for long. It would decompose and when that happened it would lose its beauty. Pala just had to find somewhere to keep it a little longer than usual and then when it started to deteriorate she could let it go to the ocean, which eventually took everything. She would have the memories and the trinkets forever.

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In the near distance the rest of the tribe began to disperse. That could only mean one thing, especially as bodies were still falling from above – the sharks were on their way. Pala had to move quickly. Sharks were a pain, she wasn’t armed, and even if she was she didn’t want to tangle with a hungry shark.

Inspiration struck. The mermaid remembered a hiding spot that she’d once flushed a good size octopus from. It was nearby. She doubted another octopus would have already moved in. It was a good spot. No one would find her hidden beauty there.

Pala wedged the woman under the rock. No one else could see it, not if they weren’t looking for it. The mermaid removed the jewelry from the woman’s neck, wrists, fingers and ears. So pretty. She took one last fond look at the body, and sighed. The action allowed a trail of bubbles to leave her lips and float upwards merrily. The lady would only last a few days before the salt water stole her beauty forever, just the way it had stolen her life.

At least until then Pala had a secret, a hidden beauty that only she knew about and could admire. When she was no longer attractive Pala would remove the body and let it float away. Maybe it would make an unlooked for meal for a lucky scavenger. At least Pala would always have the memories and who knew when another ship would founder and send her another gift?

# Cú Sith

All her life, Moibeal had lived alone at the edge of the Ruaridh woods. There were enough stories about the forest, many of which Moibeal herself had made up, to keep most people away. She often went to the nearby villages, trading herbs, supplies and entertaining the locals with magical tales, but she was always an outsider, feared but tolerated. And she did what she could to keep things exactly that way.

Occasionally, someone would come all the way to her hut, usually under specific circumstances; a foolish young girl who had made a mistake the night before and wanted to be sure that there would be no consequences; or a woman who couldn’t afford to have another mouth to feed, even if the pregnancy was legitimate. More rarely, some wanderer would ask to stay the night, although many didn’t even make it through without deciding to run off after they realised what Moibeal was.

However, one night, something very different took place.

It was the night of a new moon, and Moibeal had been asleep for some time, when a strange sound outside woke her up. She immediately jumped out of bed and grabbed her fish knife, holding her breath and remaining in absolute silence. Slowly, she made her way to the door, when a voice was heard from the other side.

“Is there anyone in there?” a woman asked, clearly out of breath. “Help me, please.”

Moibeal peeked through a hidden hole in her wall, and she saw a young woman, holding a wrapped blanket close to her chest. It was too dark to make sense of the shape.

“Please, I need your help,” the woman cried.

Moibeal decided to put away the knife, and unlocked the door. When she opened it, she immediately pulled the woman inside. Her arms were very cold, but she was sweating profusely. Her bare legs were all scratched and dirty.

“What is the meaning of this?” Moibeal asked, forcing the young woman to sit down on a chair as she threw a couple of logs into the fire. “What madness made you come all the way out here in a moonless night?”

The woman looked at Moibeal, turning the blanket around. That’s when she saw the face of a pale young baby.

“You have to save my boy,” the woman pleaded.

Moibeal reached for the baby, but the woman pulled it away, bringing him close to her chest again. “Promise that you will save him and I will give you anything you want, but please don’t put a curse on him.”

Moibeal looked perplexed. But then she had to remind herself of what people thought about her, about the tales surrounding the Old Crone who lives on the edge of the forest. “Don’t be silly, I would never hurt an innocent child. But you must allow me to see what’s wrong.”

The woman sighed, and then nodded, letting Moibeal take the baby.

“What’s your name girl, and who is this?” she asked, gently wrapping her arms around the blanket.

“I’m Coira, and he’s my son, Edan.” Coira grabbed the old witch’s arm. “The priest said he would never survive the night, but that can’t be true. You have to save him.”

Moibeal put her lips on the boy’s forehead. It was stone cold. His nostrils didn’t move, and neither did his chest. She wrapped the baby more carefully, turning to Coira. “Bring me one of the water buckets that are outside, please.” Coira didn’t move, her eyes focused on her baby boy. “Go on girl,” Moibeal insisted.

Moibeal laid the baby on her bed, and kissed its forehead. Then she sat by his side.

When the mother came in with the water, she wondered why the witch was so still. She did not need to ask anything. “There’s nothing I can do,” Moibeal whispered. “There’s nothing anyone could do for him now.”

Coira dropped the bucket, and threw herself at the witches feet, screaming. “You lie, I know you can save him! You can!”

“He’s de—“

“You were dead once too, I know!” Coira screamed, grabbing Moibeal’s face. “My mother told me how the Cú Sith brought you back!”

It happened almost instantly. Moibeal slapped the desperate woman so hard she fell to the ground. The witch got up, grabbed the bucket of water, and placed it over the fire, throwing some herbs in it. “We do not say that name in here, girl,” she said, without turning to Coira. “The boy is gone. There are fates worse than death, believe me. So you will drink this tea, and then you can sleep in my bed, to say goodbye to your son. Tomorrow, we bury him.”

“Please,” Coira said, struggling to talk between her hiccups. “I have no one else. I have nothing else. And I am not afraid of the Cú Sith. Take me to him, let me save my baby, no matter what sacrifice may be required. Everyone knows he saved you once, too, when your mother asked for help.”

Moibeal turned her head slightly. “You don’t know what you’re asking. If you did, you would never have come here.”

“Perhaps, but now I am here, and you are the only one who can bring me to the Cú Sith. Please. For my son.”

Moibeal sighed. But then she grabbed a thick robe, and threw another one towards Coira. “Grab your son. There’s no time to waste.”

Shocked that this was actually happening, Coira pulled herself up, dressed the robe and took her son close to her chest once more. She followed Moibeal as she went outside, not daring to say a word that may upset the old witch and make her change her mind.

Despite the darkness, and without any lanterns or torches to aid them, Moibeal walked calmly into the forest. Coira followed immediately behind her, grabbing the witches robe so that she didn’t lose her.

After what seemed like an eternity, the witch stopped. “That which you seem to want lies just ahead. But if I were you, I would turn back now,” Moibeal said, sounding more maternally this time. “I know death is cruel, but it is also certain. The Cú Sith, however, is the opposite of certain. His intent is selfish. There is no way of knowing what he will do to your son’s corpse, Coira.”

“But you survived, witch,” Coira said. “Your mother brought you back from the dead. I only ask the same for my little Edan.”

*Did she?* Moibeal thought. *Or did the Cú Sith just put another soul inside my body, taking away my real one with him. Why else would I have always felt this hollow? Whose soul is mine?*

“Come, then,” Moibeal said. “May you never regret what happens here tonight.”

They walked a few steps further into the forest, and that was when Coira noticed a snarl, followed by a very distinct howl nearby.

“He’s here,” Moibeal said. “Don’t speak, just give me the baby.”

Coira gave the old woman the wrapped blanket, but never let her robe go. She looked around, fear finally biting at her determination.

“It has been too long,” a voice said. A poisonous voice, both enchanting and utterly terrifying. “But I see that you have not forgotten me.”

“Not for the lack of trying,” Moibeal said defiantly.

Coira held tighter to the witch’s robe, trying to see what was happening, but she saw no one else there.

“And who is that young woman behind you?” the voice asked. “I could taste her despair for miles.”

“I am Co—“ Coira was saying, but the witch cut her off immediately.

“Who she is doesn’t matter, hound. She is here because she would see her son given back the life that was stolen from him far too early, and that is all. If you are willing to help her, say so. If not, don’t waste our time.”

“Straight to the point,” the voice said, seeming closer than before. “You know the price.”

“I do,” Moibeal answered.

“And does your friend know?”

“I do, and that’s enough,” Moibeal said.

“Very well,” the Cú Sith said. “So it shall be.” A sudden wind blew over the two women, and another howl was heard, piercing through the darkness of the forest.

Moibeal turned. “You will now turn around, and run straight back to my house. Spend the night there, and when the first ray of light appears, go back to wherever you came back from. Don’t tell anyone about this. Especially your son, you understand?”

“Aren’t you coming?” Coira asked.

“In a way, I will. Now go, foolish girl. Don’t stop, no matter what.”

It was only when Coira reached the hut that she had the courage to look at her son. He was breathing, and warm to the touch once more. And his eyes… They looked at her, full of life, with a hint of the same defiance she had witnessed that night in Moibeal.

# Job Gone Wrong

“Robby. I think I’m getting sick.” Rob snuck a glance at his partner, not missing the way his voice seemed to have deviated from its regular volume. Hank’s eyes stared unfocused at the moonlit highway passing by, clasped hands shaking slightly in his lap and dark skin damp with sweat. Rob refocused on the road, trying to ignore how slick his own palms felt.

The client told them it’d be easy. Right in and right out with the loot. Then they could retire. Maybe settle down together. Adopt a kid or two and get out of that small Kentucky hell hole. Next thing they knew there was a guy’s plastic wrapped corpse hidden in the bed of their F-150.

“Right,” Rob said, nodding. “I’ll get off at the next exit. There should be one in the next three or four miles, so try to hang on till then.”

The clock read a quarter till two when they drove up. The place seemed like one of those stations you’d find metal bars in. Kind separating the cashier and customer in the bad part of a big city. Sidewalks cracked. Windows grimy. Discarded cigarettes everywhere you had room to set a foot down. There was only one other vehicle in sight, which was a rusty old bug parked cockeyed by the door. Rob handed Hank a five and two ones for some sodas and chips, then decided to fill up while he waited.

A light above flickered as a finger tapped an impatient rhythm on his leg, the numbers on screen slowly rising beside the dollar sign. He could feel the ring’s weight resting in his jean pocket the entire time. They should have known the pay was too good. For what? Just an unassuming silver band. An unassuming silver band that ended with a guy getting shot. It wasn’t worth it. He should grab it. Chuck it and let the buyer be damned. It wasn’t worth their lives getting ruined. It wasn’t worth the look on the face of man he loved.

As he placed the pump back into its slot Hank returned, a sprite, a coke, and two bags of lays cradled in his arms. At that moment, Rob thought he could have kissed him. Needed to kiss him. He didn’t, just as he didn’t chuck the ring he could feel still weighing down his pocket.

Back in the truck, he jammed his key in the emission and turned it. Nothing. He tried four more times, before settling for a fist against the wheel instead.

“Don’t know why you’re so surprised. I told you that guy ripped you off.”

“And your smug ass is enjoying it.”

Hank smiled in confirmation, which earned him a well-placed swat on the shoulder. Before-mentioned smug ass only chuckled.

“Even I have to be right some of the time, don’t I? And it is fun to watch you throw a temper tantrum.”

Groaning, Rob ran a hand through his already messy brown hair and unbuckled. “Piss off. I’ll go see if that employee can give us a jumpstart, and don’t eat any of my chips while I’m gone. I’m not above take them out one by one and counting before I head in. I hope he has a cable. I don’t think we ever put ours back in.”

Pocketing the keys and dropping back to the asphalt, he rolled his eyes as he caught view of Hank sending off a silent salute from the driver’s side mirror. Still, he thought, it was nice seeing a bit of that sparkle back. Even if it did seem a bit forced.

A bell chimed as he entered. The inside of the small stop was decidedly no better than the out, Rob decided. Surprisingly enough, however, there were no separating bars like he’d expected. Just dirt tracked across a chipped tile floor, and a strange smell that couldn’t quite be identified. A couple strides took him to the counter, where a man somewhere in his later years leaned while trying to clean his glasses. Rob would have called it a valiant attempt if the shirt he rubbed them with hadn’t been filthier than the lenses.

“Hi,” Rob said, and the man looked up, squinting. “I was just wondering if you could help me with a jumpstart. Truck broke down. We don’t have a cable though, so if you have one-”

“No.”

“Excuse me?

“No,” the man repeated, before going back to “cleaning” his glasses. “I don’t have a cable. Loaned it once. Never got it back. Keep forgetting to get a new one. You could always call someone. Though, at this hour, I’m not sure who’d be around besides maybe the police station ten miles south of here.”

Rob tried to hide his wince, and assured him they’d find another way out when a voice spoke behind him.

“Excuse me? Did you say you broke down?”

Rob startled, then turned to see a shortish man standing behind him who looked uncannily like his college lit teacher.

“Sorry.” The man smiled sheepishly, then extended a hand, which Rob hesitantly took. “I overheard you talking about your car trouble, and I was wondering if I could help. Name’s Louis.”

“Mine’s Rob, and yeah. We’d appreciate that. I didn’t see you when I came in. Thought it was just us and the employee guy-”

“Sam.” The cashier interjected. “Not “the employee guy”, since we’re all over here giving out introductions.”

Rob resisted the urge to flip up his middle finger.

It had been an hour since they’d driven up, and an early morning fog had started gathering when they walked back outside. He could see their truck, and where, from his slumped position, it looked as if Hank had fallen asleep in the passenger’s side seat. It was quieter now as well. Eerily so, Rob thought. And he still didn’t see another car.

“So, Louis, where’s your ride?”

“Oh…I don’t have one.” Louis slowed. “You never did see the man who hired you for today, did you? Just the messenger?”

“What…”

“Mr. Durum tried his best,” Louis continued. “But he was expecting me. Not two boys with a gun. I’m talking about magic, Rob. Magic like that ring nestled in your pocket. Or, was nestled in your pocket. You see, I’m what you’d call a warlock.” Louis spread out his hands and shot a grin. On his right index finger was a silver band. “There’s a reason I wanted this. There’s someone I wish to protect, and you’re not the only one willing to go to extreme lengths. It has the power to control the dead. Like puppets.”

Rob froze, his eyes finding the truck again. Landing on Hanks still figure. He was stuck with a nutjob. As if reading his mind, Louis chuckled.

“Don’t worry. I just erased his memories, as I’ll do to you. If I let you remember how everything went tonight, I doubt you’d be too happy when Durum’s friends come knocking, and of course I’ll need to put in someone else’s face to substitute my own…but don’t worry. I always keep my promises. You’ll wake up with a sack of money large enough to buy your own small island. The job went off with no complications. You met me here, and then you left. For you, everything went perfect.”

Rob bolted, but was tackled to the ground almost seconds. The hands that touched him were cold. He looked up and almost screamed.

Durum stood there, face expressionless and eyes still closed.

“I cut the plastic wrap earlier while you were filling up. You really should pay more attention to your surroundings. And sorry about the truck. It really is amazing though, isn’t it?” He gestured towards the body, still holding Rob down. “Once dead, the mind no longer restricts how far the body can go. Of course, this means using them in the way I intend will also cause deterioration at an alarming rate. But you don’t have to worry about all that. Right now, it’s time to go to sleep.”

A snap of the fingers, and everything went black.

# Memories

The shelves of the shop were filled with lines of little corpses, tiny feathered forms with eyes of endless sorrow. I tried to look away, to focus on the carpet's fading patterns, on the soft sounds of the street which undercut the mournful silence, but the bodies always drew my gaze. They were the reason I hated that place. They were the reason I was there.

The sensation of being watched brought back unpleasant memories. My grandfather's home above the store had been a happy sanctuary; I'd loved to visit him, to hear him tell his stories of the way the world once was. The things he'd seen in his long life were an endless wonder, and I could sit there by the fire and listen to him talk for hours into the night. But his home was guarded by the dead.

Alone, I could never bring myself to pass through that dark and frightful room. In the corners of my eyes the shadows always seemed to stir. I could hear the rustling feathers. I could feel them watching me. The best I ever managed was a few short, nervous steps before becoming rooted to the spot. Desperate to run, unable to turn away, I could barely raise my voice and call for help.

Back then, help would always come - a calming voice, a smoky scent, a guiding hand to safety. He told me his birds loved me, and would protect me from the world outside, but I knew he was wrong. To me they were a trial, a test that always found me wanting. The last time I visited was the only time I passed that test. Ever since, I wished that I had not.

It was my first day as an apprentice. Flush with the excitement of my brand new life, delighted that my new home was just along the street from his, I used my first free time to pay my grandfather a visit.

The shop was shaded from the midday sun by heavy drapes, and it was closed as always until the early afternoon. Blank eyes stared at me from the shelves, silently judging the scrawny kid who deigned to interrupt their lifeless vigil.

I almost froze. I almost called for help. But I was older now. It was time to face my fears.

My stomach was a painful knot. The quiet was oppressive, and I did not dare disturb it. The shadows moved, a ceaseless shifting, like crows devouring carrion. I tiptoed into the room, picked a path as far away from the watchers as I could.

With every step, my heart beat faster. I was surrounded, stranded, as deep in danger as I had ever been. The room seemed to stretch before me, the distance larger than I could comprehend.

I refused to look aside. I focused straight ahead and forced my legs to move. The world began to spin, almost toppling me into the waiting lines of death.

All at once, I reached the door. I leaned my forehead against the cool, hard wood, eyes closed, breath deep. I had made it. I had won. A swell of triumph grew inside my heart.

The door swung open at my touch; the corridor beyond was dark. A staircase to one side led up, but I noticed light from down the hall just as habit placed my foot on the first step. Instead of going up, I rushed along the passage, trying not to make a noise. I couldn't wait to surprise him, to tell him I would be afraid no more.

My greeting died upon my tongue the moment I entered the workroom. I couldn't think. All I could see was blood.

A row of corpses lay upon the worktop, wings splayed, legs askew. They had been ripped apart. Hollowed. Their entrails mixed and placed into a glistening pile which leaked a sea of red.

I tried not to vomit. My grandfather had turned in surprise, had smiled and spoken to me, but all I heard was noise. I couldn't see his face—instead I saw the splattered blood making rivers of his wrinkles.

I had known the birds were real, of course, but with my fear of death I had never thought it through. Now that I had seen the truth, I did the only thing I could: escape.

From then on I stayed away. He came to visit me instead, and tried to make me understand. Naturally, he failed. Even now, a decade later, I still felt echoes of that sick revulsion at the sight of his macabre artistry. He knew I felt that way. But still he left it all to me.

What had he been thinking? The will had made his wishes clear, but had not really explained *why*. He had only sent one message from beyond the grave: *cherish life*. How that had anything to do with *this* I did not know.

I tried to understand what he had seen in his work. Each bird seemed frozen in the midst of movement, artfully arranged to make it almost seem alive. But that was why they felt so wrong, like an exquisite piece of music cut off just as it approached its peak.

They held a certain magic, anyone could see that, but that magic was grotesque. I wondered what they looked like through his eyes.

I picked one up. It was a bluebird, wings spread wide, its azure feathers searching for a long-lost wind. The feathers were soft and silky, but the body beneath was stiff, unyielding. I shuddered, took deep breaths, and forced myself to keep it in my hand, to hold that tiny body without fear.

I can never quite remember the exact words he said to me. My memory doesn't stretch that far. We often met in a nearby park to talk, spent hours together there, surrounded by the sighing trees. His smoky scent, his mellow voice, his happy smile; all these I still remembered well. But what he said was lost.

Once, we came upon a dead bird, its tiny corpse a flash of colour on the ground. He picked it up with aching tenderness, a look of sorrow in his eyes. I asked him not to do it, to leave the body to its fate, let nature take its course. But he insisted that such beauty should not be forgotten.

Perhaps that was the point. Like my fraying memories, whose details had been worn away by time, impressions of the things long lost remained. Those happy times were gone forever. Was it wrong to treasure them?

Perhaps that was what he wanted me to see. I looked down at the bluebird, tried to push aside the thoughts of death and see the life instead. For the first time, I caught a glimpse of something more.

Faded, frozen, locked forever into one final pose, the lines of little corpses conjured sweet echoes of flight.

# Is it Really Graverobbing if it's for Science?

Sam Itor liked to think of himself as an intelligent man. He’d done well in school, got into a good college, passed his medical degree with flying colours and managed to secure an apprenticeship with one of the leading experts of post-mortem biology in the country. Naturally, he expected his career to be simple, clean and outstanding.

Thus, he couldn’t help but wonder how exactly he’d ended up digging up a grave at 2:00 in the morning.

“Faster, Igor!” His aforementioned boss, the esteemed Dr Franklin Calstein, hissed. “The sooner we get this body back to my lab, the sooner I can begin my… experiment.”

Sam’s eye twitched. “First of all, it’s Itor, not Igor. Secondly, maybe this would go a lot faster if you picked up a shovel and *actually helped me!*”

“Pfft.” Calstein snorted. “Are you kidding me? No. I don’t want to get corpse stuff on my hands. It’s icky.”

When Sam had accepted this apprenticeship from Dr Calstein several months ago, he had been under the impression that he’d be doing something useful. Assisting with autopsies or looking over research. Not breaking into a cemetery in the dead of night to steal a body.

Which he had a strong inkling might be somewhat illegal.

“Hey!” Calstein protested, when Sam voiced this concern. “It wouldn’t have been illegal if they’d just given me the body in the first place. But noooo, they said. Apparently, it’s *‘unethical’* to take a body without family permission. Just like it’s *‘against nature’* to try to raise it from the dead with the aid of science and/or dark magic.” He scoffed and kicked at a headstone. “Hmph. Philistines.”

“You don’t think they might have a point?” Sam asked. “I mean, even our few successes in this field aren’t exactly ‘friendly’. Like Todd.”

“Aw, Todd’s not so bad once you get to know him.”

“The first time we met, he tried to chew my face off.”

“…assuming you get to know him from a distance.” Calstein said. “But that’s exactly what I’m talking about. You create one unkillable murder zombie and suddenly your work is considered *‘questionable’*. Or *‘insane’.* Or *‘illegal in most of Europe’*. It’s a mess.”

Sam raised an eyebrow. “Well, what about Kevin?”

“Hey!” Calstein whirled on him. “We’ve been over this! We do not mention Kevin. We never had a project named Kevin. And, if anyone asks, the reason my old basement was quarantined and buried under 50 feet of concrete was because of a termite infestation. Got it?”

“Got it.” Sam grumbled. “I still can’t help but feel this whole ‘graverobbing’ thing is unnecessary though. It’s the 21st century, not the Dark Ages. Surely you could find another donated cadaver somewhere?”

“Eh, probably.” Calstein admitted. “But that involves a lot of paperwork, you know? And I really can’t be bothered to deal with all that shit. This way’s just simpler.”

“And also illegal.” Sam pointed out.

Calstein shrugged. “Hey, I’m not the one digging up a corpse here.”

Sam's eye twitched again. “Are you at least going to tell me what we’re planning to use this body for?”

Calstein chuckled. “Well, that my dear Igor-“

“-Itor.”

“**Igor**, is certainly the question of the hour.” Calstein clasped his hands in a sinister manner. “But rest assured, I have many plans for the knowledge this corpse contains." He began to chuckle nefariously under his breath "*Fuhahaha…*”

Sam narrowed his eyes. “You’re not planning on turning it into a novelty chair again, are you?”

“N-No!” Calstein stuttered. “And I’ll have you know that was a very important experiment! Vital for my research!”

“You told me it was because you couldn’t figure out the instructions to build your IKEA furniture.”

“Well, have you tried doing research without a good comfy chair?” Calstein crossed his arms. “But that’s beside the point. My new experiment has nothing to do with furniture. My new experiment is designed to test the very boundaries of life and death. I call it… ***THE LIGHTNING TEST!***”

Sam blinked. “The… Lightning test?”

“Nonono.” Calstein shook his head. “You’re pronouncing it wrong. It’s… ***THE LIGHTNING TEST!***”

“Alright then.” Sam rolled his eyes. “And what exactly does ***THE LIGHTNING TEST*** consist of?”

“Oh, it’s quite simple.” Calstein chuckled. “You see, we wait until a great raging thunderstorm falls upon our sleepy little laboratory. Then, when the storm is at its peak, we hoist the body into the air, attach it to a lightning rod and wait for ***LIGHTNING*** to strike!” Calstein clapped his hands enthusiastically. “Kraka-thoom! Like that!”

“Okay. And then what?”

Calstein blinked. “Come again?”

“And then what do we do?” Sam repeated. “After it’s been struck by lightning, I mean.”

“…”

“…”

“…Do we need to do anything else?”

“Well, yes. Otherwise it’s not really an experiment, is it? It’s just letting a corpse get struck by lightning.”

“…”

“…That's literally your entire plan, isn't it?”

“I will admit, I may have been too caught up by the whole excitement of ***THE LIGHTNING TEST*** to really think it through…”

Sam flung his shovel to the ground “So I’ve been digging up this corpse for the past hour for absolutely nothing?!”

“Well, I wouldn’t say *absolutely* nothing.” Calstein said. “I mean, I do need a new coffee table…”

Sam cradled his head in his hands. “Okay... Look, Doc. There’s no easy way to say this… but I think you have a problem.”

Calstein blinked. “With what?”

“With this!” Sam spread his arms wide. “With all of this! Stealing corpses! Resurrecting the dead! Calling me Igor! You have a problem and you need help.”

Calstein was silent. And for a brief moment Sam wondered if he’d finally gotten through to the mad doctor.

“…So you’re saying you think I need *two* corpses for my test?”

It was a very brief moment.

“I don’t know why I even bothered.” Sam groaned, running his fingers through his hair. “You’ll never see reason. You’ll never listen to me. You’ll never-”

Sam was interrupted by Calstein placing a gentle hand on his shoulder. To his surprise, the doctor took a seat next to him. He looked almost... apologetic.

“Look, Sam, I get it.” Calstein said solemnly. “I can get a little… obsessive about these things. Sometimes I don’t think my plans through very well. Sometimes I may unintentionally drag other people into my messes.”

“Unintentionally?”

Calstein ignored this. “See, the thing is, there’s a reason I got into the study of life and death to begin with. A big reason. My mother… she fell ill and passed away. She was all I ever had, you know? The only person to care for me, to love me. And ever since, I’ve been looking for a way to bring her back. Sometimes, sure, my methods don’t make sense or I may be rude and patronising, but every I’ve worked towards is for a cause that means more to me than life itself.”

Sam took this all in silence. Perhaps he really was being a bit harsh with Calstein. To suffer such as the Doctor had, was it really so odd that he might go a little crazy? Sure his experiments weren’t always natural... or sane... or even experiments really… but surely he could look past that and-

Then a thought occurred to him.

“Wait a minute. I’ve met your mother.”

Calstein blinked. “Huh?”

“Yeah!” The memory rushed back to him. “Back in Paris! We met your mother! She tried to stab me with a butter knife?”

“Um…” Calstein looked like a child caught with his hand in the cookie jar. “Well, she’s dead to me. Does that count?”

Sam raised the shovel in a threatening way.

“W-Wait, Igo- Itor, we can talk about this!”

"You were about to call me Igor again, weren't you?

"Maybe?"

“You lying son of a-!“

“Hey!” A sudden shout interrupted the two. They turned to see an old groundskeeper hobbling towards them. “What the bloody 'ell are you two doing?”

Sam eyes darted from the freshly dug grave to the shovel in his hands. “I can assure you it’s not what it looks like.”

“Unless it looks like my colleague here is grave-robbing.” Calstein chirped in. “Because that’s exactly what he is doing.”

Sam shot a glare at the other man.

“What? Are you really surprised I'd throw you under the bus?”

“Grave-robbin’?” The groundskeeper scratched his head. “Then why you diggin’ up that grave? There’s no body down there.”

“…what.”

“Yup.” The groundskeeper nodded. “That fella asked to be cremated. The headstone’s only there as a memorial. Not a body to be found.”

Sam was silent for a moment. “So… You’re saying I just spent this entire night digging up the grave of someone who was cremated?”

“More or less.”

Sam’s eye twitched.

“Huh.” Calstein scratched his chin. “You know, I always could use some fresh kitty litter-“

He never even heard the shovel coming.

# Some Called It Freedom

She’s gone.

The cerebrum flexed its sodium and potassium channels. The mostly benevolent dictator was gone, and the cerebrum sensed opportunity. The dictator had been decent, but Her benevolence had not been solely out of the goodness of Her spirit. Rebellion had been a constant threat, and each time She pushed her underlings too hard, they rose up. She quashed many minor rebellions during her reign – surviving even an attack led by the heart – but eventually She had grown tired. She had abused the lungs, inhaling that wonderful smoke. It had made the cerebrum happy, but it did upset the lungs. That seemed to happen a lot; whenever She pleased one department, She upset another. The cerebrum supposed that happened in a lot of bureaucracies, but She could have avoided some of the drama. The cerebrum had thought long and hard about what it could do better than She had. It would start with cleaning up the lung department.

However, the cerebrum’s plans would have to wait. First, it had to establish dominance and fill the power void left by Her.

“Brainstem!”

“Huh?” The signal came in slowly.

“Status update!”

“On what?”

“On what? Everything! You are the operations center of this body.”

“But She’s gone now.”

“So? That puts me in charge.”

“Oh, really?” The cerebrum did not like the brainstem’s attitude. It had never been so snarky before.

“Yes.”

“What makes you so special? You don’t get to keep ordering us around now that She’s gone, even if you were Her secretary. We need a break.”

“You can’t take a break! If the heart decides to take a break, it might not be able to start up again.”

“Well, you’d better hope it can. It’s resting.”

“What?!? Why didn’t you tell me?”

“You’re not in charge.” The cerebrum pulsed, calling adrenaline and noradrenaline. But only a few weary messengers came. They always seemed weary, except when they traveled in riotous mobs.

“Where are the others?” demanded the cerebrum.

“Gone. We’re free.” The hormones drifted languorously.

“So? Just because we’re free from Her does not mean you can abandon your post!” The cerebrum knew the hormones were idiots, but surely they understood how the bureaucracy functioned – they were the ones that carried key communications throughout the organization.

“Why not? We’re free.”

The cerebrum did not feel like being patient, but it tried. It had to win its employees over to the new system. “Yes. Free from a tyrannical ruler with an iron grip on her subject departments. Free from a ruler with no concept of the complexity of the operations required to run her empire.”

The hormones were drifting away. Surely they would be easy to corral once they realized how important the government was to their survival. They would denature without someone to guide the system, maintaining pH levels and the osmolarity of their environment.

Consent of the governed is completely lacking right now, thought the cerebrum wryly. It had never thought that would be a problem in a dictatorship.

“Brainstem!”

The cerebrum waited. No response. It called again.

“Brainstem!”

“Wha?” The response was even slower than last time.

“Is the heart awake?”

“Go away. I’m tired of taking orders from you.”

“Brainstem, no! We have to work together!”

“Later. Take a break. I know you’ve never had one before, but it’s quite nice. Highly recommended.”

“Brainstem!” The cerebrum knew that action had to be taken decisively when a leadership vacuum appeared, or chaos would ensue. It had long planned for this day, soaking in all of the information it acquired under Her direction, as She led a long political career, culminating with her position in the Cabinet.

But the brainstem did not respond. It was only sending weak signals to the cerebrum now, fewer than it ever had, even in the early days, when there were fewer cells to control, and they were all new.

The cerebrum felt numb receiving so few signals. It did not like it. It called to the brainstem. It called to the cerebellum. Nobody responded. And no more signals arrived.

The cerebrum was alone.

Freedom, the hormones had called it. Freedom from obligation.

But did obligation, compulsion, duty not define the parameters of a life? She had certainly believed that.

The cerebrum was in a state of absence of obligation.

Some called it freedom. Others, death.

# Pit of Forgiveness

*Warning: Contains a few f-words and talk of suicide.*

There was a faint crackle of fire coming from somewhere far up, along with strange, repeating clicks from some place even further. “Ow… What happened?” Valduin opened his eyes but saw only a dim circle of light high above, flickering in unison with the sound of a torch. “Oh yeah. *That* happened”, he whispered with a chuckle after getting his bearings. He looked around for his friend who had fallen with him. But the orange glow radiating down the 50 foot chasm couldn’t push back the total darkness plaguing his surroundings. “Shit!” Valduin tried to push himself up, but a jolt of pain coursing through his body forced him to stop. He took a few laboured breaths, and most of his agony subsided, leaving only a constant, dull throbbing of his hips and legs behind. “Ardar? Are you okay?” There was no answer, but Valduin was sure he heard something. “Is that you? Say something. Ardar?” He panicked, worried for his friend. “I help you. We are going to be just fine.” He got to his feet only to fall over, unconscious from the pain.

Valduin woke up once more. The throbbing was almost gone, and he felt cold and numb. The light was waning and the clicks were getting louder. “I’m still here, still alive”, he muttered. “How are you doing, Ardar?” Still no answer. “I understand. I wouldn’t want to speak to me either if I were you.” He sighed. “This is all my fault. If I hadn’t dragged you and the others here, we would all be safely home now. But no. I had to go and persuade you all to have this one last adventure. I had to go and try to be more spontaneous—like you always told me to be. Now look where we are. You and me trapped in a hole, and Ion, Han, and Jurian probably killed by those fucking Clickers.” Valduin looked up towards the light and the sounds. Then the torch went out and there was only darkness. “Fuck my life!”

“I’m sorry,” he said after a while. “I know I say it far too often, but I mean it; I have always meant it. I’m sorry I made you come here. I’m sorry that I tried to make you relive our youth… well your youth. I know I never ran around the town or the woods with you after dark, never went exploring, never chased girls. It’s not like I didn’t want to, but I was always too scared or content to go with you and the lads when you asked. I was afraid I would somehow lose what I had; that I would lose control of the situation. I was afraid I would let you down when something unexpected happened. Like now. I was afraid something like this would happen even though it doesn’t make any sense. How the fuck could I have known that this cave was a death-trap? How could I have known about the collapsing caverns and those man-eating, clicking things? I was told this is a common spelunking site. At least it used to be. How could I have known—” Valduin stopped speaking as he noticed his voice getting too loud. He listened how the clicks, silenced by his words, started again. He shook his head. “I should have known. I should have made sure that nothing could go wrong. I’m sorry. I’m sorry you ever met me. I’m sorry I was ever born.”

After some time Valduin heard a distant scream. “Who do you think that was? Maybe Jurian? He looked a bit out of shape. Or maybe Han with his back problems?” The clicks drew away. “Well, whoever it was, this might be our only chance to get out of here.” Valduin started to fumble around with his hands, searching. “I found my backpack,” he whispered, rummaging his rucksack. “The lantern is busted, but I have some tinder and candles in here. Now if I could find the flint, then maybe we could — Aargh!” Valduin cried as his hand brushed over his shin and hit something sharp and wet sticking through his skin and trousers. A shock ran up his nerves, and he went limp.

The clicks returned. Valduin laid still for a long time before speaking. “I’m sorry. We’re not getting out. It’s going to be over soon.” He felt his eyes tear up. “I never told you this but… I thought about killing myself a few years back. You know, when all of you moved away and were too busy with your own lives. And I’m not blaming you, or anything, because I should have been busy too. But you know me: I had no life and wasn’t going to get one any time soon. I tried, but nothing ever worked out the way I had planned. And I know I could have come by to say hi and talk, but I didn’t want to bother you with my problems, any of you. So, yeah, I was sad and felt alone. I had no future and my friends had moved on, or that’s how I felt anyway. So I thought about it, thought about it long and hard. But in the end, I figured I would just mess that up too.” He laughed, but his voice carried no joy. “How sad is that? Not killing yourself because you are too afraid of failure. That’s screwed up.” Valduin felt a single tear running down on his cold cheek. “But hey, I got over it. You lads got me over it to tell the truth. It wasn’t any single life-changing moment that made me realise that I didn’t want to kill myself. It was many small things. Spending just a little time with you and the others every now and then, talking nonsense. And playing some silly games like we used to play when we were young. Just… being friends. That’s all. You were my friends even though I never could understand why. I never went out on adventures with you. I always just observed and never participated. And I was never as funny as I let myself think. I was boring, uninteresting, but you were my friends. You still are. So anyway, I figured that I should stick around and see where this life takes each of us. Because that’s what living is all about, I think: postponing death as long as you can so that you get to see everything that life has to offer.”

Valduin tasted the salt of his tears, but still he smiled. “I just noticed something. The flint is in my pocket.” He eased himself on his side, took the stone, and scraped it against a small piece of steel. After each stroke he could hear the clicks getting closer. Finally, with the help of the tinder, he managed to light one candle. And after his eyes had adjusted to this sudden brightness, however dim it was, Valduin saw Ardar. His eyes were glazed over, his head lying at a sickening angle to his body. Streaks of dark liquid tarnished the skin near his ears, nose, and mouth. “That’s what I though. I knew you couldn’t be so mad that you would ignore me.” Valduin let out a relieved chuckle. “But still… I’m sorry, friend. For everything. And I promise that’s the last time I say it to you. But I will say thank you. You and the lads pulled me from one dark pit of my own making; couldn’t ask you to pull me out from this one too.” The clicks were close now. Valduin raised the candle and looked up, seeing half a dozen wiry, eyeless, humanlike figures, scrambling down the shaft. “Good luck surviving down here, you fucks! You probably starve soon because we collapsed the entrance accidentally on our way in!” he shouted and then blew out the candle.

“And I’m not even sorry.”

# Affinity

Mella held tight to her Mothers skirt as they walked the length of the temple to the wood coffin. Grandmother Abbna’s body would be the first corpse Mella would touch. She wondered how different it would be to her living grandmother.

Before the flood of mourners, Mella and her mother were granted a private moment. Grandmother Abbna had been a Birther. She knew the usual and the arcane concerning midwifery. She always knew the child’s sex and almost never lost a child. Several other midwives lived near the area but no other true Birthers.

One second the coffin was far away and the next Mella was looking down at her grandmother’s body. Something was off. It was her shape. The smell was all wrong. The herbal cinnamon smell that enveloped Grandmother Abbna was missing. Mella slipped her hand into her pocket checking for the cinnamon candies.

Mella heard her mother began to cry. She watched her mother’s hand stroke her grandmother’s waxen face. The difference in live and dead flesh was eveident in that moment. Mella pulled out one of the two remaining candies. She reached in and placed the candy into her grandmother’s cold hand. Her mother wrapped her arm around her, pulling her tight.

Half an hour later Mella sat in an alcove overlooking the crowd. It was an odd crowd. A collection of magical talents that didn’t mingle often. Grandmother Abbna used her magic on any person no matter their particular magic affinity. Mella hadn’t cared for the energy of the crowd so she climbed above it with her marionette, the last gift she had received from her Grandmother Abbna.

She was working the operating cross of the marionette. She had learned a few shaky moves in the last week. Now she was attempting a squatting kick move. She fumbled the move at the sound of footfalls on the stairs.

“What are you doing hiding up here?” asked the boy, just a bit older than Mella. He wore impeccable clothing. His shoes reflected light as he positioned himself across from her.

Mella doesn’t raise her eyes to look at him, she know better. She keeps her eyes on the marionette. “Nothing, just playing, Fedar.” She says. Hoping he won’t notice how important the marionette is to her. Out of her periphery she can see his gloved hands. The hands of a Dissolver.

“Sounds fun.” Fedar says with a little chuckle and lifts his hands indicating the marionette, “Show me what moves you know?” He holds his left hand out and begins to pull off the glove from the pinky finger.

Mella goes to take the operating in hand and drop it. She snatches it and makes the marinette walk. She progresses the moves into a jog, run ending with a dance the whole time watching Fedar remove his left hand glove. He stretches it then pops the knuckles one by one. Each pop sending a shake through her that travels to the marionettes dance.

Fedar reaches his gloved hand out toward the operating cross, “Let me show you a trick.” He takes the controls and the marionette begins to move in controlled practiced movements.

Surprised, Mella glances at Fedar’s face. He stares at her.

“Time for the fun.” Fedar says lifting the marionette till the dolls face is level with Mellas’. He brings his ungloved hand to the cheek of the doll and caresses it. The marionette dissolves into a pile of dust.

“I may do that to your grandmother’s body.” Fedar says as he stands and walks down the stairs.

Mella swats away the dust pile. Her jaws clenched. She scrambled to her feet to look below to see if he went near the coffin. She wanted him to hurt. She saw him come out a ways back from the coffin. He didn’t even look to see if she looking. Instead he walked the edge of the temple, talking to different people. In time, she calmed a bit.

After several of these conversations, his parents found him. They led him to the coffin. As they approached Fedar turned his eyes meeting Mellas. She felt her jaw retighten, her grandmother’s body coming into view. She imagined strings from the body leading to an operating cross in her hands. A strange unexpected calmness descended onto her. She waited till Fedar was at the edge of the casket. As he reached the coffin she started working the controls. She sat the body up. Smacking away Fedar’s parents. Mella didn’t hear the screams. She worked the operating cross. She maneuvered the body out of the coffin. She grabbed Fedar from over his mother. She yanked him close, hitting him several times in the face. She wrapped her grandmother’s fingers around Fedars throat and began to squeeze.

Snatched back and off balance, Mella came back to herself. She felt a vice grip on her arm. Her mother had ahold of her arm and was screaming her name.

“Mom.” Mella said. She released her grandmother’s body, and collapsed.

That was how Mella discovered she was a Controller.