



Mrs. Macabre

Austin Ray Bouse

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The Mrs. Macabre Chronicles, Volume 1

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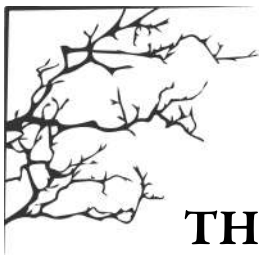
MRS. MACABRE

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Written by Austin Ray Bouse.

I would like to thank my parents, for always supporting my creepy creations, my Universal family, for lighting the creative spark in me, and my editor Francesca Leon, for making my words better than I ever could. -A.R.B.



1. THE RAVEN AND THE CAT



IT WAS PAST MIDNIGHT when the raven and the cat materialized from the dark. Materialized is the correct term, for if you had been outside at such a late hour or had peeked from your window, you would've seen the animals emerge from the darkness as if it were a curtain. Their black feathers and fur glistening in the street lamps. You would have also noticed how odd

the pairing was. The raven was not flying from the cat, nor was the cat chasing after the raven. They were both moving as if they were on a stroll together, the raven hovering slightly above the cat.

Once they had exited from the night, they both stopped at the end of the street, with the raven landing next to the cat. They stood there for a moment, as if they were trying to figure out what to do next.

“So,” the cat finally said to the raven, “we’re here aren’t we?”

“Patience, Elvira,” the raven said to her companion. “We should wait first.” The raven spoke with a voice that was deep, smooth, and confident. The voice of a woman who had done her fair share of waiting before.

“Wait for what?” Elvira said impatiently. She scratched her ear with her paw.

A bright light came from off to the side, a car was speeding right towards them. The raven flew with a caw and landed on the nearest light post. Elvira arched her back and hissed, her eyes filled with fear, the car honked, swerved, but hit her nonetheless.

“That,” the raven said and flew down to her companion, her talons hitting the ground with a righteous click.

The cat’s body lay limp for a moment, then there were the sounds of small cracks as her bones reformed inside herself. She blinked and got up. “Can’t believe you made me waste a life on one of those things,” Elvira shook her head. “Why do they have such *ugly* machines here?”

“Because they don’t have magic here, darling,” she sighed, tenderly. “How many lives do you have left now?”

“One,” Elvia grumbled.

“Oh,” The raven paused, embarrassed by how flip-pant she had been. “Then we’ll be more cautious from now on, won’t we?” She looked down the street, left and then right. “Now, I believe the coast is clear.”

The raven placed her wings in front of her and bowed her head into them. If you were to gaze once again from the window or the street, you would’ve been so shocked that you might have thought you were

dreaming. Yes, two talking animals were alarming enough, but what was even more alarming was that the raven was growing. The bird grew to the height of an average adult, her wings wrapped around her body, her feathers swished as if hundreds of dresses were being unfurled together. The feet of the bird turned into heels with pointed toes. Her wings grew pale hands with black nails and her feathers became a black dress. The head of the bird had changed to a woman's with skin the color of paper and hair and lips as dark as the night sky. She wore a small hat that had a black feather sticking out of it with a veil that draped on the side of her face. In her hand, she held a broom. The transformation was complete and there, standing next to the cat on an ordinary street, was Mrs. Macabre.

"Show off," Elvira scoffed.

"Now, now, my dear," Mrs. Macabre smiled, "there are plenty of people who can turn into animals, but not too many animals who can talk."

"Let's just get this over with," the cat eyed her companion's broom. "You might want to change that. I

don't believe people here are accustomed to walking with brooms down streets?"

Mrs. Macabre looked down at her broom. It was a beautifully ornate thing: Dirty blonde straw from the fear fields, a long black handle made of wood from a hemlock tree with symbols and hieroglyphics carved into it, a skull of a raven sat nicely at the top of it.

"Yes," she placed a hand to her chin, "yes, I do suppose you are right," there was a moment of silent contemplation, then she exclaimed, "I've got it!"

Mrs. Macabre stood next to her broom and began to twirl it with two fingers. It quickly took a life of its own and began to spin without her assistance. As it spun, the broom slowly changed, its straw disappeared and was replaced by large bat wings. The broom stopped spinning and it became apparent that there wasn't any bat wings at all, but the canopy of a black umbrella.

"Better?" She asked.

"I believe so," Elvira said, walking forward. "Now come on. If we don't get back home soon, we'll be stuck

here till tomorrow night. You wouldn't want to stay in the sun now would you?

Mrs. Macabre shuddered at the thought. Where she and Elvira came from, they were never bothered by the cruel heat of an unforgiving sun. The closest their world came to daylight was a dreary overcast.

As they walked down the neighborhood street, Mrs. Macabre's heels clacked against the asphalt like talons. She had hoped that the sound would not disturb any of the residents from their slumber or a bad case of insomnia. Though she had visited this world countless times, she had never been pleased by how plain the houses were. They just sat there next to each other like perfect white squares in their perfectly manicured lawns, with their perfectly straight driveways. There were no jagged lines, dead flowers, or a hint of black to be found on any of them. The houses didn't even *move*! How primitive. The only resemblance this world had to her own was the current darkness and a pleasant mist that hung faintly in the air. She smiled at how grim it felt .

"Do you see anything?" She asked the cat.

"Not particularly," Elvira said as they walked, staring at each house. "Or, at least not what we're looking for."

"I hope no one sees us" Mrs. Macabre said, annoyed. "If we run into another girl scout, I swear to Hades-"

"Wait," Elvira stopped dead in her tracks.

"Yes?" Mrs. Macabre perked up a bit.

Elvira nodded to her. They both walked towards a house, the damp grass squeaking under their feet as they quietly grew closer. A loud bark came from behind the fence next to the house, making them stop.

"Dogs," Elvira hissed, hair standing up. "Why do so many of them have to have dogs?"

"Patience, my sweet," Mrs. Macabre reassured her, "they can be easily distracted." She tilted her umbrella up and a piece of straw grew out of the tip of it. She held it between two fingers, gazing at it intensely. The bit of straw slowly turned into a white bone. She threw it over the fence and the dog stopped barking, the

thumping of its paws could be heard running across the yard.

“Thanks,” Elvira sighed.

“You’re welcome,” Mrs. Macabre smiled. “Where are they?”

“Up there,” Elvira tilted her head towards the second floor of the house. Another black window stared back at them like all the rest.

“Ah, yes,” Mrs. Macabre moved closer, almost to the front porch. “Come on up, then,” she gestured her shoulder to Elvira. The cat hopped on and sat next to her head, with both her hands on the handle of the umbrella, Mrs. Macabre flew upwards.

They reached the window and hovered in front of it. From the glow of the moonlight, Mrs. Macabre could see two beds occupied by two girls who looked almost exactly alike. Their room was decorated with fake spider webs and bats, posters of *The Nightmare Before Christmas* and other spooky films hung here and there. A collection of horror books were placed neatly on a shelf in the corner.

“Oh, I like them very much, indeed,” Mrs. Macabre whispered, “but do you think they require our assistance?”

Elvira’s eyes glowed the color of glow-in-the-dark paint, and stared at the children. “They would do well back home,” she said, distracted, as if she was looking for something.

Mrs. Macabre nodded in agreement.

“They are not liked by others,” she continued. “But that’s because they possess qualities that more. . . narrow minded folk do not see.”

“Is that a yes?”

“It is,” Elvira’s eyes returned to their normal, darker green shade.

“Wonderful then let us- “ she gasped.

“What is it?” Elvira asked, she squinted in the window and saw, the clock on their nightstand, glowing with the same green as her eyes had been just moments before: It was ten minutes till the hour was up.

"Blast!" Mrs. Macabre said, then quickly flew back down. Elvira jumped off and they went rushing off of the front lawn and into the street.

"I told you we should have left the manor earlier!. You're always so-" Elvira panted

"Oh, do shut up, darling," Mrs. Macabre said as her umbrella transformed into a broom again. They reached the black area from which they had entered.

Elvira had noticed her companion had stopped. "Well," she said impatiently, "come on, then!"

"You stay here," Mrs. Macabre said.

"What?" Elvira said, shocked.

"I need you to keep an eye on the children, dear," Mrs. Macabre said keeping her measured tone.

"Why?"

"Because we want to be certain that these are the *correct* children."

"But-"

"Would you care for me to jog your memory on what happened last time?" Mrs. Macabre's face was still as stone and her eyes were as sharp as knives. Elvira

knew what that expression meant, she had seen it in her companion's darkest moments. It was an expression of utmost certainty.

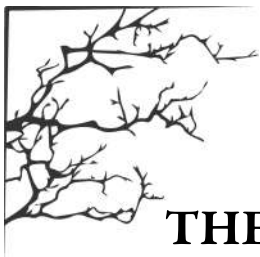
"Yes," Elvira sighed. "You're right."

"Good kitty," Mrs. Macabre smiled and scratched Elvira behind her right ear, her favorite spot. "In the meantime, have some dinner," she removed another straw from her broom and tossed it up in the air. By the time it had hit the ground, it had transformed into a mouse. It squeaked at the sight of the cat and ran away.

Elvira glared at it with hungry eyes. "Thank you," she looked back up at Mrs. Macabre, who had taken her raven shape again. "But don't do this again."

"Nevermore," said the raven and she flew into the darkness.

"Hilarious," Elvira said and ran down the street, looking for the mouse.



2. **THE GRACEY TWINS**



JANE AND CATHERINE Gracey were-and had always been- weirdos. That was what other children had called them, anyway. In the lexicon of insults that were hurled at them on a daily basis by their peers, that was the term that appeared the most. In fact, most people, whether it be at school or in their neighborhood thought of them as weirdos. Ever since they were toddlers, the Gracey twins were never interested in appear-

ing like other little girls. Instead of playing with Barbie dolls or My Little Ponies, for instance, they would always be found playing with monster figures or toy dragons. While most children drew sun flowers and rainbows upon picking up a crayon, Jane and Catie would draw graveyards and skeletons.

Mr. and Mrs. Gracey were not too keen on their girls apparent interest in the darker side of things, but they were not particularly interested in “fixing” them, either. They simply ignored them whenever the subject came up.

“Mommy! Mommy!” The little Jane had said, running to her one day, “I can read a poem!” She held up a copy of *The Raven* by Edgar Allan Poe with as much pride as a child who had just learned to read *The Cat In The Hat*.

“That’s nice, dear,” Mrs. Gracey would say, waving a hand at her, as if she would disappear with the flick of a wrist, her eyes transfixed by the glow of the TV in front of her.

"Daddy!" The young Catie once came stepping in to the garage as her father stood under the hood of his car. "Jane and I played Burn The Witch today and *I* got to be the witch!"

"Wrench?" Her dad's voice echoed as if he was in a well. "Could you hand me that wrench there, sweetheart?"

She went over to his tool box, picked up the wrench, then gave it to him. "Did you hear what I said?" She asked, making sure he had, she was so excited to tell him about her recent adventure.

"Uh-huh," he looked at the instrument. "I meant the right one."

"That is the right one, Daddy."

"No, this one doesn't fix the engine," he said confidently.

"Yes it does," she said patiently.

He paused for a moment, then sighed, determined to show his daughter that he was correct. He placed the wrench on the engine and a metal slot could be heard entering the machine.

There was another, longer pause. "Oh," he finally said, "I guess you were right."

Mr. and Mrs. Gracey were not the kind of parents that you would find in fairy tales or other stories, evil or wicked, they were perfectly fine people. But that was their problem, they were neither horrible or brilliant. They were the types of parents who simply felt that children were simple. Once they were in college, that was the time to treat their children like complex people filled with curiosity and interest in the world. But the two girls were thirteen, and for now, Mr. and Mrs. Gracey were fine with being fine.

Jane and Catherine were not just sisters, but identical twins. Only a few close family members and their parents could tell them apart. Jane for instance had green eyes, whereas Catherine had brown. Jane had a mole on her right arm, her sister did not. But save for those and a few other details, you would think that they were mirror images of one another. Both of them had black hair, both of them were exactly the same height, and both of them wore the same clothing. Un-

like most kids at school, the Gracey sisters wore their love of dark things on their sleeves quite literally. Black shirts, dresses, and shoes, with the occasional white stripes and spots of red to keep their wardrobe varied. Sometimes they would even communicate without speaking. Just a look from one sister would receive a nod or a laugh from the other. Their fellow students would call them creepy or psychic because of their uncanny ability to talk to one another without saying a word, but they tried to ignore them as best as they could.

And so, they now sat on an old, rusty bench, alone. Catherine was carving something into the wood of the bench with a nail file while Jane sat reading a book, two activities that you would often find them partaking in.

"I'm making something," Catie spoke as if her sister had asked.

"I figured," Jane said, keeping her eyes on her book.

"Don't you want to see?"

"In a minute" Jane said, annoyed.

"Haven't you read that thing fifteen times?" Catie laughed.

"Fourteen," Jane shot back.

"What is it, anyway?"

Jane sighed, "It's a biography on Mary Shelley," that was her favorite author as *Frankenstein* was her favorite book. Most children her age hadn't read either of them, a fact that she was secretly proud of.

"Just look at it," Catie said impatiently.

"Fine," Jane placed her book mark in the middle of a page and shut it. She leaned over her sister. The wood was now decorated with the small face of a cat.

"It's a cat," Catie said after a pause.

"I can see it's cat," Jane huffed, but smiled anyways. They were both fond of animals in general, but cats were their favorite.

"Not just *any* cat," Catie grinned as if she was about to reveal a secret and pointed.

Across the road, sitting on the sidewalk was a feline. Its fur was as black as the sisters' hair and its ears were pointed straight up. Its eyes, however, were a deep

green. Greener than they had ever seen from any other cat.

“So?” Jane shrugged.

“So?” Catie said in mock-outrage. “*So?* It’s been staring at us since we sat down!”

Jane looked at the cat again and realized that it had indeed been looking at them once they had gotten there. “Cats do that.”

“They look at things,” Catie said, “but this one is different.”

The Gracey twins stared at the cat again and the longer they looked at it, the more Jane knew what Catie had been talking about. The cat wasn’t *just* looking at them, but gazing, as if concentrating on their every movement. It was looking at them the way you might look at someone on the street with a funny hat or someone who was playing an instrument on the corner.. Catie slowly lifted a hand and waved to it.

“What are you doing?” Jane asked.

“I’m saying hi,” Catie said, not minding her tone. “It looks like it wants to say hi. You should too.”

"This is stupid," Jane opened up her book again.

"And you're being rude," Catie said, continuing to wave.

Jane thought for a moment and looked back up at the cat. She supposed that, if she were a cat and she was looking at two girls across the street so intently, she would want to get their attention. And, furthermore, if one of the girls did not wave at her, she would consider that to be rude. Possibly even mean-spirited.

She closed her book once again and slowly raised her hand to the cat and waved. She thought she'd add a smile, to make sure that the cat knew that she was friendly, instead of just waving out of politeness.

"Good job," Catie said.

The cat twitched, as if noticing for the first time that the twins were looking at it. It glanced around, seemingly confused, then began to lick its paw. It did so for several moments, then directed an eye back to the girls. Seeing that they were still staring at it, the cat ran away so fast and so suddenly, it made the twins

jump. Its black fur darted into the bushes and never came back.

The girls looked at each other for a moment, trying to process what had just happened.

“That was-“ Catie began.

“Weird,” Jane finished.

Before they could speak of it any further, the school bus finally arrived.



LUCKILY, FOR JANE, her favorite class was the first of the day: English. While most of her peers would be hunched over their desks, eyes glazed over, trying with every fiber of their being to keep themselves from falling asleep, Jane would sit with wrapt attention, hanging on to every syllable that came out of her teacher's mouth. This morning was not only lucky due to the subject of the class, but the lesson being taught today was on female writers, specifically Mary Shelley.

“Now class,” Mr. O’ Brien said. “Does anyone know what was Mary Shelley’s full name?”

Jane’s arm shot up like a rocket from the back of the room. She was never the type to do this in any of her other classes, but she made an exception for English.

“Yes, Jane?” He sighed, going through the daily routine.

“Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley,” she recited.

“Very good,” he said. “Does anyone know what famous poet she was married to?”

Jane’s hand immediately went up yet again.

“Anyone but Jane?” He asked, scanning the desks.

Jane’s arm extended even further, as if he couldn’t see her.

“Yes, Jane?” Mr. O’Brien finally gave in.

“Percy Bysshe Shelley,” she beamed.

“Well done,” he quickly moved on to his next question for the class. “Can anyone tell me what Mary was—
“

"I also know what happened after he died," Jane cut him off.

This caught the attention of her classmates. Those who were on the verge of sleeping were suddenly wide awake. They all turned to face her.

"Um, I'm sorry?" The teacher asked.

"After he died," Jane continued, excitedly, "Mary wrapped up his heart in a copy of one of his poems and kept it in her desk!" She ended her fact with a smile. Most would consider her eagerness to share her knowledge of Mary Shelley as a sign of arrogance, that she stated those facts because she wanted the class to know that *she* knew them, but this was not the case. Jane Gracey was not a know-it-all by any means, she was someone who loved things with a fiery passion and she assumed that, since she loved that particular morbid aspect of Shelley's life, then others in her class might as well.

This was not true. Her fact was met with horrified silence. Some of her classmates looked at her as if she had just coughed up a hairball, others giggled at her,

taking joy in such an embarrassing moment. One, a new boy, smiled, but she wasn't sure if it was out of interest or malice.

"Yes," Mr. O'Brien, a man who was easily made uncomfortable, tried to break the silence. "That's . . . interesting," he immediately ignored her and moved on.

Jane felt a deflating feeling go through her, as if she was a balloon that had just been pricked by a needle. The hair on the back of her neck stood up and the cold sensation of shame washed over her. She sunk in her seat, mortified that she had even considered anyone else would be interested in what she had to say.

Her eyes slowly drifted across the room, no longer paying attention to what her teacher was saying, then she caught something at the corner of her eye. Just outside the window was the same black cat that she and Catie had seen just that morning. It was staring at her with those same remarkable green eyes and, like earlier that day, it ran off as soon as it realized she was looking at it.



CATHERINE'S FAVORITE class was unfortunately, much later than her sister's favorite. It was two whole hours after lunch and one hour before the day was done. She had always been a crafter and explorer, one to travel and create new things, so naturally her passion was in science class. Today was one that she had been looking forward to for weeks now: Project Day. Each of the students chose an invention from history to recreate. Jane had helped Catie with the research, the actual construction of it was all her doing. Before leaving the house that morning, she had placed it under a black cloth and ever so gently set it in her backpack. She had even moved her books and other things to the pockets so as not to crush it. Some splinters, sticky glued fingers, and even a little bleeding was involved, but it was well worth it.

Most days in which students would have presented something to the class, Catie was always eager to go first. She felt that it was better to just get it over with and relax for the remainder of the lesson than it was to wait and compare yourself to other's work. But today was different. Given the nature of the project, she wanted to go last. What she had under that black curtain would surely surprise every one in the room.

The students presented each of their projects one by one. A model of the Wright brothers first airplane was shown made out of popsicle sticks, the first telephone was another made from Styrofoam, there was even a very impressive train that one boy had made with his dad. All the students presented their recreations with the same flat tone as they read off Wikipedia facts from cards that they had written on days before.

"Catie?" Mrs. Johnson asked. "Why don't you show us yours?"

She smiled and let out a sigh, preparing herself. She turned around and her sister gave her a thumbs up. She

carefully lifted the project out of her pack and made her way to the front of the class. All of the students rolled their eyes and snickered at the theatricality of her project, but she didn't mind. Her pride in her work outweighed her sense of what anyone else thought of her.

"For my project," she began, reciting her speech from memory, "I wanted to make something that was old and new when it was first created. You don't see these anymore unless you go to museums or castles in Europe, but I think this invention is important to history. Ladies, gentlemen, and persons! Boils and ghouls! I give you. . . ." she took off the black drape with a theatrical flourish, "*The guillotine!*"

Her recreation was indeed, impressive. The guillotine was made out of small plywood that stood a few inches tall. The actual blade was made out of one of her dad's razors. A little man that she made out of tooth picks was trapped in the stocks. No one noticed the level of detail that went into the project of course, they only stared at it, not sure what to make of it.

“Wait, wait!” Catie placed up a hand in protest, as if they didn’t quite get what she was going for. “It also does this!” She pulled a piece of twine on the side of the small execution device and the blade came slashing down onto the neck of the toothpick man. His head fell off and rolled into a tiny wicker basket. She looked up to see her classmate’s, and her teacher’s, amazed faces. But they did not stare from wonder, they were staring out of horror.

Jane erupted into applause. “Bravo!” She cheered, “Magnificent!”

But her attempts to make her sister feel better only made things worse. If you’ve ever been ridiculed by your classmates like Catie and Jane had, then you will understand that perhaps the worse thing that a person who was ridiculing you could do, was not say a word. The saying that sticks and stones will break your bones, but words will never hurt you, is a lie. Words can and will hurt you. But silence can leave scars.



LATER THAT NIGHT, AFTER dinner and homework, the Gracey twins went to bed, sad that they would have to wake for another day at school the next morning.

“What’s wrong?” Catie asked as she got under the covers.

“I didn’t say anything,” Jane said, which was true.

“You don’t have to,” Catie responded. “I know that look. You’re wearing your I Feel Bad, But I Don’t Want Catie To Know face.”

Jane sighed, disappointed that she had been caught. “I just. . . I just had a bad day, is all.”

“*We* had a bad day. We always have bad days. Why was this one worse?”

“I don’t know” Jane chuckled. “I hate that no one understands us. I hate that people are mean to us. I hate when they look at us, like we’re some sort of. . . “

"Freaks?" Catie asked.

"Yeah. Why aren't there any kids at school like us?"

"I don't know. Maybe they'll be other kids like us next year," Catie always felt like she had to reassure Jane, since she was the oldest of the two. Even if it was only by a minute.

"Doubt it," Jane grumbled. There was silence between them, each wanting to have the other's back, but not knowing what to say. Maybe being quiet was the best thing to do at the time.

The silence was broken by a scratching sound. They both looked at each other, then around. The scratching sound continued until they both stared at the window. Sitting on the sill, behind the glass was the black cat they saw that morning.

"Oh my god," Jane said.

"Is that the-?" Catie began to ask in amazement.

"Yeah."

"Well, don't just sit there, let it in!"

"What?" Jane spun around to face her. "Are you crazy?"

"It's a cat! We love cats!"

"It's a stray! It might have fleas or something! Besides, I saw it at school, watching us," she spoke as if that piece of information would present her case as entirely impenetrable.

"Perfect reason to let it in then," Catie said with checkmate confidence.

Jane sat, trying to think of an argument, she couldn't and groaned. "Fine!" She threw her hands up in the air. The cat sat patiently at the window as she walked over and opened it. The feline shot in the moment the window was wide enough, and Jane moved out of its way as quickly as she could.

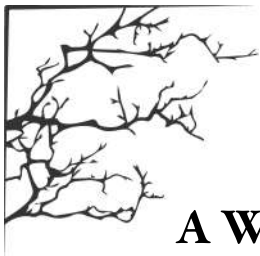
"But it's sleeping with *you*! She closed the window as far as she could, but it remained stuck an inch above the sill.

"That's fine," Catie patted on the bed and the cat leapt up onto it. "I'll tell Mom and Dad that it was my idea too."

“You better,” Jane flopped onto her bed. “Good night,” she clicked off the nightstand skull lamp they shared.

“Good night,” Catie said with a smile.

The cat clawed on the bed for a few minutes and then finally curled up next to the eldest Gracey girl. The twins drifted off to sleep soon after, but the cat stayed wide awake, keeping an eye on the small crack that Jane had made when she shut the window.



3. A WITCH AT THE WINDOW



AT TEN MINUTES PAST midnight, Jane heard the sound of tapping. In her sleep, she had momentarily thought it was the beginning of some dream that she was having. It sounded distant and quiet at first, but as the sound grew louder, it pulled her up from consciousness. Blinking and groaning, she assumed that it was the faint tapping of raindrops hitting her window.

She blinked once more and saw, across from her, that the cat was gone from her sister's bed.

She quickly turned around, darting her eyes back and forth, trying to see where it had gone. She hated the idea of some stray animal lurking in the closet or behind a shelf, potentially knocking things over. Or an even worse idea than that: The cat had snuck out of their room and down to where their parents slept. Even thinking about getting a lecture from her dad at this hour, on a school night, was not her idea of a good time. But she saw the faint outline of the bedroom door and it was closed. Jane sighed, confused and frustrated over where their newfound pet could've gone. She turned and saw it.

The tapping was coming from a large black bird that was sitting outside the window, its beak left tiny marks on the glass. The cat was scratching at the bottom of the window, trying to get to it. *Great*, she thought, *it wants to eat the bird*. At that moment, the cat looked at her briefly and rolled its eyes at her. She

thought it might have been an hallucination of drowsiness that was causing her to see such a strange gesture.

As the cat continued to claw at the window sill, Jane sat in her bed conflicted. If she banged on the window to get rid of the raven, it would wake Catie up, which would surely cause her sister to throttle her. She had gotten the impression that the cat was just as annoyed with her as Jane was with it, so the idea of simply picking it up and putting it on the bed could lead to a few claw and bite marks.

“Kitty,” she whispered to it. The cat did not hear her. “Kitty!” She tried a little louder, but the animal still persisted, as did the bird. Jane placed her hands on her face, completely at a loss on what to do about the situation. She peeked out of her fingers and saw that the cat wasn’t clawing at the window sill, it was trying to grab it at the crack near the bottom. She had thought she had closed it all the way, but she must have missed an inch or two. No, it wasn’t just grabbing at it, either. It was trying to push the window up.

“Catie,” she whispered to her sister, astonished at what she was seeing. “Catie!” She said again, only stirring her this time. She looked over and, unbelievably, the cat had moved the window an inch. Panicking, Jane cried out, “*Catherine!*”

“What?” Catie woke up with a start. “What’s wrong?”

But before Jane could explain, it was too late. The cat had opened the window just enough that the bird came swooping inside the room. Both of the girls cried out in shock as the sound of its wings filled the space.

“What should we do?” Jane asked. She looked around to see if the cat was chasing it, but to her surprise, it wasn’t. It merely sat on the floor waiting patiently.

The strangest part of all, though, came when the raven flew down to the center of the floor and wrapped its wings around itself. The Gracey twins looked at one another, confused and worried. They were at a loss for words when, suddenly, the bird began to grow into the

shape of a woman. They stared at the figure with wide-eyed horror.

"Don't be frightened, girls," the figure spoke in a soothing tone. "I'm not *that* scary," she snapped her fingers and sparks flew from them. Jane and Catie let out a cry as the lamp on the nightstand turned on. Standing in front of them was a beautiful woman with black hair wearing a dress and hat to match and in one hand she held the strangest looking broom the twins had ever seen.

"See," she smiled warmly with her lips the color of night, "that wasn't so bad, now was it?"

"Who- who-" Catie stammered.

"Oh, come, come, dear Catherine," the woman ordered, "I'll turn you into an owl if you don't start speaking properly." There was a hint of mischief in her voice, as if she were enjoying their shock.

"Who are you?" She finally got out.

"Ah, yes. Where *are* my manners? It is obvious that you've met my faithful companion, Elvira, here," she gestured to the cat.

"Hello, girls," the animal bowed its head.

"It TALKS?" Jane couldn't help herself, she nearly shrieked out the question.

"Yes," Elvira said, taking some offense to her outburst. "I'm a *cat*," she said this as if speaking was the most obvious thing for her to be doing.

"And you can call me," the woman continued, "Mrs. Macabre," she snapped her fingers again and two cards appeared between them. With a simple flick of her wrist, they were both sent out of her hand and landed on the laps of the twins perfectly.

Jane and Catie looked at one another for a moment, as if the cards were going to bite them. They picked them up, and on the bone-white cards read: MRS. LENORE MACABRE. WITCH FOR HIRE. 1313 HALLOWLAND.

"How do you know our names?" Catie asked.

"Elvira told me," Mrs. Macabre explained, "every witch has a familiar and she is mine, so we share a psychic link between one another."

"The cat can read minds?" Jane covered her head, as if that would shield her brain from being tampered with.

"I'm a *cat*," Elvira sighed, "that's how I found you both," she turned to her companion, "they were so smart at school, you would think that would carry over afterwards."

"Rude!" Jane retorted.

"Why are you here?" Catie ignored the absurd squabble.

"As you can see from my card," Mrs. Macabre sat on the edge of her bed, "my occupation is one of service, but one of the things that I am most fond of doing is helping ostracized children in need. That is to say, lending a hand to those that others define as strange and unusual. Elvira and I took a sabbatical of sorts from assisting children such as yourselves. But we are delighted to say that we are ready to get cracking again! So, I extend an invitation to spend some time with me in my homeland. Just for a short holiday."

"Where do you live?" Jane asked

"It is called the Hallowland," her eyes blazed with wonder, "a place filled with monsters, ghosts, and ghouls. You humans see glimmers of it when the gates become visible to you once a year. All Hallow's Eve, I believe you call it?"

"We know it!" Catie turned to her sister, their eyes locked with excitement, Halloween was their favorite day of the year.

"Oh, wonderful!" Mrs. Macabre exclaimed. "I'll pack your bags!" She snapped her fingers and their suitcases were pulled out of their closet by invisible hands, drawers opened and clothes began to fly out of them and into the luggage.

"Wait a minute," Catie said. The clothes hung in mid-air and their guest turned to them. "This is all happening so fast. Can I talk to Jane for a second?"

"Of course! I just got so excited, I forgot what you poor dears must think of everything. Talk amongst yourselves," Mrs. Macabre's pale cheeks grew less so, as if she were blushing. She walked over to Elvira and petted her.

Jane and Catie got out of their beds and leaned in close towards each other.

“So, what do you think?” Catie asked.

“I think this is crazy,” Jane replied.

“Crazy cool, you mean,” her sister smiled.

“I mean, yeah. She looks awesome and where she lives sounds doubly awesome. But. . .” she trailed off.

“I know. It’s weird.”

“Not weird in a bad way. I don’t know,” Jane shook her head, confused. A hundred thoughts spun in her mind like bees. “Mrs. Macabre?” She asked the witch.

“Yes?” She raised her head.

“I don’t mean to be rude, but. . .” Jane hesitated. “How do we know we can trust you? How do we you won’t eat us like in *Hansel and Gretel*?”

“You don’t,” Mrs. Macabre stood up. “In fact, I’m very pleased you asked that question. I admire doubt in a person. If it is within reason, doubt is a testament to one’s character. It shows that you are unwilling to follow someone bigger than you simply because they said so and that you are capable of making your own deci-

sions. I also admire honesty. So, to be honest with you, Jane Gracey, I have done many terrible things in my long life. And helping others such as yourself and your sister is my way of making amends for that. Whether you trust me or not is up to you.”

Jane thought for a moment. Like most parents, Mr. and Mrs. Gracey had taught their daughters not to trust strangers. And, as she assumed, especially not strangers who had just flown into her room disguised as a raven and then turned themselves into a witch. There was something enchanting about not just her offer to explore a realm of ghoulish delights, but about Mrs. Macabre herself. She was someone of both grace and beauty, as well as having a gleeful glint in her eye that seemed inherently warm somehow. She also thought that if she was a stranger who wanted to do harm to her and Catie, she would not be as candid as she had been just then. If she were in fact like the witch from *Hansel and Gretel*, she would tell her that she was trustworthy and that there wasn't a bad bone in her body. But, considering this witch had just admitted to

once being bad and was now trying to make up for it, it would be wrong of her to not give her a chance, at least.

“Okay,” she finally said, “let’s go,” she was almost knocked over by her sister hugging her so hard.

“Wonderful!” Mrs. Macabre smiled. The clothes came to life again and folded themselves in their suitcases. The cases zipped and buckled themselves without the aid of a single finger. “Come along, girls,” she motioned to them, “Catie hold my hand and Jane hold hers.”

They did what they were instructed to do. “What now?” Jane asked, now becoming more excited at the prospect of their adventure.

“Fly, of course,” Mrs. Macabre snapped her fingers and the window completely opened. A slight breeze blew in as Elvira leapt out.

Jane nearly had the wind knocked out of her as she and her sister were carried off by Mrs. Macabre and her broom. All three of them flew out of the bedroom window like a human chain, their suit cases following behind them.

"Don't look down," Catie giggled.

"I'm looking down," Jane of course did look down for a moment and saw the cat waiting for them on the grass, her green eyes glistened in the dark. Jane shut her own eyes until they landed.

"Excellent work, my dears," Mrs. Macabre smiled. "Most children get sick on the way down."

"Don't say that," Jane said, holding back her dinner.

"Quickly now," Mrs. Macabre hurried down the front lawn. "We don't want the gate to close on us!"

The Gracey twins picked up their suitcases and followed the witch and the cat. Jane's feet felt wet on the damp grass and the sounds of crickets in the dark made her feel strange. True, this impromptu trip was thrilling, but there was something forbidden about it as well. Like sneaking downstairs to grab a cookie and trying her hardest not to wake her parents, Jane felt the rush of danger.

"Mrs. Macabre?" Catie asked, trying to keep her voice down so that the neighbors wouldn't hear them. "What do you mean by gate?"

"She means that," Elvira gestured ahead. At the end of the street was a huge black wall, not night exactly, but a curtain of darkness.

"That's the gate to the Hallowland," Mrs. Macabre said, "it opens every night at midnight in your time. Once the clock strikes one, it's closed until it strikes midnight again."

"Can anyone see it?" Jane asked, amazed that no one had called the police yet. The gate was massive, seeming to stretch to infinity both upwards and sideways.

"Only if you believe in such things. Most do not," Mrs. Macabre smiled then stopped once they reached the edge. "Hold each others hands again, ladies. It's very dark in there."

They did, Jane held Catie's damp palm, she knew that they both felt nervousness and excitement at that moment. All of them stepped through and Mrs. Macabre was right, it was very dark in there, but it was also very cold. The only light that came through was from the street, but even that stopped several feet be-

yond them. All there was going forward was a tunnel of black.

“See you on the other side,” Elvira said, flicking her tail. She walked a few steps and was gone.

“Wh-where is she going?” Jane asked, teeth chattering, her voice echoing for miles.

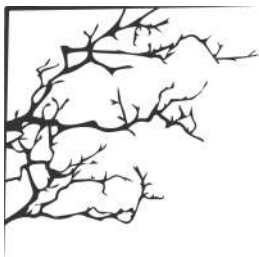
“Home,” Mrs. Macabre said, “cats can see in the dark. We on the other hand must use other modes of transportation,” she placed both her hands on the broom, planting it firmly on the dark floor. “Grab hold, children.”

They did with shaky hands.

“Blasting off,” she said with a smile.

And with that, the small light that shone through the tunnel disappeared. The darkness swirled around them. As it gained speed, wind blew through the twins’ hair. It grew louder and louder, until the wind started to howl. Green lightening flashed over them and, for a moment, Jane saw her sister and Mrs. Macabre tightly holding onto the broom, their clothes whipping around them. She was terrified that her hands would

lose her grip, that she would let go and be lost in the black forever. As the wind blew, it felt like ice on her skin. The lightning cracked and thunder bellowed once more. Her screams were drowned out by the howling of the gale force. Then, the tornado slowed down, the wind died, and it was no longer cold. The darkness slowly turned to smoke. As it evaporated around them, the Gracey twins were in someplace new.



4. MRS. MACABRE'S MANOR

“Welcome to the Hallowland!” Mrs. Macabre announced with arms outstretched. Jane and Catherine looked around at the vast landscape that surrounded them. Rolling dark hills with dead trees dotted here and there, a graveyard could be seen somewhere off in the distance, hundreds of bats flew zig-zagging and swirling in unison through the sky. A gray mist hung lightly in the air that gave the Hallowland an almost dreamlike feeling. A white full moon lit the black sky in a pale light. The air was cool and soothing

on the twins, like an autumn morning. The Gracey girls only thought of magic and wonder.

Jane took a step back, her feet crunching on orange leaves, and realized that they were standing on a cliff-side. She looked down and saw black water frothing with white as it crashed against the rocks below.

“Careful now, Jane,” their host said, “that water has sea monsters. They are friendly folk, but their tentacles do sting a bit,” she smiled and Jane couldn’t help but do the same in return.

“Took you all long enough,” Elvira said below her. “I thought I’d be here all night.”

“The ride was a little bumpy,” Catie replied. “Mrs. Macabre, what about our parents?”

“What about them?” Mrs. Macabre asked.

“Well, we’re not at home anymore. Won’t they be worried about us?”

“Oh, forgive me!” Mrs. Macabre laughed. “How could I have been so thoughtless! You see, Catherine, time in the Hallowland works differently than it does

in your world. I'll have you back home before the sun rises, horrible thing that it is. I promise you."

"Oh, good!" Catie said and she looked at Jane. They both shared a thought between them, a thought that said that they hoped this trip would last long.

"Come along, darlings!" Mrs. Macabre said.

"To where?" Jane asked.

"To my house, of course," Mrs. Macabre smiled as she walked away.

The mist parted and the Gracey twins gasped at what they saw. Several yards in front of them was a very tall house. Catie spotted the style of architecture immediately as Victorian, but this was unlike any other house that she had seen from that period. Instead of a box, it was shaped vertically, as they got closer, they realized that it was in fact, shaped like a coffin. Windows glowed with candle light, making it look like a face in the dark. If it hadn't been for the moonlight above them, the black wood of the house would have been unrecognizable. It was the most extraordinary home

they had ever seen and they couldn't wait to get inside of it.

As they walked up the staircase to the front porch, each step let out a small squeak, making the girls giggle. Mrs. Macabre pulled out a key from her pocket and placed it into the door marked 1313 on it. As she turned the key into the lock, Jane and Catie heard the sound of bolts, chains, padlocks, and iron bars clicking open behind the single door.

"Are you ready?" Mrs. Macabre turned to them.

They nodded, the anticipation was so high, wasting one more word would stall it even further. The witch opened the door and they walked in. What they saw left them at a loss for more than one word, but for all of them. From the outside, the house appeared to be very narrow and confined, despite its height, but once inside, the Gracey twins were in an enormous foyer. A huge staircase was in front of them, twisting in a spiral, they stood on a black and white checkered marble floor and were surrounded by strange artifacts. Boxes, statues, and skeletons of various monsters decorated

the foyer, lamps and candles lit the house, giving it the magic glow of a jack-o-lantern. But the most impressive thing about the manor was when they looked up. Above them were levels, upon levels, upon levels. The ceiling itself was barely visible.

"It's impolite to stare with your mouths open, children," Mrs. Macabre said, shutting the door and placing her broom in the umbrella stand next to it.

"It's-it's-it's- Jane tried to say, but was too in awe from the sight of it all. Her neck began to ache from looking up for so long.

"Not much, I know, but it's home," she took a big whiff of the air. "Be it ever so humble."

"Is that. . . pumpkin spice?" Catie asked, taking a sniff of her own.

"Excellent work, Catherine," Mrs. Macabre placed a finger to her nose and winked. "It's my favorite aroma."

Elvira yawned. "All this traveling has made me tired. Good night everyone," she sauntered off up the stairs to a room somewhere.

“Good night, Elvira!” The Gracey twins waved, then Catie noticed something unusual. “Mrs. Macabre,” she said looking around, “Where are our suitcases?” A panic went through her and her sister. Did they lose them at the gate?

“Oh, they are in your room, my dear,” she said, “I made sure of it.”

“Of course,” Jane laughed, magic was something they’d have to get used to. “Where is our room, by the way?”

“Twelfth floor take a right, then a left, go straight, then another left, then you’ll find yourself at the door on the right,” Mrs. Macabre said.

“Um, could we write all that down?” Catie asked, her head reeling.

“Better yet!” She reached into her pocket, up to her elbow, and pulled out a folded piece of aged parchment. “Ta-da!” She handed it to them with a theatrical grace.

“What is it?” Jane took it.

“A map of the house, of course. You can easily lose your way in here. Took me at least three years to remember where I keep the tissues!”

Jane opened up the map and Mrs. Macabre was right, drawn on it was an exact blueprint of the manor. Hundreds of rooms were labeled and, at the very bottom, was a star that had YOU ARE HERE printed on it.

“I suggest taking the lift,” Mrs. Macabre said and pointed to an elevator off to the side.

“Good thinking,” Catie looked at the map. “I don’t think our legs could take it. Even with all the PE classes we’ve had.”

Mrs. Macabre chuckled. “I’ll leave you two to go exploring for yourselves! Good night, darlings! Don’t let the bogeyman bite!”

“Good night, Mrs.-“ the twins looked up and she was gone. They looked around and she was nowhere to be found.

“That’s not weird at all,” Jane said and walked over to the elevator.

“Sooooooo?” Catie smiled and nudged her sister’s shoulder.

“Alright, “Jane opened the iron grate with a loud squeak, and they got in the lift, “it is pretty cool.”

“I think you mean *really* cool,” Catie shut the grate on her way in.

“Really cool,” Jane looked at the panel of buttons off to the side, she wanted to explore all of them, but she felt they would easily become lost, even with the map, so instead she pushed twelve. The elevator came to life and they slowly moved up. “But we should still be careful.”

“She’s really nice, Jane,” Catie said in an annoyed tone.

“It’s not her that I’m worried about. It’s this place. The Hallowland.”

“What’s to be worried about?”

“It’s amazing, but it’s still a new place. We just need to stick together, Catherine,” Jane always used her sister’s full name to make a point with her. Catie had always been the extroverted one, but Jane had the cau-

tion that she lacked. She took pride in being hesitant about new situations and this was no different. The elevator came to a halt with a shudder and Catie opened the gate.

“Okay,” Jane stepped out, looking at the map, “let’s see here,” the star that marked where they were had moved to the twelfth floor. Each door on the map was labeled differently. As she scanned the page, she saw a door titled, THE GRACEY ROOM.

“That’s nice to put our name on it,” Catie said. “What’s that?” She pressed her finger on the door that said, SWAMP ROOM.

“I think it has a swamp in-“ Jane looked up, stating the obvious, but Catie had already ran her way down to the middle of the corridor and opened the door.

“Check this out,” her sister waved her arm to come closer. Moonlight shone on her face and fireflies came floating out of the doorway.

“I don’t think we should open random doors,” Jane said.

“Would you just get over here?” Catie asked impatiently.

Jane sighed and sulked her way over. She stood next Catie and peaked in. The room wasn’t a room at all, but an outdoor swamp. If they were to make one more step, they’d be neck deep in the dark water. Lilly pads dotted the lagoon here and there, reeds jutted out like small towers. The air was thick with humidity under the night sky.

“Whoa,” Jane couldn’t help but say, then she saw something moving in the water. Ripples were slowly heading towards them. A scaly head popped up from under the swamp and rose. At first the twins thought it was a reptile of some sort, but they were shocked to see a fish-man rise from the depths. Gills slowly moving, huge yellow eyes bulging out of his head, he held out a webbed-hand towards them. Just as he was about reach them, Jane slammed the door shut.

“Okay,” she panted. “Maybe not *that* door.”

“What about that room?” Catie asked pointing to a place on the map marked VOODOO ROOM. It was several doors down from where they were.

“Let’s see,” Jane said, walking over to the door, muffled conversation could be heard from within. She opened the door and her and Catie saw rows upon rows of shrunken heads all hanging from their hair on racks. They bobbed up and down as they chatted with themselves, some arguing, some laughing. They all stopped and turned towards the twins.

“Do you mind knocking first?” A head said, its eyes sewn shut.

“Sorry,” Catie said and shut the door. The conversation continued. The two girls looked at each and couldn’t help but burst out laughing.

“Can you imagine if Mom and Dad were here?” Jane giggled.

“They would die of shock,” Catie said.

They continued making their way through the corridors, going left, going right, up, and down, until finally they reached their room. Like the others, there was

no number to identify it, but a plaque that read: THE GRACEY ROOM.. They opened the door and were even more surprised by the room itself. It was an exact replica of their own from their house. Every piece of furniture, every book, every speck of dust was copied from home. Jane went to the window and saw that even their neighborhood was there. Their suitcases sat by the door, but they were open and empty. Jane and Catie looked through the drawers and closets and saw that everything that they had packed was neatly folded and placed throughout the room.

“Guess Mrs. Macabre wanted us to feel at home,” Jane said.

“I love magic,” Catie swooned and she fell onto the bed.

“So far, so good,” Jane got into hers.

“Don’t act like you’re not super impressed,” Catie smiled.

“We better get to sleep,” she yawned, ignoring her. “We need to make up for it. Night.”

“Night,” her sister sighed.

Jane turned off the lamp and, even though she wanted to continue being cautious, she couldn't help but smile as she drifted off to sleep.



SHE WAS WALKING DOWN a dark hallway. The only light that Jane saw was the one that outlined the door in front of her. It seemed to be miles away, but she got there with only four or five steps. She opened the door and the light blinded her. She held up her hand to shield her eyes, but as her sight adjusted, she saw that she was in a bright white chapel. She was standing on a red carpet that went straight to the alter. All the pews were filled with people she didn't recognize. Bouquets of roses were placed around lit candles, and at the center of the alter was a bride with her back towards her.

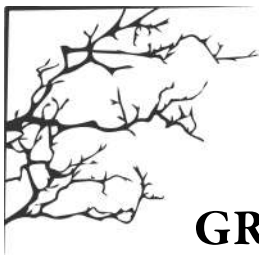
Jane was drawn to the bride, but wasn't sure why. There was something mysterious about her the same way that Mrs. Macabre was mysterious, she had to

know more. Like the dark corridor that she was just in, the path to the altar seemed to stretch on forever. But, unlike the corridor, this seemed to take longer. Hours seemed to pass. Jane finally reached the altar, she wanted to tell the bride something, but a fly stopped her. It buzzed and landed on the bride's white veil on the back of her head. Jane wanted to swat it away, but another fly landed on it. And another. A rank, horrible smell overtook the room. She turned around and saw that all of the guests had changed. They were mummified and decaying, flies buzzed around their empty eye sockets. The roses turned black and wilted. The candles burned out and the chapel went dark.

A cold breeze blew in and she covered her arms shaking. The bride had changed, instead of a white dress, she was now wearing all black. There were tears in the fabric and Jane could see that the bones beneath it were the same color as the dress. The bride turned, her veil covering her face like a spider's web. She bent towards her, bones creaking, until they were almost

face to face. Underneath the veil, Jane could see the faint outline of a skull staring back at her.

“I do,” said the bride in a raspy voice. the sound of a hundred flies buzzed through the air, then it turned into something else. Something horrible, something sad, something heartbreaking. It was the sound of weeping.



5. **GREMLINS**



THE NEXT MORNING, THE Gracey twins awoke to a bright blue sky and birds chirping from their neighborhood. They almost forgot they were in Mrs. Macabre's house until they opened the bedroom door. Once they reached downstairs from the elevator, they could hear the sizzling of meat on a stove, but couldn't place the delicious scent in the air. They made a turn at the foyer and saw the kitchen.

“Morning, darlings!” Mrs. Macabre said over the stove where she was making eggs of some sort on a skillet. The kitchen, unlike the rest of the house, was surprisingly small, cozy even.

“Morning, Mrs. Macabre,” the twins said in unison. They both lightly punched each other on the shoulder, a ritual they often did when they caught themselves mirroring one another.

“Morning,” Elvira said from a corner. Her mouth was full and she was standing over a bowl of half-eaten raw fish.

“How was your first night?” The witch asked with concern.

“Just like being home,” Catie said, taking a seat at the table in the center of the room.

“Fine,” Jane said, doing the same. She considered sharing her nightmare, but she decided not to. It felt secret somehow, like it was only meant for her. “Yourself?”

“Like a vampire, my dear,” Mrs. Macabre slid the eggs onto two plates. “Like a vampire. Breakfast is

served!” She set the plates down and, judging by how good the smell was, the twins were not expecting what was sitting in front of them. Instead of yellow, these eggs were the color of concrete.

“Um. . .” Catie started, trying not to sound disgusted.

“Oh, silly me!” Mrs. Macabre said and snapped her fingers. A cabinet and drawer opened and a pepper shaker, two forks, and two glasses floated from them. The glasses were filled from a pitcher with murky, green water and the shaker rattled some pepper onto the eggs. The glasses flew over and gently placed themselves next to their meals.

“What *is* this, exactly?” Jane asked, inspecting the contents of her glass to make sure nothing was alive in the liquid.

“Why it’s gargoyle eggs and beetle juice, dear,” Mrs. Macabre sat down at the other end of the table. “Breakfast of champions.”

Jane and Catie both looked at each other, unsure of what to do. Mrs. Macabre looked back at them with her hands on her chin, smiling.

“Don’t mind me. I’ve already had mine,” she said in a sweet voice.

Catie decided to bite the bullet first. She placed her fork in the eggs, picked them up and carefully placed them into her mouth. She chewed and made a face that surprised her sister. “Jane, you *have* to try this!”

“Don’t pull my leg,” Jane said, narrowing her eyes.

“I’m not! Promise. They’re really good!” Catie said, eating more.

Jane looked down at the gray eggs again, shut her eyes, and took a bite. Her older sister by only a minute was right. The eggs *were* good, fantastic, even. She wasn’t sure if it was because of how shocked she was, but they were some of the best eggs she had ever tasted. Not too runny and not too soft. She took a swig from the beetle juice and nearly laughed it out of her mouth. It tasted just like lemonade. “Hallowland breakfasts are the best!” She said.

"I'm so glad!" Mrs. Macabre applauded. "Eat up, we have a long day ahead of us."

"Is it going to get any brighter?" Catie asked, taking notice of the overcast outside. She also spotted no sun, but the full moon was still out.

"Oh, Hades no!" Mrs. Macabre laughed. "It never gets lighter than what you see outside. We of the Hal-lowland detest sunlight."

"What about seasons? Do you have those?"

"There are no winters, springs, or summers here. It is eternally autumn. Are there any more inquiries? I'd be delighted to answer them," she glanced back and forth at the girls.

"I have one," Jane said, finishing her breakfast, "On your card, it says that you're a missus."

"Correct," she smiled.

"Well, an R in the abbreviation for missus means that you're married. Are you?"

For the first time since they had met her, the Gracey twins saw a look of discomfort on Mrs. Macabre's face. It was if she was hiding a great shame

from them. One that only brought back bad memories. "I used to," she sunk down in her seat, "I kept the title in honor of my wife."

"Oh. . ." Jane said, noticing the uncomfortable twinge in the air. "What happened to her?"

She paused and thought about it. Then she perked up with a smile. "Let's get going, shall we?" Mrs. Macabre got up from her seat. "Don't mind those," she said once she noticed the girls grabbing their plates and glasses. She snapped her fingers and they were placed in the sink. "Come along now, Elvira."

"Can I just have a minute to digest this?" The cat said, lying on her belly.

"Not now, my dear. The road waits for no one! Cat or witch!"

Elvira grumbled and got up, following them into the foyer. As they moved towards the elevator, Catie walked closer to Jane.

"Nice going," she whispered.

"How was I supposed to know that was a sensitive topic?" Jane snapped back.

“Just stop getting your nose into stuff where it doesn’t belong,” Catie waved her hand as if it were a way to finish the conversation for good. They reached the elevator and got in.

“Blasting off,” Mrs. Macabre proclaimed after the grate was closed, pushing the button marked 100.

“What’s at the top?” Catie asked.

“Why, the helm, of course.”

“The helm? That’s for a ship, though,” she said with brows furrowed.

“You would think that after seeing a talking cat and a magic broom, they’d stop asking questions,” Elvira shook her head.

“Well, it is kind of weird,” Jane said.

“You’re kidding me, right?” The cat raised the closest thing she had to an eyebrow.

“Here we are!” Mrs. Macabre interrupted them as the elevator came to a stop. They all got out and followed her. Unlike the other corridors that Jane and Catie had seen, this one was curved and, along with other doors, there was a set of doubles at the middle.

“Don’t look down,” Catie said.

Jane glanced over the railing and saw a hundred foot drop below. The black and white patterns of the ground floor were barely visible. “I looked down,” she said, trying to keep her breakfast inside of her.

Mrs. Macabre opened the doors and they went inside. The helm of the house was as circular as the hallway that proceeded it. On one end was a large window that looked out onto the Hallowland, on the other end, a map of the land itself. On the walls were machines and pistons that reminded Catie of an old factory from the early 1900’s. At the center of the room was an enormous steering wheel that you would find at the bow of a ship.

“What are *these*?” Catie asked, running over to the gears and metal contraptions on the wall.

“Those, my dear,” Mrs. Macabre explained, “are the inner workings of the house. The cogs of the clock, if you will.”

“I didn’t realize the Hallowland was so big,” Jane gazed in wonder at the map. She stared at drawings of

forests, graveyards, rivers, castles, and cities that were dotted across the landscape. She hoped that she would be able to see them all.

“Even I haven’t seen everything,” the witch said getting behind the wheel. “Elvira, prepare to raise anchor.”

“Aye, aye, Captain!” The cat said and jumped on a lever next to the wheel, pulling it all the way down.

There was a whistle somewhere up above and the cogs of the house began to turn, making Catie jump. The wheels turned with squeaks and bumps, she laughed and applauded with delight.

“Look over by that window, children!” Mrs. Macabre pointed to the other side.

“What’s over there?” They both asked, running over, too excited to punch one another.

“Our way forward.”

“But, Mrs. Macabre,” Jane said. “I don’t see any wheels,” she pressed her face to the glass, but all she could see was the front porch and the ground.

"Wheels?" Their host smiled. She pressed a button on a console next to her.

The house lurched upwards, nearly knocking the twins over. Things could be heard rattling around below as the house swayed.

"What's going on?" Catie asked as the house rocked back and forth, as if it were trying to find its balance.

"Look!" Jane cried, staring out the window. Below the house was not wheels, but bird feet. Long legs and pointy toes with claws stuck out from underneath the porch.

"Your house has *legs*?" Catie asked, astonished.

"My house has a lot of things you don't know about, Catherine," Mrs. Macabre said. The lights flickered for a moment.

"That's odd," Elvira noted.

"Well, it is very old, after all," Mrs. Macabre said. "Now, where shall we go first? Take a look at the list, girls."

"List?" Jane asked, still wanting to watch the feet below.

"Over there," Mrs. Macabre pointed to something by the map. The Gracey twins rushed over and saw paper coming out of a slot on the wall. The tack-tack-tack of a typewriter could be heard from inside the slot and on the paper they saw a list of things to do for the day.

"Where should we start?" Catie kept grabbing the paper as it quickly came out, trying to keep up with it.

"The top, my dear," the witch said.

"Uh," Jane took a hold of the list and read it, "collect black apples."

"To the nightmare forest, then!" Mrs. Macabre exclaimed and, before the girls could ask what the nightmare forest was, she pressed another button.

The cogs and gears whirled to life again, along with the house. The twins were sent stumbling all over the place, spinning their arms around to keep them balanced. Jane looked at Catie and they exchanged another one of their silent conversations. *Boat trip*, their eyes said. They both remembered a trip to Costa Rica

that they had made several years before, as their boat swayed back and forth on the choppy ocean, one of the crew members told them to go with the motion of the ship. As the house swayed left and right, so did they.

Jane made it back to the window and looked down, still in awe of the bird legs bobbing up and down as the Hallowland moved past them. She looked up and saw miles and miles ahead of her, then something blocked her vision, making her yelp. The creature's face at the corner of the window was red and had large eyes, sharp teeth formed a mischievous smile.

"Mrs. Macabre!" Jane cried, "There's something here! On the roof!"

The witch looked at the cat. "Gremlins," she said. She pulled a lever and the house grounded to a halt, the gears and cogs stopped.

"What are gremlins? You mean like from that movie?" Catie asked.

"I told you we should've checked for holes before parking!" Elvira said to her companion. They heard the

sound of claws scrambling on the roof above them, like rats, along with hoarse giggling.

“Children,” Mrs. Macabre said to them, “go over there and get some equipment,” she pointed to a cabinet in the corner.

“What’s in it?” Jane asked, nervously walking over to it.

“Gremlin repellent, of my own making. It won’t kill them, but it’ll knock them out for a while to give us time to move.”

They opened the cabinet and in it they found a few metal cans connected to a nozzle with a pump on it. The cans read: GREMLIN GAS in big yellow letters. Old gas masks and worker gloves could be found on the floor, as well.

“Do we wear these?” Catie asked, holding a mask up.

“Absolutely,” Mrs. Macabre said. “The gas will make you sick for weeks if you inhale it and their spikes leave quite a deep cut, if they pierce you, Now hurry, before they get in and wreck the engine!”

The Gracey twins didn't like the sound of spikes at all, but they did what they were told. They put on their gloves and masks, even if they were a bit too big, and armed themselves with the pumps.

"Over here!" Elvira said and jumped, grabbing hold of a cord from the ceiling with her teeth. A ladder unfolded along with the piece of the ceiling. The girls marched towards it. "Good luck," the cat said and Jane bent down and petted her head. When they reached the top, the ceiling was shut closed behind them.

The roof was clear. The twins looked back and forth through the large glass holes of the masks and none of the gremlins could be seen, just the gray sky.

"You think they're gone?" Jane asked, her voice muffled.

"No," Catie walked steadily over the tiles of the roof, "I think they might- *behind you!*"

Jane spun around. Right behind her was a gremlin, its crazed-eyes bulging up at her, its mouth dripping with saliva. It arched its back and the sharp spikes protruding from it shook, like a porcupine. With shaky

hands, Jane pulled up the device and sprayed it. The gremlin went flying backwards, coughing and then fell off the roof.

She let out a sigh. "That was a close-" but before she could finish her sentence, more of the gremlins came crawling up from the corners of the roof. There were four of them total, but they were all primed for attack.

Catie held up her pump in defense. The gremlins slowly inched towards them, all gazing at the girls with malicious intent. "Spray!" Catie yelled and they both began pushing their devices in and out. Green smoke emitted from their nozzles, hitting one of the creatures, making it roll off the house like its sibling.

The other three strategically bounced around the smoke. Jane spotted one, it razed its back and wiggled, two of the red spikes came shooting towards her. She ducked, seeing one of them land tip first into the roof, then she felt a sharp pain in her leg and she let out a cry. A spike was sticking straight out of her pants into her right thigh. She placed a finger to the cut and saw

blood dripping from it. The gremlin sneered at her. She gently pulled the barb out as carefully as she could, reminding her of a time when she was stung by a bee when she was smaller, and got back on her feet again.

The creature had vanished. She darted back and forth and saw Catie wrestling with one of them. "It's over there!" Her sister cried out to her. Jane looked to her right and saw the other two trying to climb up the chimney. She looked back. "Don't worry about me," Catie said as she used her pump as a sort of shield against the monster, gremlin saliva dripped onto her mask. "Just don't let them get inside!"

Jane nodded with determination and made her way to the chimney. As she limped her way over, she pumped the gas all over the area. The gremlins hissed and coughed until they were no longer visible. She heard a sharp scream of metal and glanced over to where Catie was. The gremlin that she had been fighting with had torn into the pump, bending it, and was now clawing away at her sister with eager teeth. Jane spun her pump around and sprayed the gremlin just

before it reached her face. Its eyes bulged out and rolled off the roof with a wheeze.

Catie gave her a thumbs up. Jane looked at where the gremlins had been before and saw that they were gone. "Hey," she said. "I think I got them!"

Catie nodded, then stretched out her hands in protest. "Look out!" She cried through her mask. Jane spun around again and one of the gremlins jumped towards her. They were both sent downwards, tumbling off of the roof. Jane grabbed hold of the gutter rail that was connected to the side and hung onto it. *Don't look down, don't look down*, her sister's words rang in her ears, but of course she did.

Often times, when we are afraid, we have a tendency to do the thing that we should not. If we are in a dark forest, for instance, and we know that something terrible is behind us, we may look behind us anyway to confirm our suspicions. Jane Gracey was always one to confirm her suspicions.

She looked down and saw, not the ground, but the morning mist covering it, which was almost as terrible

as seeing the bottom. It allowed her imagination to run wild with all sorts of creepy crawlers and other monsters of the Hallowland waiting to devour her. There was another shriek of metal like the one she had heard above and she dipped down an inch, the iron grate giving hold.

“Catie!” She screamed, trying to get her sister’s attention, but she was not there, only the gremlin stared back at her with that wicked grin. The creature let out a raspy laugh as it held out a claw to her, making sure that she would see every move that it was going to make. It swiped at the grate and the metal inched lower, making it shriek once more. Another laugh, another swipe, another shriek. She shut her eyes, the terror overtaking her vision and the gremlin’s laugh along with the scream of the metal filled her ears. Her heart pounded and she breathed harder in the mask, making her eye pieces fog up. She thought of how awful it was that such a wonderful place could end up being the death of her. She was right all along, she *was* right about Mrs. Macabre and the Hallowland. This was a dangerous

place and she should have refused the witch's offer. She should've stayed in her cozy bed in her cozy room. She should have decided to just sleep and bare her boring school on another boring day, she should have-

The sounds of the screaming and the cruel laughter stopped, it was replaced by a hacking cough. She opened her eyes and saw green smoke above her. The gremlin fell from the vapor and would have nearly struck her if she hadn't dodged it in time. She looked down and saw it fall into the fog below. She laughed triumphantly and then saw something else. At the corner of her eye, she thought she saw a floating shadow several yards away from her. A shadow that resembled the bride from her nightmare.

"Jane!" Catie called above her, breaking her concentration, "Climb up! Quickly!" She held out her hand.

Using the grate as a rope, Jane pulled herself up as hard as she could. As she did so, the metal grate screamed again and began to tear away from the roof.

She scrambled up and grabbed her sister's arm, just as the grate fell off and down to the depths below.

"You okay?" Catie asked.

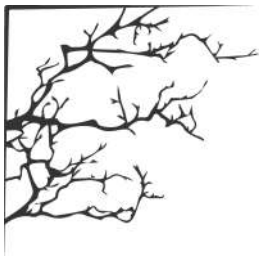
"I am now," she looked back at where the shadow had been and it was gone. She turned and saw Catie's broken pump on the roof and her sister holding hers.

"Let's go," Catie said. She helped Jane limp to the trap door. She stomped on it twice and it opened with Elvira hanging on the cord again. They both made their way down the ladder.

"Did you get them?" Elvira asked, letting go.

"Never mind that dear, " Mrs. Macabre sad, "as long as they are alright."

Jane removed her mask. "Never better," she said, her face covered in sweat and fainted.



6. JACK LANTERN



JANE WOKE UP IN HER bed, thinking that it had all been a dream. That there was no Hallowland or gremlins. She was almost disappointed that she was back home. Almost, that is, until she saw Mrs. Macabre sitting next to her.

“Careful, careful,” she pressed a chilly hand to her forehead as she moved. “You took a nasty spill, dear.”

"How long was I out for?" Jane rubbed the back of her head and moaned from a dull pain.

"Just for a couple of hours. Here," she reached for something out of view, "have some of this."

Jane followed her hand and watched her grab a bowl of soup on top of the nightstand. She looked down and saw that it was a dark, purple color, which was unlike any other soup she had seen before.

"Ugh," she said, "what's that?"

"Why it's snake and spider stew, of course," Mrs. Macabre chuckled, surprised. "It's good for the soul. Let me help," she lifted up the spoon from the bowl and moved it towards Jane's mouth. The youngest twin refused at first, keeping her mouth tightly shut, then gave in. She gulped it down and was taken aback by how sweet it was.

"You know," she said taking another sip, "the food here isn't as bad as it looks."

"Funny," the witch said, gingerly holding the spoon with each serving, "I often say the same thing about the

food from your world. I'm quite fond of. . . what do you call them? Tacos?"

"Me too," Jane smiled, then she realized that there was something on her leg, it felt warm and sticky. She looked under the covers and saw a dark patch over her cut where the gremlin spike had stabbed her. "What's that?"

"An old remedy of mine. A combination of spider's web, wolfsbane, and moon dust. It should heal within a day or two."

"Oh," she paused. "Mrs. Macabre, I know those gremlins wanted to damage the house, but did we. . . did we *kill* them?" She thought of the one that had fallen as she clung to the side of the roof and she shuddered.

"I don't believe so," Mrs. Macabre said, reassuringly. "The gas that you used knocked them unconscious, but those barbs on their backs provide a cushion of sorts for when they fall. At the very worst, they'll wake up stuck to the ground for a bit. Fascinating creatures

gremlins. I considered having one for a pet, but they can't be domesticated, poor things."

"Poor gremlins," Jane sighed. She had found the whole adventure to be both terrifying and exhausting, but she was glad none of them had been killed by their actions. After all, she assumed it wasn't the gremlins fault that they wanted to cause mischief, they were just born that way. She then remembered when she saw, or *thought* she saw, the bride hanging in mid-air and a chill went through her.

"You look like something is on your mind, Jane?" Mrs. Macabre raised an eyebrow.

"It's. . ." she thought about it for a moment. There was a part of her that did want to tell her about the strange vision that she had had. A dream was one thing, but out in the open was even more unusual than that, even for this place. But she decided to keep it hidden, since it very well could have been just her imagination running away with her at the moment. "It's nothing," she shook her head and smiled.

"Very well, then," she smiled back. "Jane, I must apologize for letting you and Catherine go up on the roof alone. I should have known that it was too dangerous for you. I should have been there. I thought you might be different than the last one. I guess. . ." Her voice trailed off and she shook her head and chuckled. "Oh, don't be so hard on yourself, Lenore! Elvira and I will be joining you on our next errand, anyways. We might want to get going. They're waiting for us down stairs," she snapped her fingers and the soup bowl was gone.

Several minutes later, they were downstairs. Mrs. Macabre went to the kitchen and returned holding two wicker baskets.

"This will be more fun than the gremlin control," she gave her a basket. "Promise."

Jane took it and they both walked out the front door. The house had moved quite a distance from where it had been before. Several hours ago, Jane recalled seeing rolling hills, now they were in the middle of a forest. Jane turned around in a circle, surrounded

by trees as far as she could see. They were all the color of ash and not one leaf stood on any of them, their branches stuck out in zig-zag formations like lightning bolts. The only distinctive features of the trees were the black apples that hung from them. The day had turned to evening and the moonlight was starting to shine on the strange fruit, giving them the appearance of glowing, black orbs. Like everything else that the Gracey twins had seen in the Hallowland so far, the trees were beautiful in their own peculiar way.

“You feeling better?” Catie asked, walking up to her carrying her own basket with Elvira strolling next to her.

“Yeah. A little beaten up, though,” Jane rubbed her head and was amazed that her leg hadn’t been limping. “Did I miss anything fun?”

“No,” Elvira interjected. “Long trips like these are so *boring*,” she stretched her body and yawned.

“Not everyone travels in a walking house,” Catie knelt down and scratched her ear.

"Be careful girls," Mrs. Macabre said as she locked the front door. "These trees can be quite defensive." She walked down the steps and joined them.

"Defensive?" Jane asked.

"You need to pick the apples delicately. Like so," Mrs. Macabre walked over to one of the trees and plucked an apple from its nearest branch. It shuddered for a moment afterwards. "Thank you," she said and petted it, calming it down.

"Oh, right. Obviously," Jane chuckled.

"Shouldn't you be inside, Elvira?" Catie asked the cat. "It's kind of dangerous out here for animals, don't you think?"

"Dangerous?" Elvira scoffed. "I'll have you know that I've been drowned, burnt, frozen, buried, kicked, thrown out of an *extremely* high window, and very recently, had my back broken by one of your automotive machines. I think I'll save my final life for something worthy of it, thank you very much."

"Cats have nine lives?" Jane asked.

“Yes,” Elvira sighed, “and you only have one. So, I suggest *you* two be careful.”

“That’s enough chit-chat,” Mrs. Macabre interrupted. “I’d rather get this done in time for dinner. Black apple pie requires some preparation, you know,” she picked another apple. “Thank you.”

Jane walked over to a tree and carefully grabbed the apple on its lowest hanging branch. Very slowly, she pulled it and the apple snapped off of it. The branches shook, startling her. “Th-thank you,” she said and softly rubbed its trunk.

She then saw something that nearly made her cry out in shock. Several yards away from her, was the bride. Jane shook her head and blinked, making sure that it wasn’t just her imagination this time. She looked in that direction for several seconds and the shadow was still there, her dress swirled around her in tattered curtains, her feet did not touch the ground, but floated inches above it. She turned to see if anyone else had noticed, but they continued to pick the apples from the trees. Jane looked back at the bride, and with a black

boney hand, the figure placed a finger to her veil where her mouth was. Jane did the same to hers, unconscious that she was mirroring her. It was almost as if she was hypnotized by the bride, drawn to her, wanting to learn more about her and what she had to say, if anything at all. All of the sounds and the visions of the forest slowly vanished and it was only the strange, mysterious figure looking back at her.

“What are you looking at?” A voice snapped her out of her concentration, making her jump. She looked down next to her and it was Elvira.

“Nothing,” she said, catching her breath.

“Huh,” Elvira said. “Humans.”

Jane looked back and saw that the bride had disappeared once again. *Am I going crazy?* She thought to herself. Had the Hallowland somehow infected her mind with some sort of virus that Mrs. Macabre wasn’t telling them about? And if so, why hadn’t Catie said anything about seeing strange visions, either. Perhaps, she was and she was keeping it a secret from Jane in fear that *she* might think she was going crazy. What-

ever it was, it was not a coincidence, she was sure of that. Something weird was going on and she was determined to figure it out. But first- apples. She stood on her toes, placing a hand on one of the higher branches and, just as she picked it off, she heard something again. At first she thought it had been the tree, a cry of some sort, but it happened again and she noticed that it was far off.

“Did you hear that?” Elvira asked, her ears perking up.

“Yeah,” Jane said, relieved that she wasn’t the only one. She looked behind her and both Mrs. Macabre and Catie were searching for the source of the sound.

“*Help!*” A voice yelled in the distance. “*Someone! Please!*”

“We’ll have to worry about the apples later, girls,” Mrs. Macabre said, “Someone is in need of assistance. Immediately.” She hung her basket on her arm and marched forward. Jane, Elvira, and Catie went with her.

They continued to follow the pleas for help. As they moved deeper into the forest, the calls grew louder and clearer, along with something else. Mixed in with the screams was a strange snapping sound, as if dozens of branches were scratching against one another. They too grew louder until they finally stumbled upon the sound's origin.

At first, the Gracey twins weren't quite sure of what they were looking at. They did know, however, that two of the trees were fighting with one another over which one would get the person that was screaming. Person was the only term that the two girls could think of to begin with, because that was the closest that they could come to in finding a frame of reference. The person had arms, legs, and a torso, that was evident enough from the thrashing about that he (or at least, they presumed it was a he) was doing as the branches pulled and twisted him this way and that. But his limbs and body were far too thin for an average human. He wore clothes that appeared to be made of patchwork and wool of some sort, his head was bulbous and or-

ange. Then it hit them- this wasn't a person at all- this was a living scarecrow. Everything came into sharp focus as if they had been looking at an abstract painting that had suddenly been made clear to them. Bits of straw came loose from the sleeves of his coat and pants, his arms twisted in unnatural ways, and his face was carved into a pumpkin like they would see every Halloween night, a candle light glowed from within. Though his face was immobile, it was clear that the scarecrow was terrified.

"It's Jack Lantern!" Mrs. Macabre said, almost sounding excited.

"Who?" Jane and Catie said in unison.

"A friend of mine. Last I saw him was-"

"We can talk about all that later!" Elvira interrupted. "We need to help the poor thing before he gets eaten!"

"Hello, Jack!" Mrs. Macabre called to him. "We've come to help!"

"Mrs. Macabre?" Jack stopped his screaming and turned his head towards them, the glowing in his skull

pulsed as he spoke every word. "Oh, I am so, *so*, happy to see you!" His voice shook, as if he was about to burst into tears. "Help me! *Please!*"

"Can't you magic him out, Mrs. Macabre?" Jane asked.

"These are nightmare trees," she said, sadly, "there are some things even my magic can't get through.. They look hungry."

"What are we going to do?" Jane looked up, panicked. She was terrified that Jack was going to be eaten in front of her very eyes and he seemed like such an innocent scarecrow.

"I've got it," Catie said with the assurance that she always had whenever she had an idea. "Jane, I need you to lift me up."

"What?"

"That tree is too high," she pointed to the left tree that was attacking Jack, "I need to stand on your shoulders."

"What are you going to do?" Jane's eyes narrowed, worried that her sister was going to say something dangerous.

"Just trust me," she said.

Jane hated whenever her sister would keep plans from her. Every adventure, every surprise party, would be prefaced with *trust me*. Why couldn't people just *tell her* what they were thinking? But she knew that if she asked any further questions, she'd start arguing with her and poor Jack would certainly be dead by that point. And Catie knew it bothered her as well, judging from the faintest hint of a smile on her face. "Fine," Jane said and walked over to the tree, cautious that it was going to hit her.

"I'll make sure and catch you if you fall, dear," Mrs. Macabre planted her boots on the ground, ready for anything.

"And I'll. . . " Elvira said, pausing for a moment. "Be moral support."

"Good kitty," Catie said and took off her shoes. She walked over to Jane. "Ready?"

"Just don't die," Jane said bending down and cupping her hands together.

"I'll try not to," Catie placed her hands on her sister's shoulders, she stepped into her palms and Jane lifted her up.

"Ow," Jane said as Catie's shoe stepped on her head.

"Sorry," she grunted as she shimmied her way up the tree, swaying back and forth along with it. Jane took a few steps back and watched as her sister continued to climb. The cracking of the branches seemed to grow louder and Jack's shrieks deafened, or that could've been her fear's doing.

"Careful!" Mrs. Macabre called out to her, keeping her stance.

"Hold on-" Elvira began, but was cut short once the tree rocked so hard, it nearly sent Catie slipping off.

She placed a foot firmly onto the bark and pulled herself up, as if she was getting onto a horse. Finally, she made it to the spot where Jack was being held hostage.

"Help! Please!" Jack cried out to her.

"I'll try!" Catie yelled back. "That candle in your head, can you make it brighter?"

"What?" The scarecrow asked as his arms and legs were being pulled in different directions.

"Can you make your head hotter without hurting you?"

"Yes," he replied nervously.

"Great! Now, what I need you to do is make it so hot that you start a small fire, then I think the trees will let you go! Can you do that for me?" She smiled, trying to encourage him.

"I don't think so."

"Why not?" Her smile turned into a frown.

"Because I'm . . ." he paused. "Because I'm . . ."

"Get on with it!" Elvira said.

"Because I'm scared!" He blurted out.

"Because you're *what*?" Both of the Gracey sisters said together, stunned. Jane looked at Mrs. Macabre who only shrugged and shook her head hopelessly.

"Fire scares me," Jack said, embarrassed.

"But you *have* to do it, Jack!" Catie said, trying to keep her footing.

"What if it doesn't work?"

"How do you know if you don't try?"

"What if I hurt you?"

"You think I came all the way up here without knowing that? I came up here to make you feel safe."

"What if-?"

"*Just! Do it!*" Catie yelled as the tree swayed again, nearly throwing her off once more.

Jack took a deep breath and his head erupted with fire as if it were a stove that had been turned all the way up. The red-orange flames blended in with his pumpkin head. The branches of the trees roared with a huge crack and they swayed apart, releasing him.

Catie was sent flying into the air and was soon caught by Mrs. Macabre like a quarterback catching a football with both hands. Jane rushed to her side. "Are you okay?" She asked.

"At least I didn't faint," she groaned, but smiled at her.

“Help me with him!” Elvira called and ran towards Jack.

The scarecrow’s limbs were scattered about in every direction. His arms to the west, his legs to the south, his torso to the east, and his head to the north. “Am I alive?” He said, the inside of his head still glowing, smoke rose from it.

“Yes,” Mrs. Macabre said, retrieving his right arm. “You’ll live to get yourself in trouble another day, my friend.”

“How’d you get into this mess, anyway?” Jane asked, picking up his head.

“Last we saw him was in the fear fields,” Elvira chimed in.

“Yes,” Jack said, “I was exiled from the fields recently.”

“Why?” Catie lifted his torso up and slung it over her shoulder.

“For being too scared. I would sit on my pole in the fields and scream because it was too high up. Everyone would laugh at me,” he replied, sadly. “I was walking

along through the forest and I got hungry. I thought I'd have an apple, but the trees didn't like that at all." He paused then let out a sad sigh. "Imagine me, a scarecrow being afraid of everything. I'm a failure."

"Nonsense!" Mrs. Macabre said. "We only fail when we stop trying. Besides, I've never met a scarecrow that feels fear, which makes you unlike anyone I've ever met."

"But I'm so alone."

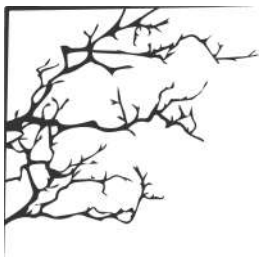
"No you're not," Jane said. "Everyone is afraid of something. Mrs. Macabre, can we take him with us?"

"Brilliant idea, Jane Gracey," the witch said with a smile.

"I wouldn't want to bother you all," Jack said.

"We insist," Catie said.

"Oh, thank you! Thank you so much!" The pumpkin head glowed brightly from within. And so, carrying the pieces of Jack Lantern and their baskets of black apples with them, they made their way back to the manor.



7. **THE WEEPING WIDOW**



THIS WAS NOT JANE AND Catie's first experience with baking. As toddlers, they trained with their toy ovens, making plastic cookies and cakes-always adding gummy worms and chocolate bugs to their sweets of course- then in helping their mom make muffins in their real oven in their real kitchen. But this was slightly different from what they had made back home. The

basic accouterments of pie baking was there (crust, dough, sugar) but with a little bit of magic thrown in. A few dashes of banshee powder here, a teaspoon of goblin honey there and *presto!* Black apple pie was ready to be served!

"But, Mrs. Macabre," Catie asked before digging in, "if these are from nightmare trees, won't they, you know. . . . give us nightmares?"

"Oh, goodness no!" Mrs. Macabre said as she cut through her own slice, juicy blackness oozed out of it. "Magic is not inherently good or bad, Catherine. Magic is just magic. It's how you use it that makes it light or dark. Case in point, this pie was made with certain magical ingredients with the purpose of making it delicious. Therefore, it shall be delicious."

"Or we hope it will," Elvira said, sniffing her slice in her bowl.

"Hush," the witch shot back, but they all laughed.

The pie was indeed delicious. To the Gracey twins, it had tasted sweeter than any pie that they had ever eaten. Instead of filling their heads with fear, it filled

them with delight and joy. Mrs. Macabre ate hers with great precision and grace, as if she had been taught to eat that way by a fancy tutor. Elvira ate hers gingerly, but very clearly enjoyed it, while Jack wasn't able to move his mouth, but shoved it through the carving that formed his smile. The candle inside would burn the food away with every serving and he made *mmm* sounds all throughout their meal.

"I'm stuffed," Catie sighed, pushing her empty plate away and leaning on the back of her chair.

"Same," Jane repeated her sister's actions. "I wish Mom and Dad would make pie like that."

"You don't have black apple pie in your world?" Jack asked, he was still having difficulty understanding that they had never seen a talking scarecrow before, either.

"No," Catie answered, "our parents make blueberry or lemon pie. They're so boring. So. . ."

"Normal," Jane sighed.

"One person's normal is another person's strange," Mrs. Macabre said.

"But they don't *understand* us," Catie groaned and her sister nodded.

"Do they make fun of you like the other children at school?"

"No," Jane had to think about it for a second. "They just let us be ourselves without asking about it or wanting to be a part of it."

"So they do not try to make you more like them?"

They both shook their heads.

"Then, if they allow you to be yourselves and don't make you feel terrible for being yourselves, then what is the problem? Parents who do not share their children's differences but don't interfere with them are far better than those who try to force their normalness onto them. Normal isn't defined *for* you, it is defined *by* you," Mrs. Macabre took one final bite of her pie, as if it were an exclamation mark.

Both Jane and Catie looked at each other, surprised. They had never really considered that perhaps the reason why their parents were so uninterested in what *they* were interested in was not because they

didn't care about them, but because those interests weren't all that interesting to them. In fact, if the shoe was on the other foot, Jane and Catie would surely find whatever their parents were interested in (whether it be cars, fishing, sports, etc) equally as uninteresting. As if a curtain had been lifted from their eyes, the Gracey girls suddenly felt for their parents like they had never before.

"Oh, girls," Elvira said behind them and they both turned. "Do you like libraries?"

Jane gasped, a rush of excitement went through her and she looked at her sister with wide eyes.

"You're going to give her a heart attack," Catie rolled her eyes.

"Then we should hurry!" The cat's tail popped up as did her ears. "Follow me!" She went bounding out of the kitchen.

"Can I come too?" Jack asked, sheepishly.

"Of course you can!" Jane said and offered him a hand. Jack took it and she felt the softness of the straw inside his glove. They both hurried out of the kitchen,

the scarecrow flailing about, as if he was caught in a gust of wind.

"Hope you don't get lost!" Mrs. Macabre cried after them.

"We won't!" Jane's voice echoed as they all ran through the foyer. They all stopped at a door underneath the stairs.

"Are you ready?" Elvira asked, building the suspense.

Jane nodded her head vigorously. Elvira jumped up and clung to the door handle with her paw. It swung open with a loud creak. Jane and Catie's mouths dropped opened with amazement at what they saw. Jack's candle grew brighter.

In the room, was not a library at all, but a cathedral of books. Rows upon rows, upon rows of books stood like huge columns in the room. The walls were lined with books, the floors had stacks of books placed here and there, even the ceiling was covered in books as it made a triangular shape upwards. The amount of volumes in the library was overwhelming. There was a

sense of awe that you might have upon seeing something as mighty as the coliseum in Rome or the Taj Mahal in India. They stood before the Eighth Wonder of the world.

"What. . . what *are* all these books?" Jane managed to get out, finally.

"Books of the Hallowland," Elvira said, guiding them through. "We like to read too, you know."

"Has anyone read all of these?" Catie asked.

"Mrs. Macabre's wife did, once," Elvira said in a sad voice and chuckled. "Took her ten of your years to finish them."

"What's this?" Jack asked, picking up a book from the floor. The cover read: *The Book of Boos*.

"Don't-!" Elvira cried out, but it was too late. Jack had already opened it and an enormous *BOOOOOO*, roared through the library, echoing on for eternity. Jack immediately shut the book and dropped it on the floor with a bang, making him jump.

"Maybe I should read something lighter," Jack said, shivering.

“Come on, old sport,” Elvira cocked her head towards an enormous fire place nearby. “Let them explore,” she hopped onto a velvet chair next to the hearth. Jack sat in another, but scooted an inch or two away from the fire.

The two girls went in opposite directions. Jane scanned the nearest shelf to her eye level, not sure which novel to choose. *A History of Giant Insects* was one, *A Vampire's Guide To Cleaning Your Coffin* was another. Then, something stuck out to her, a strange book, possibly the strangest that she had ever seen. She pulled it out of the shelf and was stunned to find that the cover of the book was made of a rough almost rock like texture. Upon further inspection she realized that the cover of the book was made out of coral reef. Hard barnacles bulbed out of the spine and traces of seaweed could be found on the edges. The front read: *The Encyclopedia Of Sea Monsters* and the author's name was Captain Oliver Shagnasty. She opened the book and felt dampness on the tips of her fingers as she looked through the pages. The strong scent of salt water filled

the air and she could've sworn that she could hear the faint sound of crashing waves as she flipped through portraits of creatures from A-Z that had gills and all manner of briny biology. She wondered if the monster from the Swamp Room was in the book, then octopus tentacles grew from the sides of the encyclopedia. The slimy appendages twisted and turned towards her, suckers popped on the inside of them.

"Ugh!" She cried with disgust and dropped the book. She wiped her hands on her shirt as she watched the book slither across the floor and into the darkness.

"Jane!" Catie, said rushing up to her, "I think you'd like this one!" She was carrying several books under one arm, but held out another to her. It was a large, dark gray tome called *Ghosts Of The Hallowland Vol.19* by Harold Haunt.

Jane took the book from Catie and carefully opened it, she breathed out a sigh of relief once it was evident that the book held no sentience to its sentences. As she turned each page, she smiled at the gallery of ghosts that Mr. Haunt had painted. Some

were comical, like a ghost of a burnt up man smoking a cigarette called *The Man Who Couldn't Quit*, others were strangely beautiful like the one of two ghosts kissing in a sinking boat on a lake titled *The Drowning Lovers*. But, as soon as she flipped to the next page, the hair on the back of her neck stood up.

The painting that was looking back at her was of the bride. She had appeared just as she had in her nightmare and the other moments she had seen her outside: clad in a jet black wedding dress with a veil covering her face, oil dark skeleton hands holding her shoulders as if she were trying to comfort herself. She did not stand, but seemed to float in mid-air, her dress covering her feet in jagged shapes like bat wings. Above her was the title: *The Weeping Widow*.

"What's wrong?" Catie asked, concerned.

"Elvira," Jane said, moving past Catie, "who's this?" She held up the book to the cat.

Elvira stared at it for a moment, then her eyes grew wide. "That's nothing," she said quickly, "just another ghost."

“Who. Is this?” She repeated, more sternly.

“Very well,” Elvira sighed. “I’m going to get in so much trouble for this,” she looked behind her then back to the twins. “There are many ghosts in the Hallowland, as you can see. Some are friendly, some are dangerous. But none are as dark as the Weeping Widow. No one knows who she truly was, but legend has it that in life, she was the most kind woman with the most beautiful soul in all the land. Together, her and her partner shared their love for one another with the Hallowland. A love that could move mountains and turn the tides of the sea. A love that could last for all eternity. But then, one day, she lost her beloved. Overcome with loss and grief, the woman grew wild with rage, spreading her anger, committing horrible acts where ever she went. Her anguish consumed her and she became the Widow, a specter of sorrow and despair. Those who have seen her, like the author of that book,” she gestured her head towards it, “are lucky to be alive. She is a black hole to all who meet her, sucking them in to her dark pit of self-loathing.”

Jane felt a chill go up her spine, she had felt a sense of unease and sadness when the Widow had appeared to her, but it was deep within her, like an itch in the back of her mind. "What-" she cleared her throat, "what did she do?"

"I'm sorry?" Elvira asked.

"You said she did terrible things. Like what?"

"I believe the children have heard enough ghost stories for tonight," Mrs. Macabre said from behind them, they all turned in surprise. She was standing several feet away from them, how she was able to get so close without making a sound was beyond them. She was lit half way between the firelight and the shadows of the library, making her bone-white skin glow red-orange.

"I agree," Jack said, immediately standing up from his chair. "This is becoming far too frightening for me. I hope I don't have nightmares."

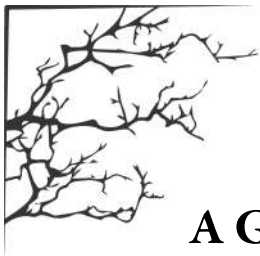
"I'm sure you won't, my dear Mr. Lantern," Mrs. Macabre gave a small smile. "Come along girls, we have

an important day ahead of us tomorrow," she turned and walked away.

Elvira got down from her chair and followed the witch. As she walked, she gave a glance to Jane as if to say that this was their secret to keep. She nodded back.

"Come on, you," Catie said, covering a yawn with one of her books, "I'm sure we'll have plenty of time to read these!"

Jane went back to the book shelf, and not knowing where to put it, placed it on top of some stacked books quickly, as if it was going to bite her. She hoped that she would never see that book or the Widow again.



8. **A GAME OF DEATH**



JANE AND CATIE COULD smell cookies from downstairs. As they went through the hallways and the elevator, the smell grew stronger, filling their noses with its sweet scent. They finally reached the foyer and entered the kitchen.

“Morning, girls!” Mrs. Macabre said, reaching into an oven.

“What kind of cookies are those?” Jane asked, not quite being able to pinpoint the variety of smell.

“I bet it’s something gross,” Catie said with a devilish grin, “like bugs!”

“Or finger nails!” Jane tried to up the ante.

“Chocolate chip,” the witch said, placing the tray of cookies on the kitchen table. She wiped her hands on her apron.

“Oh,” the Gracey twins frowned in unison. Chocolate chip was indeed their favorite cookie, but they were hoping for something more gruesome. The Halloween had made them accustomed to gross and ghoulish foods.

“Are they for us?” Jane perked up, hoping that she’d be able to taste that wonderful aroma soon.

“I’m afraid not,” Mrs. Macabre said. “These are for the Grim Reaper.”

“The Grim Reaper?” Catie looked at Jane in shock. “You mean like. . . *Death*?”

“Well, yes,” she responded casually, “he placed an order for them last night.”

"Do people often do that?" Jane asked, remembering the card that she was given that night in her bedroom.

"Indeed they do. Baked goods, potions, back rubs, a whole variety of things."

"Do they pay you?" Catie inquired.

"A small fee, but that's not the goal of it. The *doing* of the task is its own reward," she snapped her fingers and a black box came flying out of one of the cabinets along with some red satin. The cookies floated in the air and were gently placed inside the box, which subsequently closed itself. The ribbon tied itself into a snug bow neatly on top. She snapped her fingers once more and a card appeared in her hand. A pen shot out of a drawer and she wrote:

To: G.R.

From: Mrs. Macabre

She smiled at her fine, cursive writing on the package. "Come along then," she said, taking off her apron.

"You want us to come *with* you?" Jane asked, stunned.

"Yes, why not?"

"Well," Catie started. "He's. . . *he's Death*."

"I'm sure he's a lovely man," Mrs. Macabre shrugged. "Never met him myself. Always made deliveries via magic to him. But, since I now have a pair of tourists, I thought they'd want to see the sights," she smiled and picked up the box. "But, if you don't *want* to come and would rather stay with Elvira and Jack instead, I understand," she walked out of the kitchen.

"Let's go," Catie turned to Jane.

"I'm not sure that's a good idea—" Jane said quickly, knowing that her sister would want to follow Mrs. Macabre without hesitation.

"Come on," Catie walked out of the kitchen. "We've got a *witch* as our guide. What's the worst that could happen?" She smiled.

Jane followed her with a huff. In between Catie nearly being killed by the nightmare trees, the strange way Mrs. Macabre reacted in the library, and now this, Jane was becoming increasingly uncomfortable with the idea of her being so impulsive, but she followed her

anyways. Someone had to be the ladder to rest her feet on.

“Without further ado, girls,” Mrs. Macabre said, grabbing her broom from the umbrella holder, “I give you, the river Styx,” she opened the front door and they were greeted, not by a majestic sight, but frankly a mundane one. The only things that were visible was the bank of the river itself covered in dirt, twigs, and leaves, along with a small boat that was beached onto it. The rest was a dense fog that covered where the river flowed. There was no soft purring of water, as the girls had expected upon the announcement of the location, only a soft wind blowing in the distance.

“This is it? Jane asked. “I thought it would be more. . . “

“Magical,” Catie finished with a sigh.

“Oh, pish-posh!” Mrs. Macabre scoffed at them. “This is one of the most wondrous sights in all of the Hallowland! Look how beautiful the fog curls and overlaps against itself, like a wave. Marvel at how peaceful and tranquil the shore is!”

The Gracey twins looked at her with the same faces that they made upon seeing the pink socks that their grandmother had given them for Christmas one year.

"Very well, then," Mrs. Macabre clicked her tongue. "No appreciation for beauty these days. Off we go!" She marched to the boat and they all got in. "Everyone settled?" She asked, stepping in and handing the box of cookies to them.

"How are we supposed to sail?" Jane asked, holding onto the box as she wobbled sitting down.

"Simple," Mrs. Macabre said with a smile, "by broom!" She tapped the end of her broom on the side of the boat and it became an oar. She dipped it in the water and pushed off.

The girls looked down and saw no river, they only saw fog. "Where did you get that?" Catie pointed to the broom-oar.

"My teacher gave it to me," Mrs. Macabre said, wisps of smoke rolling off her oar with every row.

"Teacher?" Jane asked. "You mean you went to magic school?"

“More or less. It was a graduation present. Look!” She pointed in front of them.

They both turned and saw that small candles had appeared in the fog. They curved, pointing them to the left. They glowed in the grayness like fireflies.

“What does that mean?” Catie said, excited.

“It means, we’re almost there.”

As they continued down the path of the candles, the fog opened up around a giant cave off to the side. Jane felt a chill go through her, as if the howling of the wind was a cry of warning in the distance. As they entered the mouth of the cave, stalagmites hung above them like razor sharp teeth.

The inside of the grotto was lit by candelabras that flanked the river on the rocks surrounding them. Wax dripped down onto the stones, the candle light bounced off the walls, shimmering with amber light. Skeletons dancing with mortals were carved into the rocky surfaces. They stopped at a small beach nearby and docked.

"Here we are," Mrs. Macabre said, placing the oar into the boat. "Thank you, dear," she said to Jane as she was handed the box.

"It's beautiful, in a strange kind of way," Jane said, getting up.

"And big too," Catie said, jumping onto the gray sand of the beach. She cupped her hands over her mouth and called out, "Hellooo!" But there was no echo. No sound came back to them, the Gracey twins exchanged glances.

"Interesting," Mrs. Macabre said with a sense of curiosity and delight. "Oh, Mr. Reaper? It's Mrs. Macabre. I believe you placed an order?" She held up the box, as if he was hiding somewhere.

There was a moment of silence, then a dark voice responded, "Yes. I believe I did."

The source of the voice was nowhere to be found. Then, out of the darkness, came a figure. The Grim Reaper was clad in long black robes that fell to the ground. He was nearly seven feet tall, *as tall as Jack*, Catie thought. His face was shrouded from view by his

hood and in one of his hands he carried a long scythe. Jane couldn't help but remember the Weeping Widow upon seeing him.

"And I see you've brought a number of guests with you," he continued in a low, measured tone that made them all shiver.

"I-" Mrs. Macabre said, trying to compose herself, "I had some guests from the human world traveling with me and I thought they would enjoy visiting your beautiful home. And, I must say, as someone who has never met you, it is quite an honor, sir," she bowed and smiled slightly. For the first time since meeting her, Jane and Catie had seen something from their host that they had never thought possible until then. Intimidation.

"Very well," he said in a manner that could only be described as bemused. "Is the delivery as I instructed?" He held out a pale hand.

"Yes, sir. Chocolate chip," she gave him the box and he took it.

As the Grim Reaper went over to a nearby rock, Mrs. Macabre briefly looked at the children and gave them a wink, as if to reassure them that all was well. But Jane thought she wasn't quite as confident as she thought she was.

The Reaper sat down and placed his scythe against a wall. He carefully undid the ribbon and opened the box. He picked up one of the cookies between two fingers and placed them in the hood of his cloak. He drew his hand back and a bite mark appeared on the cookie. "Mmmmm," he moaned. "Warm. . . gooey. . . *delicious*," he took another bite.

"So glad you like them, sir," Mrs. Macabre said in almost a sigh of relief. "Do you have the payment?"

He reached into his robes and came back with a small leather pouch. He tossed it to her and she caught it with a metallic jingle.

"Thank you sir," she said, placing the money into her pocket. She quickly turned towards the boat. "Come along, girls. Let us leave Mr. Reaper to enjoy his-

"Wait," he said.

Mrs. Macabre stopped dead in her tracks and closed her eyes for a moment. "Yes?"

"I'm sure you are aware of the rules, Mrs. Macabre," the Reaper continued, wiping his hands on his robes. "One cannot leave the river without offering a soul."

"I was. . . *unaware* of those rules," she responded, almost through clenched teeth. She turned around. "Whose are they?"

"It is the law of the universe. I only do its bidding. One of you shall not leave this place alive."

Skeletons shot up from the sands of the beach and held all three of them in an embrace, anchoring them to the spot. Jane and Catie twisted and turned, but the boney arms were wrapped too tightly around them.

"Let us go!" Mrs. Macabre said, struggling.

"Choose," the Reaper said, ignoring her pleas. "Choose which of you shall die."

The three of them could only look at one another in silence. They secretly thought that they would gladly sacrifice themselves for each other, but that was only

their hearts talking. Soon their minds took over the conversation and the full gravity of the situation came into vision as clear as crystal. If one of them agreed, they would never see the other again. They would never know what it would be like to wake up on a beautiful morning, to laugh, to cry, to feel anything. They would cease to exist only because their hearts told them not too. And that terrified them.

“Fascinating,” the Reaper spoke after a long pause. “Since the three of you cannot decide who shall be taken, I propose a challenge. Whomever defeats me in a game of wits, I shall set you all free. But should they lose, their soul shall sail to the netherworld.”

“What game are you suggesting?” Mrs. Macabre asked.

The Reaper reached into his robes. Jane then remembered a story she read about a knight who played chess with Death. She hoped it wasn’t true, considering she was terrible at the game and she knew Catie was as well. She prayed that Mrs. Macabre would be a master chess player, but that wish was no longer needed. What

the Reaper took out instead was a dark polished box about the size of a small jewelry case.

"Within this receptacle," he explained, "are infinite cards. Upon each card is a question on the nature of someone's demise."

"It's a trivia game?" Jane asked, perplexed by how mundane it seemed.

"Do not underestimate my proposal, child. I have never lost. I suppose you are the one to accept it?"

Jane looked at her sister, Catie nodded, they both knew that she was the better reader of the two. "Yes."

"Jane, no! Please!" Mrs. Macabre protested.

"This is the only way we're going to get out of here," she said, reassuringly.

"But you're just a child!," Mrs. Macabre pleaded with her. "This is too big for someone so small to handle! "

"Well, what better time to learn how to be big than this?" Jane looked into Mrs. Macabre's eyes, battling it out with her. She could see the witch wasn't going to let her win, yet at the same time, she knew that Jane

was right. That Jane truly was the only person who had the knowledge to win such a game. Mrs. Macabre finally gave in and nodded, mournfully.

“Very well,” the Reaper said and the skeleton holding Jane turned back into sand.

Jane rubbed her neck where the skeleton’s arm had been. She walked over, her heart racing. She couldn’t believe what she was doing. Challenging Death for her soul in a *trivia game*? She must have been out of her mind! But it was too late now, she would rather take the risk than to lose both Catie and Mrs. Macabre. The thought of which terrified her the most. She sat down on the rock across from the Reaper, the box sitting patiently between them.

“Are you ready?” He asked.

She took in a deep breath and let it out. “Yes,” she said.

“Begin,” he opened the box and placed his hands in his lap, waiting.

She reached into the darkness, feeling nothing but cold air. Then a card appeared in her hand, startling

her. Jane took it out and looked at it: Nothing. She looked on both sides and the card was blank. As she gazed at it, ink slowly appeared on one side, forming shapes, then letters, until finally, a question.

“What was the date of Julies Caesar’s death?” She read.

“Simple,” he responded. “March 15, 44 BC.”

The date wrote itself below the question. “Correct,” she said and the card evaporated.

The Reaper reached into the box and pulled out a card. “Where did Leo Tolstoy die?” He asked.

Jane’s mind raced, searching the files of her brain for one scrap of information. Then, she found it. A memory of a documentary on Tolstoy that they watched in English class. “At the train station in Astapovo!” She snapped.

“Correct,” the Reaper said with a sigh and his card disappeared.

Jane looked over and saw Mrs. Macabre frowning with worry. Her sister struggled to give her a thumbs

up. She pulled out another card. "When did Joan of Arc die?"

"May 30, 1412," he said casually.

"Correct," Jane said.

Their battle of wits continued for what seemed like hours.

"When did Abraham Lincoln die?"

"April 15, 1865."

"Where is Napoleon Bonaparte buried?"

"Les Invalides. Paris, France."

"Where was John F. Kennedy assassinated?"

"Dallas, Texas."

On and on the questions continued. Jane's mouth grew dry and her hands started to ache from reaching into the box over and over again.

"Growing tired, little one?" The Reaper said without a hint of slowing down.

"No," she said, placing her head in her hands. "Are you?"

"I have never known the meaning," the Reaper responded and pulled out another card. "What day of the week did Percy Shelley die?" He asked.

She snapped back upright. How lucky was she that he would ask such a question about the Shelleys! The date itself was July 8, 1822, but the day of the week? That had slipped her mind. She of course had read the biography of Mary Shelley countless of times, but that one piece of information had evaded her memory bank. Her heart raced, was this it? Was this how she was going to die? Because of some stupid *game*?

"Give up?" The Reaper spun the card between his long fingers.

"*No!*" She nearly screamed in panic. "No, I know what it is. It's. . . it's. . ." She glanced at Mrs. Macabre and Catie, their faces filled with fear. Then it clicked. "Monday! He died on a Monday!"

The Reaper paused. Not being able to see his face made the whole situation that much more agonizing. "Correct," he finally said.

“Yes!” Catie cried, but stopped after she saw the Reaper turn his head towards her.

Jane reached into the box and got another card. She looked at it for a moment, then smiled. “How did Edgar Allan Poe die?”

“What a simple question!” The Reaper said, sitting back. “Such an easy inquiry that I’m sure the game will end. Prepare your final words to your friends, girl. Edgar Allan Poe died, of course, of. . . .” he trailed off and looked to the side, as if in thought. “He died of—” his hand clenched in frustration. “Give me a moment.”

“Take your time,” Jane said, trying her hardest not to laugh. She looked at her companions and they both shared the same enthusiasm.

“He died of. . . .” The Reaper paused again. He slammed his fist on the rock. “*Hell and damnation, what is it?*”

“Unknown!” She slapped the card face up on the table. “Though there are many theories on how Poe died, no one knows for certain!”

The skeletons holding Mrs. Macabre and Catie turned to sand. They both ran up to her and embraced her.

"I knew you could do it!" Catie said.

"Come on girls, let's go home," Mrs. Macabre smiled, but her eyes glared at the Reaper like daggers.

"Fair game," the Reaper held out his hand as Jane was about to follow them to the boat.

"Fair game," she reluctantly shook his hand, it felt like ice. He pulled her forward.

"I saw a vision," he said, a black void staring back her. "Someone whom you hold dear will soon die."

"What?" She asked, scared. She looked over at Mrs. Macabre and Catie, but they were too busy getting into the boat.

"I do not know which. The road of fate has not one path, but many. One way or another, my debt will be paid, girl."

She yanked away from his grip and quickly ran towards the boat. Though she couldn't see his face,

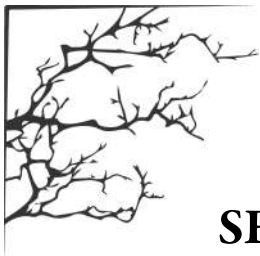
she sensed something that terrified her more than his prophecy. She knew that he was smiling at her.



“I’M SORRY, GIRLS,” Mrs. Macabre later said on the river, the candles illuminating the night air. “I should never have put you in danger like that. I was foolish to think I could trust him.”

“It’s okay, Mrs. Macabre,” Catie said. “At least we have her!” She nudged Jane on the shoulder, but she didn’t notice.

Deep in the fog, Jane could just barely make out the figure of the Weeping Widow inside of it. Her long black arm was waving to her in the distance. She was beginning to feel that the Widow was becoming her only anchor, as her own river was slowly growing cloudier.



9. SECRETS AND SHADOWS



THAT NIGHT, JANE AWOKE to the sound of creaking. At first, she thought it was just from somewhere deep within the house. She had noticed an abundance of creaking since she first arrived, just the side effects of a magic manor, she presumed. But the creaking grew closer. First, it began outside her door, then it moved up towards the ceiling. She looked at Catie, sil-

houetted in the dark, sound asleep. The creaking continued going down the walls until it finally ended in a corner of the room. The darkness of the corner began to move, taking a strange shape, like that of a person. The shadow moved and Jane had to cover her mouth to keep herself from screaming.

“Hello, child,” the Weeping Widow said in that terrible raspy whisper that she had heard from her nightmare.

Jane leapt out of bed towards Catie to wake her.

“Don’t bother,” the Widow said. “This is your dream, not hers.”

“I’m- I’m in a dream?” Jane asked, looking around her. The room appeared to be as authentic as the real one.

“Yes. I cannot enter the manor on my own, so I must only communicate directly to you through your dream space, I’m afraid,” she moved closer towards her and Jane took a step back. “I mean you no harm,” she said, putting out her skeleton hands as a sign of reassurance.

“Why are you following me?”

“Because you can help me, Jane Gracey.”

“Help you? Why don’t you go to Mrs. Macabre? She helps plenty of people.”

The ghost made a sound that Jane only recognized as a chuckle. “Oh, no. The witch is not who she appears to be.”

“What do you mean?”

“Sit down, child,” the Widow gestured to the bed. Jane reluctantly got back in and the Widow sat down, making no imprint on the bed itself. “Many years ago, when I was still alive, my wife and I knew Mrs. Macabre. We considered her to be a very close friend of ours. We trusted her. We respected her. She could do no wrong in our eyes. Then I tragically lost my beloved and, in my grief, I went to her, knowing that she had been through the same pain once before. Seeking comfort, I instead received wrath. She mocked me for always lamenting and sulking over the loss of my poor wife. She would taunt me, bully me, *hate* the woman that I had become. Tired of my grieving, she turned

me into the thing that sits before you,” she gestured to her black dress. “She turned me into a ghost, imprisoning me for all eternity in a shell of heartbreak and sadness,” She removed her veil and Jane saw a stream of black tears rolling down her skull, like a faucet that could never be turned off.

“I’m sorry,” Jane said in revulsion and pity, “I’m sorry that happened to you, but- *how?* Mrs. Macabre isn’t bad, she’s done nothing but good things for Catie and I.”

“That is where you are wrong, foolish girl,” the Widow wagged her finger at her. “Like the wicked witches of the old stories, Mrs. Macabre tempts children with pleasures and promises using those desires to deceive them.”

“What do you mean?” Jane asked, a sense of dread crept over her.

“Since you have arrived in the Hallowland, she has placed you and your sister’s lives at risk. First with the gremlins, then allowing Catherine to climb that night-

mare tree, and now, nearly forfeiting your soul to the Reaper.”

“How can you follow us?”

“As I said before, Mrs. Macabre and I were close in life and we shall remain so in death. I saw your game of wits with the Reaper, I saw you win by sheer luck, I overheard the prophecy that he gave to you. The loss of someone you care for is coming,” she glanced over to Catie in the other bed.

“But, Mrs. Macabre didn’t do those things to hurt us!” Her voice rose in a desperate attempt to make sense of what she was hearing. “How could she have known that we would be in danger?”

“Because she has made that same mistake before,” the Widow pointed to the dark patch in the corner where she had appeared. A boy walked from the shadows, he was translucent and the color of moon light like the portraits of the ghosts that she saw in the library. The boy moved towards the bed and the Widow wrapped a long arm around him. “This is the spirit of the last child that she has taken from your world. Like

yourself, he was an outcast, a misfit. Ignored for his love of dark things. She took him on adventures like yourself, but in the process, he perished by her recklessness. Now he haunts the Hallowland in perpetual terror." The boy's eyes were wide with fear, staring at nothing in particular, his mouth hung slightly open, as if he was permanently gazing at the thing that killed him.

"You're lying!" Jane cried at her, "She would never do that!"

"Though your protest, I see doubt in your eyes, Jane Gracey. I've seen it ever since you've arrived here. Somewhere, deep inside you lies a place that has always seen her and her ways cautiously. Listen to that place. Make your home in it," the Widow tilted her head up, as if she heard a noise. "You will wake soon, I must leave. Remember, child, heed my words or it may be your doom," the Widow and the boy drew themselves back into the shadows. As they did so, the creaking returned and it was replaced with crying.

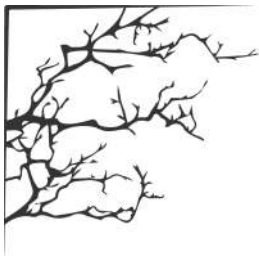
"Stop it!" Jane covered her ears.

The crying turned into sobs.

“Stop it!” She yelled again, shutting her eyes.

The sobbing multiplied a hundred times over, the chorus of anguish grew and grew until it swarmed her senses like flies.

“I said stop it!” She screamed and bolted upright from her bed. She looked around, panting. She blinked as the false sun shone through her window. She breathed out a sigh. A dream, that was all it was. Just a dream. She looked over to the bed next to her and Catie wasn’t in it. She heard from far below the sounds of Mrs. Macabre and her sister moving around in the kitchen. She got out of bed to join them, then she noticed something on her hand. She looked down at the white sheets of the bed and saw black splotches dotting them, like tears of ink.



10. THE VAMPIRE BALL

By the time Jane reached downstairs, the door bell had rung. A high-pitched shriek went through the house and died. She looked in the kitchen.

“Oh, could you get that for me, darling?” Mrs. Macabre said as she, Catie, and Jack were cleaning up breakfast. Elvira sat on the window sill, looking bored as most cats often do.

Jane opened the front door and was greeted by a werewolf. She gasped as she looked up, gazing at the man whose body was covered in thick brown fur,

his head resembled a snarling dog. Sharp fangs poked out from his maw and yellow eyes looked into hers. Around his body, he wore a leather satchel.

"Is this the residence of Mrs. Macabre?" He asked in a low voice.

"It is," she said, remembering to speak.

The werewolf opened his satchel and with a clawed hand, he took out an envelope and handed it to her. On the front was the address of the house, the return address was *1897 Crimson Castle*. She looked on the back and saw a red wax seal with a bat embossed into it. "Took me forever to find the place," he said, apologetically.

"Thank you," Jane smiled. There was a pause. Not knowing what to do, she stood there, waiting for him to say something. After several awkward moments, the werewolf cleared his throat.

"Tip, please?" He held out a hairy hand.

"Oh!" Jane said and laughed. "Sorry! I'll be right back!" She rushed over into the kitchen. "Mrs.

Macabre?" She asked handing the letter to her, "The were-mailman is asking for a tip."

Mrs. Macabre laughed. "They're called mail-were-wolves, dear, not were-mailmen," she shook her head and smiled. Jane suddenly conjured the image of someone writhing in agony as they turned into a mailman by the light of a full moon. She held back a giggle. "The werewolf treats are over in the cabinet," the witch pointed to a cabinet in the corner and Jane walked over to it.

Opening the small door, she found a series of jars filled with everything from eyeballs to crows feet. She saw the one marked WEREWOLF TREATS and grabbed it. She took off the glass lid and saw that it was filled with cookies in the shape of humans. She picked one up and smelled it and to her surprise the scent was a blend of chicken and bacon. She placed the jar back and ran to the front door.

"Here you go!" She said, handing the treat to him with a theatrical gesture.

The werewolf looked at it, then looked to his right, then to his left as if to make sure that no one else was around. He moved closer to her, so that she could feel his warm breath. "Can you throw it, please?" He asked sheepishly.

"Of course!" Jane said and went onto the porch past the mail-werewolf. She threw it as hard as she could and it went several feet away.

The werewolf began to pant and ran after it. Jane watched his hind legs kick dirt in the air and his tail wag, as he sniffed through the dark grass to find it. He finally did and ate it in two quick bites. "Thank *yoooooooouuuu!*" He howled.

"You're welcome!" She laughed and waved to him, going back inside and shutting the door. As she returned to the kitchen, Mrs. Macabre was intently reading the letter that she had received.

"What does it say?" Catie asked, with bated anticipation.

"It's an invitation to the Vampire Queen's ball," she said, "She holds one every year, but this is the first time I have been invited."

"Well, at least they won't drink witch's blood. You think they eat cats?" Elvira asked in a dry tone.

"Hush," Mrs. Macabre waved her hand at her. "It says that I am allowed to bring no more than two guests."

Catie gasped with excitement, while Jane kept in a word of hesitation. Though she wasn't quite sure if the Widow was friendly or not, the ghost's pleas did stay with her. After all, she wasn't exactly *wrong* to say that Mrs. Macabre had put them in harm's way up to that point. Even if she didn't mean to.

"Oh, Mrs. Macabre, can I stay here, please?" Jack shuddered. "Vampires are so scary. With their fangs, and their coffins, and they can turn into bats! Bats are terrifying!"

"They're quite charming once you get to know them. But, of course you can stay if you want to, dear. No one will force you to do anything you're not com-

fortable with," she patted him on the shoulder and Jack let out a sigh of relief.

"When is it?" Catie asked.

"Tonight, in fact."

"Can we go?"

"I don't know if we should," Jane finally said, unable to keep it to herself. They all looked at her, surprised.

"But- but they're *vampires*, Jane?" Catie said, shocked. "Don't tell me you've never wanted to meet a *vampire*?"

"I do!" She said, embarrassed. "I just- after that whole thing with the Reaper. . ."

"Oh, sweetheart," Mrs. Macabre let out a sigh. "I told you I never should have brought you and Catie to the river with me. That was my fault, and I take full responsibility for it," she thought for a moment. "In fact, I think I know just the trick!" She snapped her fingers and a cupboard opened up. Various jars, tea pots, and containers came flying out and landed gently on the kitchen counter, until finally a large glass jug came out

of the back. It was full of a red liquid that looked like fruit punch. “Ah, here we are!” Mrs. Macabre said, presenting it to everyone. “Vampire camouflage!”

“What’s that?” Catie asked.

“A little potion of my own making. An extract of vampire blood here, an extract of chameleon saliva there and *presto!* You’ll be able to look, sound, and smell like a vampire. That way they won’t confuse you for a midnight snack.”

Jane prickled at the thought. Not just at the concept of being vampire food, but that the solution to her problem had been solved, partially to her disappointment. “I guess we can go then,” she mumbled.

“Yaaaay!” Catie held up her arms with joy. “You won’t regret this, Jane!”

She prayed that her sister was right.



AFTER A LITANY OF CHORES, which included: Feeding the man-eating plant, dusting the mummies' tombs, bathing the swamp monster, and making sure the giant spider had its exercise, it was time to leave for the ball.

"You won't get into too much trouble, will you?" Mrs. Macabre said as she scratched Elvira's ears.

"We'll make sure you'll never notice if we do," Elvira purred and tilted her head back with pleasure. Jack shook his head to Mrs. Macabre diligently.

"Alright girls, off to the ball!" Mrs. Macabre grabbed her broom out of the holder and opened the front door.

"How are we going to get there?" Jane asked as they walked out, holding on to one last hope that perhaps they couldn't go after all.

"Oh, it would take far too long to travel by house, my dear. So, instead, we'll get there the old fashioned way," she held up her broom vertically and let go, it floated several feet above the ground. The broom then stretched, growing longer, so that it would fit all of

them. "Hop on, then," Mrs. Macabre smiled as she swung around on the front, tapping the raven skull handle.

Catie gleefully got on behind her and Jane did so with great care. The last time she had done anything similar to such a task was when her parents took them horseback riding when they were five. She had hated it, never finding the comfort in riding a living thing. She felt a twinge of anxiety run through her as she gripped Catie's sides.

"Now hold on, children. Blasting off!" Mrs. Macabre kicked her legs off the ground and they went zooming up. Catie laughed as if she was on a roller coaster and Jane nearly had the wind taken out of her. She glanced down and saw Jack waving below them, growing smaller and smaller as they went up, he soon looked like a tiny figure of a scarecrow in front of a tiny model of the manor.

"Don't look down, don't look down," she kept repeating out loud. The wind whipped through her hair and she shivered from the cold.

"You're holding me too tight," Catie yelled behind her as they flew.

"Sorry!" Jane called out in return. She loosened her grip a bit. As their flight continued, her heart beat slowed down to its normal rate, she relaxed her hold on Catie's back, and she took in her surroundings. The night sky was illuminated by a giant, pale moon that hung in it for all eternity. Its beams shone over the bright twinkling stars over blankets of ink. Dark clouds were dotted here and there, swirling like cotton candy. Below them were mountains, trees, hills, rivers, and lakes. She saw villages and cities dancing with pinpoints of candle light in their windows and street lamps. She wondered if anyone was looking up and seeing them, a witch on a broom must be as mundane as watching an airplane flying over their house was to her. All of it was bathed in a deep, rich purple making it feel like something from a dream. Though the land was full of monsters, it contained within it a beauty that she had never seen. Her heart ached at the thought of leaving it one day soon.

“Ah-ha!” Mrs. Macabre said, pointing downwards. As they slowly descended, the Crimson Castle came into view. Spires of red grew higher and higher as they drew nearer, appearing like a massive blot of blood in the indigo-tinted landscape. “What a lovely night for flying, don’t you think, girls?” She asked as they touched down.

“That. Was. *Amazing!*” Catie said, getting off. “I can’t wait to do it again!”

Jane wobbled a bit as she got up off of the broom, finding her land legs as she did so. She looked down at what she was wearing. “Don’t you think we’re a little underdressed for a ball?” She asked.

“That won’t be a problem,” Mrs. Macabre said and pulled out a piece of straw from her broom. She placed it in her pocket and snapped her fingers. Her daily wardrobe of black had turned into a red velvet suit. She moved her fingers through her raven hair, making it grow short and wavy as she did so. She struck a pose. “How do I look?”

“Fantastic!” The Gracey twins said with applause.

“Thank you,” she bowed and pulled out two pieces from the broom and handed them to the girls. “Now you try it. Just think of what you want to wear and snap your fingers.”

Jane and Catie carefully took the pieces from her as if they were radioactive. They placed them in their pockets, thought about what they wanted, then snapped their fingers. Instantaneously, their clothes turned into gorgeous red gowns, Jane’s more formal with lining weaving in and out like black vines around her dress and Catie’s more regal with glittering rubies dotted all around it.

“Thank god we didn’t think of the same dress,” Jane said with relief.

“You look wonderful, darlings,” Mrs. Macabre tapped her broom onto the ground and it turned into a walking cane. “Oh, I almost forgot!” She took out a vial from her pocket. It was filled with the elixir that they saw from the kitchen cabinet.

“Do we have to?” Catie groaned.

“Is it going to hurt?” Jane said, taking it.

“Not at all. Just a little discomfort, but that shouldn’t last for more than several seconds.”

Jane opened the vial and smelled it, the scent was strong and sharp, like medicine. She held her nose and took a swig. Bitter, sour liquid went down her throat, almost making her gag, but she kept it down, anyway. She handed it to Catie, who took it from her with a frown. She drank it with the same look of disgust.

“Give it a moment to kick in,” Mrs. Macabre said, excited.

Several seconds past with no results. Then they both noticed that they were growing paler by the moment. Their stomachs began to gurgle as if they were hungry, then they felt something growing inside their mouths. It was a dull, throbbing sensation that they might have gotten from a toothache. The stomach and mouth problems soon disappeared.

“Whoah,” Catie said, placing a finger delicately on her new born fangs.

“This is weird,” Jane agreed, feeling the sharp points with her tongue.

“You two look just the parts!” Mrs. Macabre applauded, “Now, we should get going. The potion will only last a few hours.. Shall we, then?” She moved towards the castle and the girls followed her.

Now that they were down on ground level, they were able to see the castle more clearly. It was enormous, with a huge draw bridge and a porticos made of iron. The torches that lined the walls made it glow like the rubies on Catie’s dress. But surrounding the castle was something they hadn’t expected at all. Roses. Hundreds of red roses made a perimeter around the castle, giving the whole space an overwhelming, sensuous red tint.

“Where are all the carriages?” Catie asked.

“What do you mean, dear?” Mrs. Macabre said.

“For all the guests. How did they get here?”

“They turned into bats or wolves, of course,” she shook her head and smiled.

They reached the two massive double doors that was surrounded by several maids and butlers. Their eyes were wide and stared at nothing in particular.

“What’s up with them?” Jane whispered, so as not to be seen as impolite.

“They’re humans that the vampires have hypnotized,” she explained. Jane wasn’t sure if that made her feel better about the situation.

One of the butlers strolled up to them. “Hello,” he said in a slow, monotoned voice, “welcome. To. The. Crimson Castle. May I. See your. Invitation?” He moved his hand out in a mechanical fashion towards her.

“Certainly,” Mrs. Macabre said, pulling out the letter from her pocket.

The butler took it and read it. Or at least, that was the assumption, it was more accurate to say that he stared at the paper with his eyes unmoving. “Very well,” he finally said. “Enjoy. The party,” he turned to his associates and nodded to them.

The other butlers and maids took to the mighty doors and opened them with a loud creak. As they walked inside, the trio looked around with amazement. Enormous crystal chandeliers hung over them, bal-

conies and baroque architecture were draped in curtains of red satin and velvet. In the middle of the room was a large fountain that bubbled blood surrounded by classic statues of women with fangs. The vampires around them were dressed impeccably: reds, blacks, and golds danced around them. Feathers, jewelry, and even some masquerade masks entered their view. Some of the faces gazed at Mrs. Macabre with unkind eyes.

"Mrs. Macabre!" A voice cried out to them. They turned and saw a woman walking gracefully towards them, fangs smiling. The guests quickly parted, making a trail for her. She was dressed in a large crimson ball gown, with a cape trailing behind like bat wings. Atop her red hair sat a crown incrusting with rubies.

"Your Majesty," Mrs. Macabre bowed. "What an honor it is to be invited to your ball. You're looking as lovely as a freshly embalmed corpse," she took her hand and kissed it.

"Oh, you are too kind!" The Vampire Queen said, flattered. "News had spread that you had returned from your long hiatus, so think of it as my way of wel-

coming you back! And who are your two guests, might I ask?"

"These are my nieces," she interjected, before the girls could open their mouths, "Jane and Catherine. They've come to visit me, so I thought I'd give them the pleasure of meeting their monarchy."

"Your Majesty," the twins bowed.

"Wonderful! Tell me, young ladies, which clan do you herald from?"

All three of them looked at one another for a moment. "The Dracula clan!" Jane said in a panic. "He's our distant cousin," she smiled.

"Funny. I've never heard him mention you before," the Queen placed a sharp nail to her chin in thought, then waved at the air and laughed. "Oh, that old bat is unable to remember where his own coffin is, anyways! You three just arrived in time! We're about to start the parlor games!"

Jane and Catie looked at each other, relieved that their cover hadn't been blown. The games that the Queen was excited for were both familiar and foreign

at the same time. The first, was croquet, a game that they had never played before- especially not with skulls- but they were fast learners. The second was snake racing, in which tracks were invented through a series of small wooden walls. Snakes would then be set loose and whichever snake reached the finish line first, the person who had placed the bet on it would win a large sum of money. As the reptiles slithered through the labyrinthine structure, all the vampires cheered for their snake to win. It, unfortunately, ended on a technicality error in which the python ate the cobra.

After an hour or so of games, dancing, and conversing with the other vampires, the dinner bell was rung. Everyone entered the dining room and sat at an enormous banquet table that spanned the length of the hall.

“Oh, I do hope you two are humanitarians,” the Queen said as she sat at her throne placed at the end of the table.

The Gracey twins looked at Mrs. Macabre, who nodded back to them immediately. “We are!” Catie said with smiling fangs. She nor Jane knew what the

Queen had meant, but it soon became clear once the butlers and maids placed the main course in front of them. In a bowl made of fine China was a dark red liquid that was quickly deduced to be blood. Wisps of steam rose off of it as the girls looked down, shocked.

"Where is it from?" Jane whispered to Mrs. Macabre.

"You don't want to know," she said as she sipped hers.

Catie took the smallest amount of her soup from her spoon then made a face as if she had tasted something strong. "It's really salty," she said to Jane. "Just tell yourself it's tomato soup or something," her tone was not as confident as her sister had hoped.

Jane looked around and saw the other vampires slurping and eating their blood soup as if it was the most delicious meal they'd ever had. Some dipped bread into it, others asked for eyeballs to be dashed into theirs, all of it made her nearly sick to her stomach.

"May I be excused, Your Majesty?" She asked, getting up.

"Whatever for, my dear?" The Queen asked, breaking conversation from a noble vampire.

"I- I don't feel good," Jane clutched her stomach, "Where is your restroom?"

"The washroom is down the corridor to the right," she said pointing to it and looking genuinely concerned.

"Thank you," she curtsied and turned. As she moved her seat back into the table, she gave an apologetic look to Mrs. Macabre and Catie, who in turn were looking at her with a sense of abandonment. She rushed down the hall, her shoes echoing against the marble floor and bleeding into the conversation at the table.

She soon reached the washroom and locked the door behind her. She let out a sigh of relief and walked over to the sink, turning it on and washing her face in the cold water. She looked into the mirror and laughed with surprise to see that she had no reflection. The laughter soon died down when she noticed that she was not alone.

“Enjoying the party?” The Widow asked from the back of the room.

“What do you want from me?” Jane spun around.

“The broom, child,” the Widow floated from the shadows towards her, “the broom is the key to your prison.”

“What do you mean?”

“The witch is indeed full of magic, but the strongest source of it comes from the broom. Without it, she is less powerful. Without it, she is harmless. Without it, you and your sister are safe.”

“What- what do you want me to do with it?” Jane stammered, getting colder as the Widow drew closer.

“Nothing, my sweet. Only to give it to me,” the Widow placed a boney hand to her chest. “I cannot enter the manor without it. Once I have the broom, I shall set you and your sister free, so that you may return to your world.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“You doubt her, I know you do. Is there not a part of you that doubts her intentions? To make you stay

here, in the Hallowland forever, instead of going back to where you belong?. Wouldn't you want to go back home and live a normal life? A life where you keep your love of the dark hidden? Without being teased, without being judged, without being seen as a *freak*?"

Jane shivered, but not from the cold. There was a part of her, deep in the back of her mind, that wished that she and her sister would hide who they were. Being called strange and unusual by other children just made her and Catie feel even more lonelier than they already did. And maybe, just maybe, if they were normal then their parents wouldn't look at them as if they were from another planet. "I do," she said.

"Then let me take it, then," the Widow laid a hand on Jane's chin. "Let me take that pain away, let me make you feel joy again, let me help you rid this disease of being yourself."

"How?" She asked, a tear rolling down her cheek.

"Tomorrow. Meet me in the attic at noon. Commandeer the broom and give it to me through the window. Remember, no one must see you. No one."

“I will.”

“Excellent. Now hurry along, your truth is showing,” the Widow tilted her head to the mirror.

Jane looked behind her and saw that the ghost had vanished, but she also noticed a faint outline of her reflection in the mirror. She panicked, if the potion was wearing off for her, then it surely was doing the same for Catie. She quickly unlocked the door and rushed out.

Composing herself, she walked back to the dining hall. The chatter amongst everyone was still in session, a chorus of voices talking about things she wasn't paying attention to.

“Oh, thank Hades, you're back!” The Queen said, noticing her. “Just in time for desert!”

Jane sat back down and saw, to her surprise, a piece of white cake had replaced her soup. She wiped some sweat off of her brow. “Sorry,” she mumbled to Catie.

“What took you so long?” She whispered back.

"Just wasn't feeling good," Jane cut the cake with her fork and it oozed red. She wished that she was still in the bathroom.

"Well, don't do that again," Catie said, annoyed. "I had to think up vampire small talk, and believe me, that wasn't easy."

"I said I was-" Jane stopped, her breath taken from her and her eyes stared at Catie in horror.

"What?"

"Your-your mouth," she touched her own lips.

Catie felt it and understood what Jane saw. Her fangs were gone. "What do we do?" She asked in a slightly higher voice, a common trait of hers whenever she was scared.

"I don't know," Jane looked at Mrs. Macabre, who was gleefully conversing with a vampire lord. "Don't panic."

"Does anyone smell something?" A vampire duke asked the table.

"Now that you mention it," a woman said, sniffing the air. "I do detect a hint of some odor."

"I'm panicking," Catie said, looking around. Mrs. Macabre's eyes shifted with a steely gaze.

"It smells like. . . " Another vampire chimed in.

"Humans," the Queen said, looking at the three of them. "Mrs. Macabre, I do believe your guests are not who they claim to be," she smiled like a shark or some wild predator.

"I could go for a fresh snack," the duke said, his features changing like all the rest of the vampires at the table. Their faces transformed from human to bat-like, their fingers grew like spider legs and their nails turned to claws.

"Get out, now," Mrs. Macabre said to the girls as she brandished her cane like a sword.

Jane and Catie both rushed out of their seats and ran as the vampires clawed at them from across the table, their hissing mixed in together with the crashing of plates and glasses. Jane turned and briefly saw Mrs. Macabre shooting bulbs of garlic from her cane at them, sending the vampires recoiling in disgust.

“Seize them!” The Queen’s screams echoed through the castle. “*Seize them both!*”

They ran down hallways for what seemed like miles. All of the beautiful drapes and decorum of the castle seemed different now, it was grotesque and ugly, like something from a surreal nightmare. Their feet were the only sounds bouncing off the walls. Their hearts pumped in their chests and their breathing came out like exhaust from a great engine. They ran and ran until they hit something that sent them onto the floor. Above them stood a butler and a maid.

“You’re. Not. Leaving,” the butler droned.

“The. Queen. Wants. Your blood,” the maid said.

“And. What. The. Queen wants-“

“The. Queen. Shall get.”

The man and woman lunged towards them. Catie kicked the woman in the face, knocking her out. Jane tried to fight, but the butler took hold of her. She bit and flailed in his grasp, but he wouldn’t budge. None of her attacks seemed to bother him whatsoever.

“Do not. Struggle,” he said. “It. Is futile. To-“ A huge crash broke his words and he was sent tumbling to the floor, with Jane falling on top of him. She looked up and Catie was standing over them with shards of a vase surrounding them. Roses and dirt laid around the remains, an empty column stood in the corner.

“Come on,” she helped Jane up and they continued running. They turned a corner and heard a door open next to them. They whipped around, ready to defend themselves, and saw that it was Mrs. Macabre. Her suit was now decorated with claw marks, velvet stuck out here and there like patches of red grass. Her hair was unkempt and messy.

“Girls,” she panted. “Get behind me.”

They did what they were told, and as soon as they hid themselves behind her back, the door burst open and the vampires came rushing through. As the space grew more crowded, they were sent slowly backing into a corner.

“Don’t worry, darlings,” the Queen said. “It won’t hurt for more than a moment. Besides, you could join

our court if you wanted to. You wouldn't need to pretend anymore," she smiled and her royal guests laughed and jeered along with her.

"Shut your eyes," Mrs. Macabre turned her head towards the twins. "And, whatever you do, don't open them until I say otherwise."

"What?" Jane asked, terrified.

"Do it!"

They both covered their eyes and shut them as hard as they could. Even in their darkness, they could see the faintest glimmer of the brightest light they'd ever seen. The vampires hissed and screamed and then the cacophony died down along with the light. Several seconds past.

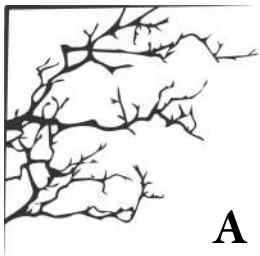
"You can open them, now," they heard Mrs. Macabre's voice.

They did and they saw that the vampires were gone. "What happened to them?" Catie asked.

"I replicated sunlight with this," she held up her cane," they went scurrying back to their coffins or underground. They'll soon find out it was spell, so I think

it's best that we excuse ourselves from the party, immediately," she said, exhausted.

The three of them left the castle alone in silence. Mrs. Macabre had turned the cane back into her broom and they flew off. As they traveled back to the manor, Jane looked down and was surprised to find that she wasn't filled with anxiety about the height any longer. She didn't find the view beautiful, either. The Hallowland now appeared to be full of danger within its shadows, the moonlight showing a vast terrain of horrors and terrors below. She had thought that perhaps the Widow was right.



11. A GIRL, A GHOST, AND A BROOM



AFTER LUNCH THE NEXT morning, Jane and Catie were assigned chores. Mrs. Macabre had deemed her manor to be “a bit *too* stuffy,” so she gave herself, Jack, and Catie kitchen duty, while Jane volunteered to dust.

“Do you want me to dust the entire house?” She asked as she was handed the feather duster.

“Oh, no, my dear,” Mrs. Macabre chuckled. “Just the foyer. Baby steps and all that.”

Just as she had wanted it. Jane went into the foyer and did what she was told, she made her way slowly throughout, first beginning on the ground dusting underneath furniture, and then making her way to the top of statues, tables, etc. As she was dusting the mighty grandfather clock in the corner, she had noticed that it was ten minutes till noon. A chill went through her as she remembered the Widow's words the night before. She looked around and spotted the broom in its umbrella holder. She looked in the kitchen with Catie, Mrs. Macabre, and Jack cleaning the windows with their backs turned. She bit her lip and thought to herself that, if there was a shot at getting it, it was now or never.

She carefully made her way down from the clock and tip-toed across the floor, constantly looking over at the kitchen as if she was crossing a street during traffic. She reached the front door and stared at it. This was the closest she had been to the broom itself when

it wasn't in Mrs. Macabre's grasp. She had never really studied it until now. At first glance, it appeared to be just an ordinary broom with a bird's skull on the top of the handle. But as she looked at it closer, she admired the beautiful symbols carved into it, the blackness of the handle like a night sky, and its straw as rich with amber as if it were made of honey. She shook her head and thought it was time to get a move on. Not only would she risk getting caught, but she couldn't imagine how impatient the Widow must have been, waiting by the attic window. She wasn't scared of the Widow *per se*, the ghost had convinced her that she was of no threat, but she did find something intimidating about her. Like a stern mother that you would never want to let down, lest she send you to your room. She shivered at the thought of where a ghost would send her as punishment.

Jane picked up the broom and was surprised by how heavy it was. She had expected it to be as light as a feather, but instead, it had a certain weight to it. As if it was carrying something that had more than what

met the eye. She looked again at the kitchen and saw that they were still cleaning the windows. She ran to the elevator and pressed the down button. As the gears whirled over her, she could hear Catie laughing and a sense of guilt past over her. If her sister were to see her stealing the broom, she may never forgive herself. Not because Catie would be angry, not because it betrayed Mrs. Macabre's trust, though both of those things were true. No, the thing that made Jane's heart sink the most was the look of disappointment on Catie's face.

After all, wouldn't that be like looking into a mirror? To have your identical twin look at you with such a feeling of sadness and confusion would hit too close to home for her. She considered for a moment to run back and return the broom. But the thought of having to deal with the potential wrath of the Widow, along with the Reaper's prophecy convinced her otherwise.

The elevator came to a stop and she got in. As she closed the gate, she pressed the button to the hundredth floor and it came to life again. She breathed out a sigh, glad to have reached thus far in her heist.

"What are you doing with that?" A voice asked next to her. She gasped and nearly fell against the wall. It was Elvira, who was calmly looking up at her.

"I-I'm going up to clean the attic," Jane said quickly. "Mrs. Macabre said to use this. It'll clean things faster," she held up the broom and smiled.

"Do you know how to use it?" The cat asked, tilting her head to the side.

"Well, I mean, I can learn. How hard can it be? What are you doing in here, anyway?"

"I was going to see if they needed any help in the kitchen. I could've taken the stairs, but I'm feeling lazy today."

"Oh," she paused. "Then why didn't you get off when I walked in?"

"Considering that you were carrying *that*," she nodded her head towards the broom, "I thought you may need some help with whatever you were up to."

"Oh," Jane said again. She faced the elevator door, not wanting to talk. The machinery filled the silence.

She could feel Elvira's eyes on her, studying her. The elevator reached the top and pinged.

As they got out, the corridor leading to the attic seemed to be much longer than it had been when she had first arrived. It was like being in a dream where she was running, but no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't reach where she wanted to go.

"Feeling a little warm, Jane?" Elvira asked, strolling beside her.

"No," she said, beginning to notice the sweat forming on her brow. "Why?"

"You seem a little. . . . *stressed*, is all," the cat said. Her eyes turned a luminous green.

Jane panicked. She had forgotten that Elvira could read minds. *Clear your head*, she thought immediately. *Don't think about what you're doing. Think of anything! Think of puppies!* Elvira's eyes turned back to normal. "You really shouldn't do that," Jane said. "Reading people's minds without their permission is rude."

"You know what they say about cats," Elvira said wryly, "we are a curious lot."

They finally reached the attic and walked through. Jane began sweeping the floor, as if on command while Elvira sat and watched.

“Is this your first time sweeping?” The cat asked.

“I’ll have you know that I am a master sweeper. My mother says so.”

“That’s because she’s your mother,” Elvira said without hesitation. Jane swept aggressively by her, sending Elvira back several paces.

“If you think I’m no good at it, why don’t you make yourself useful and go look in the corners were I can’t reach,” she pointed to the machinery around her. “Maybe there’s some dead mice in there.”

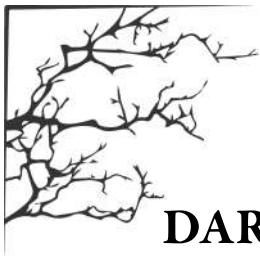
Elvira’s ears perked up and she darted over to the mechanisms. Jane moved her way closer to the windows. She looked down and saw the Weeping Widow floating right below it. Her hollowed eyes looked up at her like two black pools. She glanced over and saw Elvira’s hindquarters sticking out of the gears as she hunted.

"I can't find anything," her voice echoed through the machinery.

"Keep looking," she called to her. "I'm sure you'll find something," she unlatched the window and slowly opened it inwards. A cool breeze drifted in carrying dark orange leaves with it. She prayed the cat couldn't feel it. The Widow slowly drifted up with the wind and stretched out her arms. Jane held out the broom to her.

"I'm telling you, there's nothing-" Elvira turned around. "*Jane, don't!*" She hissed.

But it was too late. The Widow's hands gripped the handle of the broom and yanked it from Jane, holding it close to her. The lights flickered and went out, then the house began to tremble with the sound of rattling bones.



12. DARK MAGIC

Catie had been cleaning the kitchen counter when the lights had gone out. She looked around confused. “What’s that all about?” She asked.

“I’m not sure,” Mrs. Macabre said. “There must be something wrong with the attic. This old place has a tendency to get hiccups from time to time.”

“I hope we don’t have a gremlin problem again,” she groaned.

“Gremlins?” Jack asked, nervously. “Do they bite?”

“Don’t worry, Jane and I can take care of it,” Catie chuckled. “Jane?” She called out, but received no response. As Mrs. Macabre was finding a lantern in a cabinet, she went into the foyer.

The coziness that it had brought when she had first arrived was gone now. Instead, the large room felt cold and dark, she looked up and a draft howled through the winding staircase and the floors above her. "Jane, where are you?" She shivered and looked around with no sign of her. She glanced upwards and saw a feather duster resting on the grandfather clock.

"Did you find her?" Mrs. Macabre came into the room holding the lit lantern with Jack trailing behind.

"No. I don't know-" Catie began, but her sentence was cut off by a sound above her. The house began to shudder. "Why is it doing that?"

"It is afraid," Mrs. Macabre said, cautiously.

The shudder stopped and another sound soon filled the air. The pattering of feet came running down the staircase, getting closer and closer, until it reached the foyer.

"Jane- she's taken it," Elvira panted as she jumped onto the floor, her eyes wide with terror.

"Calm down, dear," Mrs. Macabre said, holding up a hand to steady her. "Taken what?"

"The broom," she gestured her head to the front door. They all looked over and saw that it was missing.

"Why would she do that?" Catie asked. She had noticed Jane had been acting odd as of late, but this was unusually suspicious of her.

"She *gave* it to her!" Elvira nearly screamed.

"Who?" Mrs. Macabre asked.

"The Weeping Widow," the cat replied.

Darkness swept over Mrs. Macabre's face, the likes of which Catie had never seen before. It was filled with such fury and anger that it almost frightened her. She took a step back, as if the rage was radiating off of her. "You mean, the ghost you told us about?" Catie asked.

"Yes," Elvira said, taking notice of the witch's change.

"But what would she want with the broom? And why is Jane a part of this?" She looked around as if the room itself held the answers. With such confusion and chaos happening so quickly, she just needed a simple answer to such simple questions.

"Catie, Jack, you two stay down here with Elvira," Mrs. Macabre said.

"*What?*" She asked, furious. "You can't just leave us here!"

"It's too dangerous. This isn't vampires we're dealing with. This is something much worse."

"She's my sister, Mrs. Macabre!"

"*Catherine,*" she shot her a look that was filled with poison. "You will do as I say."

"I'm. Not. Staying," Catie said, planting her feet on the floor and crossing her arms. She stared right into Mrs. Macabre's eyes with just as much conviction. Several seconds past. The silence was deafening.

"Hell and damnation," Mrs. Macabre said, finally. "But do exactly as I say. Understand?"

Catie nodded and let out a breath of air, the tension within her released.

"Do I have to go?" Jack asked, raising a hand.

"Yes," they all said in unison. Mrs. Macabre turned into a raven.

“Grab hold of my foot,” she said, flying over them. “I’ll carry all of you.”

Catie gripped her claw and Jack took her other hand. She looked up and gave him a small smile, reassuring him that everything was going to be okay. Elvira leapt onto his shoulder.

“Ready?” Mrs. Macabre asked and, before they could answer, they were flying upwards. Looking down, Catie felt a different sensation than she did when she was flying on the broom the night before. This time she was afraid of falling, she imagined letting go and hitting the floor along with Jack. No sense of wonder filled her heart now, only dread.

They reached the top floor and let go as soon as they flew over the banister. The raven turned back into Mrs. Macabre. “Get behind me,” she said, holding the lantern in front of her. The white light casted an eerie glow against the hallway, like it was the moon. The door to the attic was open, but just barely. They inched closer and heard a noise beside them. Mrs. Macabre quickly turned, but there was nothing there. She spun

around and the Widow floated in front of them. Her black dress billowed around her like wings and she clutched Jane close to her with an arm around her throat. In her other hand was the broom.

"Hello, there," the Widow said in a raspy whisper that made Catie's blood run cold. "It's been so long, hasn't it?"

"Let her go," Mrs. Macabre said.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Macabre," Jane began to sob. "I didn't mean to-"

"Silence, child," the Widow spat angrily. "I'll hear none of your petulant whining." She threw Jane towards them and Catie caught her.

"It's okay, it's okay," she said over and over again as Jane cried into her shoulder.

"You have the broom," Mrs. Macabre glared at her. "Now, what do you want from me?"

"To suffer," the Widow said and pointed the end of the broom towards them. Black smoke billowed from the straw and swarmed around them. Inside the thick, dark fog they could hear the faintest sound of wailing.

"To suffer as you have made me and others suffer," the Widow's voice echoed through the smoke. "To live the rest of your days in unimaginable pain," the smoke formed a hundred faces screaming. "To feel the guilt boil inside of you till you feel that there is nothing left," the faces slowly drifted together, forming the Widow. "To feel the doubt of who you are strangle you to your very last breath," her skeleton arm gripped Mrs. Macabre's throat, then dissipated.

They were back in the hallway, confused of what had just happened. The Widow remained several feet away from them.

"Then why don't you, then?" Mrs. Macabre rubbed her neck. "Why don't you just get on with it?"

"That would be far too easy," the Widow waved a hand, dismissively. "I want you to suffer. But only by your own making," she snapped her fingers with the sound of a match being struck. The lights returned to the house, every door lining the hallway slowly opened with loud creaks. All the monsters that were held within them came spilling out.

"To the lift! *Now!*" Mrs. Macabre screamed, dropping the lantern with a crash, and they all ran to the elevator. As they ran, Jane looked behind her and saw the horde of beasts that been unleashed. Giant spiders, swamp monsters, mummies, and other creatures came charging at them.

"Get in! Get in! Get in!" Elvira shouted as they reached the elevator. They all tumbled in and Mrs. Macabre turned to shut the gate, but it was stuck. She yanked again, but the gate only made a metallic shriek, sticking into place.

"Help me!" She cried out and they all got behind her, pulling the gate with all they had. The cabal of monsters grew closer and closer, then with a mighty tug, the gate came slamming shut, just as a zombie reached out to them. His arm groped at them through the gate. Catie pressed the down button and the gears began to whirl. As they descended, the zombie's arm was cut off and fell down the shaft.

"What are we going to do?" Jack asked, his hands up to his mouth.

"She has more magic than I now," Mrs. Macabre said, hopelessly. "My abilities without the broom can only do so much."

They sat in silence as the elevator continued to go down. "Unless," Jane said, finally breaking it. "We use the library."

"What do you mean?" Catie asked.

"The books. They're filled with magic, right? If we can lure the Widow in there--"

"We can give her a taste of her own medicine," Elvira finished, her ears perking up.

"You're a genius!" Catie said with her arms up and hugged her, but their celebration was cut short.

Above them, they heard a huge roar and they looked up. Something massive was falling down the shaft towards them, it finally hit the top of the elevator and they realized what it was. The huge man-eating plant was purple, magenta, and green all in one flower. It would have been beautiful if it weren't for the rows upon rows of sharp teeth that glared at them in every petal. It bloomed and snatched at the metal, causing

the elevator to halt mid-shaft. Iron screamed at them as it clawed its way through. Vines shot at them like snakes.

They all screamed and moved to a corner of the elevator. Mrs. Macabre snapped her fingers and fireworks went off inside the lift with loud pops. Bright sparks of blue and red were sent up towards the plant, irritating it, shaking its head. It roared once more and began to eat its way through. Mrs. Macabre cried out as a thorn from a vine ripped through her arm. She was sent huddled into the corner, covering the wound.

“Help me get this panel off,” Catie said to Jane and she pointed to the one beside her holding all the floor buttons. Jane gripped it and yanked, making a sound like a can being opened. Jack quickly joined in.

“Hurry!” Elvira said, swatting at a vine. The plant had ripped off the top of the elevator.

Catie grabbed one of the wires from the exposed panel and ripped it out. Sparks and smoke fizzled from the end of it. The plant hurdled through the elevator and she held up the wires to its mouth. It burned and

popped inside the flower and the plant screamed in agony. It was sent careening back into the darkness of the shaft.

"No, *you're* the genius," Jane smiled at her. The elevator squeaked and was sent falling down the shaft, metal screamed and sparks flew. Everyone grabbed hold of one another and the elevator landed with a crash, sending them all tumbling out of it.

"Come on," Jane said, getting back up and grabbing Catie behind her. They all ran towards the library. She slammed the doors open and they were inside.

"Where do we hide?" Jack asked, gazing at the enormity of the place.

"Anywhere," Jane said.

"Split up," Mrs. Macabre said. "It'll be harder for her to target us, we can surprise her with an attack that way."

They all nodded and ran in different directions. Jane and Catie went through the shelves, until they heard the echo of the doors swinging back open. They hid behind a shelf.

"You think you can hide from me?" The Widow said, floating in. "Naughty, naughty." She waved the broom across the shelves and one by one, they all came tumbling down. Like dominos, the shelves fell, hitting one another with crash after crash. The twins were sent to a corner, avoiding the avalanche of books, dust filling the air. They each covered their mouths, so as not to make a sound.

"Come out, come out, wherever you are," the Widow continued to taunt. She waved the broom again over a pile of books that were sent flying off to the side. Underneath was Jack, holding onto a book like a shield. "A scarecrow afraid of the slightest bump in the night. How pathetic."

"Everyone is afraid of something," Jack said and opened the book. A thunderous *BOOOOOOOOOOO* came echoing through the library, sending the Widow crashing to the other side, where Jane and Catie were hiding just feet away.

The Widow slowly regained her composure. "I have some tricks too," she said and pointed the end of

the broom towards him. Fire began to swirl into a tornado, directed straight at him.

“No!” Jane cried, unable to control herself.

The fire stopped and the Widow turned to them. “There you are,” she said. “So kind of you to sacrifice yourselves for him,” she floated closer.

“Leave them be,” Mrs. Macabre announced. “It’s me you want,” she stood by Jack.

The Widow turned towards her. “You never did learn to keep children out of your games,” she said and held out her hand. A long, black needle grew out of her palm and she pointed it directly towards the twins.

Jane immediately placed herself in front of Catie with her back towards the Widow. “I’m sorry,” she said as tears formed in her eyes. As she looked into Catie’s terrified face, she realized what was going to happen. *This is it*, Jane thought, *This was what the Reaper said*. She shut her eyes tight and waited. But nothing came. Instead there was a sound behind them of the needle going through something followed by a low thump. Jane got off of Catie and they looked in silent horror at

what was in front of them. Elvira laid still with the needle sticking out of her side.

"What's the matter, girls?" The Widow jeered. "Cat got your tongue?" She lunged towards them.

"I may not have enough magic," Mrs. Macabre's voice distracted them. They looked over and saw tears running down her cheeks. "But *he* does!" She pulled one of Jack's arms up and ripped out a single piece of straw. The Widow screamed with fury and flew towards her, broom pointed her way. The straw in Mrs. Macabre's hand turned into a whip that she flung towards the ghost. It wrapped around the broom and she tugged it, forcing it out of the Widow's hand and into hers.

The Widow floated back several paces, arms up pleading. Mrs. Macabre pointed the broom at her and chains formed around the Widow's body, capturing her.

"Time for a lesson in marine biology," the witch said. "Jane, will you do the honors?"

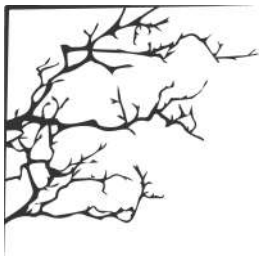
"W is for Widow," Jane said, picking up *The Encyclopedia of Sea Monsters*, "and K is for Kraken," she opened it and a gigantic sea-dragon head came out of it. Covered it dark green scales and fins, water dripped onto the floor. The Widow gazed up at it and shrieked with fear. The beast licked its lips and opened its mouth, swallowing her whole. Jane shut the book tight and it fell to the floor. It shook for a moment, then grew tentacles and slithered away.

She went back to Catie and hugged her. "Are you okay?" She asked, cupping her face with her hands.

"Yes," Catie said gently, "but I'm not the one you should be worried about," she pointed somewhere and Jane looked over.

Mrs. Macabre silently walked over to Elvira's body. She gently removed the needle and picked her up, cradling her in her arms. She went over to the fireplace and sat down in the chair. She placed Elvira in her lap and scratched her right ear, just as she liked it. They all slowly came over by her side, and stood there, saying nothing at all. Silence can leave scars, but some-

times it can allow a person to heal more than any words can. Sometimes just being there for someone can be enough.



13. PAST MIDNIGHT

Once they had restored the manor to its former glory with the broom and Mrs. Macabre had tended to her wound from the plant, they buried Elvira several yards away from the house. They had decided that, instead of a coffin, placing her in her bed along with her food bowl and her favorite ball of yarn was just as she would've wanted it. After they had made the grave and lowered her in, they could only stand in silence, thinking of the right words to say.

"She was a good kitty," Mrs. Macabre finally said in a soft voice. She waved the broom above the grave

and the ground swallowed it. Orange leaves blew over it like offerings of condolences from the Hallowland.

"The Reaper," Jane said. "He told me that someone close to me would die. I just- I didn't know-" she began to cry. "This is all my fault!"

"What ever do you mean, dear?" Mrs. Macabre asked, placing a hand on her shoulder.

"The Widow," she said through tears. "The Widow came to me and said that I shouldn't trust you. That you were dangerous. That, if you kept us any longer, we-we might die. But she lied! She lied and I fell for it!" She shook with anger.

"Oh, Jane. Don't do this to yourself. The truth is, I haven't been honest with *you*."

"What do you mean?" She sniffed.

Mrs. Macabre bent down, so that she met her eyes. "You see, the Weeping Widow went after you to get to me because, well, because she once *was* me."

"I don't understand," Catie chimed in, looking just as confused as her sister and Jack were, "what do you mean *was* you?"

“When I was still with my wife,” she sighed, “our life together was very much similar to the one that I have now. As both of us were skilled in magic, we would use the Art to help others. Be it fixing houses, healing the sick, or baking sweets,” she smiled at the memory. “We would even sometimes let children join us. Children like yourselves who felt misunderstood and alone. Who loved the darker, spookier side of the world. Until, one day, I failed to save a child that was traveling with us and I-“ she paused. “I became someone else. I let the grief, self-hatred, and doubt take over me and I became darker than who I was. I lashed out. I hurt others, wanting them to experience the pain that I felt in order to make myself somehow feel better about what happened. But it didn’t. It only darkened my heart more, until finally. . . My wife left me..”

Jack gasped in shock. “Oh, Mrs. Macabre, how horrible!”

“I never saw her again,” she said sadly. “That is when I realized that, should I continue on the path that I was taking, it would only lead to more death and

loneliness until I myself was dead. And that is no way to live. Life should be about sharing your joy, your passions, your love with others, not misery and hate. So, I decided to remove that pain, to exorcise it from myself. It was a long process and it was more painful than I could ever imagine, but I was able to expel all that hate within me. What I did not take into account was the shape it would possess. The hurt took form into that ghost that-that *thing* that calls itself the Weeping Widow. And she has haunted me ever since.”

“But she’s gone,” Catie said. “We trapped her in that monster!”

“She cannot die, my dear. Soon she will return. But, when she does, I’ll be ready for her.”

“All the trouble that I’ve caused,” Jane said. “After everything that you’ve been through. I just made things worse.”

“Oh, no, my dear, on the contrary, in fact,” Mrs. Macabre wiped the tears from Jane’s face. “Meeting you two has been the happiest I have been in a long time. I wasn’t sure if I was up to taking children on adventures

again. That doubt came creeping back inside my head once more. But you have given me hope just by being yourselves. You've made me believe that I *can* be good again. All I ask is that you don't let your own Weeping Widows take over you. Never be afraid to be the unusual young ladies that you are. Others may look at you differently, but that difference is what makes you unique. And living as your fullest self means that you can be happy. And being happy makes others so. Spread that happiness and it will come back to you a thousand times over," she smiled at them and they smiled back. "Having said all that," she said standing up, "I believe it's time for you to return home."

"I think you're right," Jane said. Though she and Catie did love the Hallowland, Mrs. Macabre, and Jack, they both felt that their time there had come to an end. A bittersweet sensation swept over them like a wave. They never felt so much like themselves than they did there, but this was not where they were meant to be. They went back into the manor and collected their luggage. Once outside, they saw Jack waiting

for them on the porch. He was covering his face with a handkerchief and shaking, his straw insides rustling like a pile of leaves.

"Jack, what's wrong?" Jane went up to him, placing a hand on his back.

"I just don't-don't want you leave," he quivered, wax tears fell down his pumpkin cheeks.

"It's okay," Catie came up to him. "We don't want to leave, either."

"But we're very glad we met you," Jane smiled.

"Really?" He asked. "Even if I'm scared of everything?"

"Even if you are scared of everything," Catie said. "It's what makes you such a special scarecrow," they gave him a hug, his long arms wrapped around the both of them.

"Alright, then," Mrs. Macabre said a few feet away. "I think we should be off. The gate will only last a little while longer."

The Gracey twins let go of Jack and waved him goodbye. They walked over to where Mrs. Macabre

stood with their luggage trailing behind them. Jane looked behind her and stared at the manor for one last time. When she had first arrived there, she had looked upon that same house with both excitement and unease. Now, she looked back on it with memories of danger and wonder. She couldn't believe that she had been through all those strange events, and yet, she felt like a different person. That Jane was not comfortable in her own skin and worried about what others thought of her. This Jane, however, was glad to be who she was no matter what anyone thought. Her skin felt just as cozy as a warm blanket on a rainy night.

"Jane?" Mrs. Macabre asked, breaking her from her thoughts. "Are you ready?"

"I am," she said, turning away from the house.

Mrs. Macabre smiled and held up her broom, the end facing the air in front of them. She moved it vertically, as if it were a sword cutting into something, and the black curtain appeared in front of them. They walked into the darkness, placed their hands on the

broom, and the vortex made the Hallowland disappear once again.

They returned to their neighborhood moments later. As they walked out of the gate, the twins were struck by how odd everything looked. Every house stood as plainly as cardboard boxes, on their plainly manicured front lawns, on their plainly perfect streets. The night sky did not have a shade of purple or dark blue in it, but as black as the space that they had just come from. An airplane flew overhead and the buzz of the engines felt that it should have been the squeaking of bats, instead. Nevertheless, it was their home, plain as it was.

They reached their house and held onto Mrs. Macabre as she lifted them into the air. They each crawled through the window that they had opened when they left. Their bedroom looked exactly as it did in the Hallowland, but this too had a strange feeling to it. The fact that it was in the wrong house made it feel like a replica of their room, but it was the real one. The clock on their nightstand read 12:45.

“So,” Mrs. Macabre said. “I guess this is goodbye, then.”

The twins looked at her for a moment, then gave her the tightest hug that they could. “I don’t want you to go,” Jane said.

“Please stay with us,” Catie added trying not to cry.

“I know, darlings,” Mrs. Macabre said, wiping a tear from her eye. “I know,” she got down on one knee and kissed them on their foreheads. “But goodbyes aren’t meaningful if they don’t hurt a little. Now, off to bed.”

Jane and Catie got into their beds with the witch following behind, tucking them in. Afterwards, Mrs. Macabre returned to the window, smiled, then transformed into a raven. She flew out the window. Moments later, Jane rushed over and closed it. She looked at the clock and saw that it had just turned one in the morning. She peeked out the window, looked down the street, and saw that the gate had disappeared.



WHEN THEY AWOKE THE next morning, they didn't feel as nostalgic for the Hallowland as they had thought they would. In fact, they felt that they were still there in a sense. Yes, the location had changed, but the feeling within themselves was still there. The sense of magic and belonging that they felt in the manor was with them. Burning in their hearts and filling them up with a sense of calm and serenity. Getting ready for school was no longer a slog like it had been, instead it had an excited charm to it as it had been in the Hallowland. Their breakfast did not consist of gargoyle eggs and beetle juice, but in their imaginations, it *could* have been.

Waiting on the school bus was not the slow, eminent dirge of doom, but an adventure, like waiting for Mrs. Macabre's manor to start walking down the road or the thrill of getting rid of gremlins on top of

the roof. School itself no longer felt like a labyrinth of persecution and loneliness. The eyes that glared at them judgmentally or the snickers that they received reminded them of the river Styx and the Reaper or fighting off the long arms of nightmare trees. The insults that were hurled at them by their peers such as “weirdos,” or “freaks,” seemed tame compared to what they had been through. If those that insulted them only knew what they had been up to the night before, they might have chosen their words more carefully.

Lunch period was about the same as it had been before. Jane and Catie would sit alone at a table, each taking their meals out of their sacks, mirroring one another as they did so. Other kids continued on laughing, chatting, or making idiots of themselves with their classmates.

“Who’s that?” Catie asked, pointing at a boy who had just walked into the cafeteria.

Jane looked over and saw him. He walked through the giant room as if it were a mine field, holding his

tray of food with him, like a barrier between himself and the world. His eyes glanced

over the tables, looking desperately around to find a seat. But if one was not already taken, it was quickly filled to prevent him from sitting there. The twins understood why, considering that he was dressed in a shirt for the band *The Cure*, a group that no one in the school knew about, and if they did, they would have called it “old music.” Jane shrugged. “I’ve seen him before, we should invite him over. Hey, kid! Over here!” She waved both of her arms up, as if she was stranded on an island trying to get the attention of a ship in the distance.

The boy squinted and looked around, hearing her voice. He spotted them and quickly walked over. “Thanks,” he said sitting down on a space near Catie, “I thought I’d never find a place to eat.”

“No problem,” Jane said, taking a sip of soda. “You’re, uh, Vas-something, right?”

“Vasquez,” the boy said. “Abraham, but people call me Bram.”

"Bram, yeah, I think I've heard of you," Catie said.

"People make fun of my name. My dead name, I mean," he said, sheepishly.

"People make fun of us too," Jane said.

"Yeah, I saw you in class talk about Mary Shelley, I thought that was cool."

"Cookie?" Catie asked, offering hers that she had wrapped in plastic as desert.

"No," he reached into his backpack, "I brought my own," he pulled out a small red velvet cake wrapped in foil.

"I hope that's not blood cake," Jane said, looking at Catie.

"Please tell us you're not a vampire," Catie returned the glance and smiled.

"Wait," Bram's eyes grew wide with excitement, "Do *you* like vampires too?"

"Only in movies and books," Jane said. "Why? Do you?"

"You have *no* idea!" He dug into his backpack, and pulled out a wooden black box. He opened it and in-

side was a mini-vampire hunting kit. Lined with small wooden stakes, a vial of holy water, a crucifix, and even a fake clove of garlic. "I found this at a flea market a while ago!" He said, as if presenting the most valuable treasure in the world. "I keep it with me at all times just in case, you know, I run into any," he smiled. "My mom and dad think it's dumb."

Jane and Catie looked at one another. "We don't," they said in unison. They talked until the bell rang, barely touching their food. Their arms were too busy flailing about in shared enthusiasm as they discussed their favorite monsters, stories, and movies together. They argued over which they would rather be, a vampire or a zombie? Or which Poe story was their favorite. Or whether or not Mothman was real. The Gracey twins were so wrapped up in the conversation, that they never bothered to look out the window behind them, to see a raven perched on the branch of a tree outside.

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Austin is a writer, horror freak, and comic book nerd living in central Texas. Their debut novel, *Never*, was published in 2019. They are gender fluid, prefers the pronouns they/them,, and has a form of cerebral palsy. Austin plans on keeping it that way

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