

The
Gothic Stories
Shadow
by
Within

AND OTHER TALES

*Bishop
Challoner
School*



First published in Great Britain in 2021 by
Ministry of Stories, 159 Hoxton Street, London N1 6PJ

ministryofstories.org

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Designed by
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Illustrations by
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Supported by
The J A R Charitable Trust



Supported using public funding by
**ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND**

Foreword

Charlotte Harrison, Bishop Challoner School

December 2020

I was adamant that I wanted a Ministry of Stories project to take place this term – although I had no idea if it would even be possible in the context of the pandemic. How it would work logistically? What if everything changed again all-too-quickly? Yet I knew it had to happen.

We're now approaching our two-year anniversary of working with Ministry of Stories, and I've had the total privilege to oversee the amazing work countless students have produced as a result of working with MoS. Not only have I seen the positive impact from both a creative and academic perspective, I have seen young people truly shine as a result of the invaluable feedback and support of the MoS team.

I was desperate to provide some stability and escapism for our students during this term: words can be a refuge, and this would be my way of throwing them a life raft. The MoS Avengers assembled to create a project specifically for our students – going virtual to ensure as many could take part as possible. The journey has been a fantastic one to follow, with extraordinary work being produced every single week.

And now the final destination, this anthology, is something other-worldly. The writing within it has a maturity and craft beyond these students' years; you really are in for a treat. It wouldn't have been possible without the help of Rob, Holly, Linden and Ms Mwaki – thank you, yet again, for making my nebulous ideas a reality that has gone above and beyond anything I could have ever imagined.

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CONTENT NOTES

By their nature, Gothic stories can have some elements which some people might find frightening or disturbing. We've added content notes to help you decide if there are any stories you would prefer to avoid – they are at the back of the book (page 113) to avoid spoilers for those who would prefer not to know in advance!

Introduction

Linden K McMahon, Ministry of Stories

This anthology of Gothic stories is going to take you on brilliant, chilling adventures: you will meet a spider hybrid, a set of mysterious eyes, two very different vampires, a regal werewolf, a shy archaeologist, a zombie hunter, a brave and clever witch, a lovelorn ghost, a boy genius, a conflicted murderer and even Death himself...

The storytellers introducing you to all these characters are students at Bishop Challoner School in East London. Over the term, they experimented with aspects of telling a good tale: from characters, to settings, to different points of view. The Gothic theme provided inspiration to explore the supernatural, to imagine conflicted characters, and to come up with atmospheric settings. After half term, the writers started working on one idea each, putting that learning into practice in their stories as they developed them over several weeks. The result is this set of imaginative, multi-layered stories!

All of this took place in the context of the coronavirus pandemic. The writers had to contend with disruptions to school, and the uncertainty and stress of being a student in these times. We weren't able to meet in person, but communicated through video and email. With all that in mind, I think their achievements are all the more impressive!

So thank you to all of the writers for working so hard on your stories, and sharing your words and imaginations with me – and now the world! Congratulations on becoming published authors. And always remember that you are writers: you have the power to create new worlds any time you want. Keep reading, writing and creating!

To the reader: come on in, stories await...



Bloodlust

by Rachel

I walked slowly through the misty graveyard, with nothing there but the dead bodies to keep me company.

A crow, black as night, was perched upon a gravestone that read 'Matilda Murdstone, born 1786'. To anyone else, this seemed like a normal gravestone; but to me, it was suspicious. Where was the year of death? I decided to not let that take up too much of my thoughts as I was already overwhelmed with the thought of my father. I was trying to clear my mind, but the image of him was still there. I couldn't help but hate him for what he did, for what he still does. I hate myself for what I am.

To humans, we are just myths, stories you tell little kids to scare them. Reality turned fiction over time. But we're still very much here, hidden in plain sight. We're your lawyers, your doctors, your cleaners, your teachers. We're everywhere and nowhere at the same time. Sometimes I can't believe I'm really a...

My phone starts to ring, breaking my train of thought.

'Hello?'

'Aria, hiiii I'm so excited for our sleepover! I'm at your house,



or should I say castle! You never told me you lived in a fairy-tale-come-to-life!

‘Mhm.’

‘Are you nearby?’

‘Yeah, I’ll be there in 2 minutes.’

That was my ‘best friend’ Sienna. She doesn’t seem to notice my obvious annoyance at her presence, but she is useful to keep around. Almost like a pet. I do give her a bit too much control sometimes – I really don’t like being bossed around by a human.

As I made my way to my father’s castle, I couldn’t help but admire its majestic structure. 18 years of living here and I still can’t help but be entranced by the stone walls, covered in a thick layer of beautiful flowers. One always different from the other. What a shame that it’s occupied by the devil himself...

‘Hello dear. Sienna’s been waiting for you.’

I decided to just walk past him, blocking out his voice. I really wasn’t in the mood to talk to him. Not that I was ever in the mood anyways.

‘Sien-AGGH!’ I was interrupted by a large hand gripping my neck tightly.

‘I said hello, dear. What type of daughter would you be if you didn’t greet your dear old dad?’ My father spoke as he started to lift me by my neck.

‘L...let g...go of...m...me,’ I struggled to say, as my vision became blurred.

‘I’m waiting.’ He spoke with a grin on his face.

‘H...hello...D...Dad.’ He let go, and I fell to the floor gasping for breath.

‘It wasn’t that hard now, was it?’

‘I HATE YOU!’

‘Aww, I love you too. Anyways, like I said, Sienna’s waiting for you.’

It wasn’t like my dad to be so hospitable towards Sienna. In fact,

he tried eating her every other week, so I was confused as to why he was acting weird.

Then I knew why.

As I walked into the dining hall, the intense smell of blood slammed into me like a brick wall. Sienna sat at the head of the table, her eyes staring right at me. Her smile unwavering. You’d think that wouldn’t be an issue, right? Wrong. The issue was that there was a human heart on a plate in front of her and a massive hole in her chest, right where her heart should be.

If I was human. Maybe I would feel upset, angry or horrified by the room being decorated in the blood of a ‘close friend’. Maybe I would be upset by the fact that my father has literally killed my only companion.

But no. I felt hungry. Very hungry...

As I tore into Sienna’s flesh, I could feel her every thought. Her every memory. She has done nothing but care about me, and still, I feel nothing. I still see her as nothing more than a food source.

This is why I hate my father. He wants me to be the monster that I already am...

Death into Realisation

by Yasmina

“

THE CEMETERY

Silence roamed there, but not for long.
The rocks rumbled and the moss shook.
The graveyard was alive.

”

Have you ever seen the moon's untroubled smirk? The way it scares the sun every day to have its fame and its glory, gleaming its kingdom in the dense darkness of the night. The way the cloud's jealousy tries to cover the only beauty of the night; fools they are. The cemetery. Silence roamed there, but not for long. The rocks rumbled and the moss shook. The graveyard was alive.

Slowly the gloom of the night centred its focus to the live show of the corpse rising to the full moon. The attention was stolen from the moon and settled on the disturbing noises of moans, grunts, and rustles from the opening caskets. It was that time of the month: where all the dead come to life and reunite like friends after school. Their hair wet and damp from previous rainy nights that sank through the ground and skin green and fleshy from a long time asleep. Cheekbones defined and jawlines sharp enough to take someone out. Lips dry and chapped barely enough to pronounce grunts, let alone words. Bones and skin creaked like antiques from 1995: the dates they died.

They walked towards a man; a man named Oliver James, the first man to rise from the dead. His presence filled the land and swept into children's dreams, making them nightmares. His ripped cloak dragged dead leaves with him as he walked to the front. His golden cane shone as bright as the stars. Blinding. His top hat crippled and relaxed, its colour

faded away after decades. His eyes faded almost white as he still accustomed himself to the brightness of the night. Nose contoured with his dark, aging skin dried from lack of hydration. What would you expect? He smirked, happily being alive again. Teeth gone or badly rotting and mould growing from the bacteria build up after years of no hygiene. He laughed loudly, turning around to come into view of his people. He was ready to roam around the world being able to walk and to enjoy living again. The best thing was they could turn into ghosts and they can't be seen by the public or heard. Just like that they were gone ready to do some pure mindless vandalism – because why not?

He slowly went off, lethargically trampling on all the people trying to get his way through to collect Lucifer, his pet crow that he uses to clean his tombstone and other useless things that he just takes for granted.

* * *

Hi, I'm Lucifer and every day, I see myself sacrificing all of me for this horrifying, terrible human being... and for what? He put a spell on me; it's that simple. I had to leave my wife and my kids and I miss them every single day, because I am not allowed to see them or else he will punish me and my family. He's so bittersweet. He hates everyone, including me, yet when he sees his wife, he's this pool of sympathy and sadness. I feel bad for him, honestly. I'm determined one day he will change and realise that his wife has moved on, yet the thing is he doesn't want to accept that he's the one who left her first.

When he's not around, the damp smell of petrichor surrounds all of Germain City, and the humidity makes it even worse. The sound of other birds returning to their loved ones in the morning and their little chirps makes it even harder to live each day. The constant rain makes it easier to eat because snails and worms come out for their daily moisture which – living in Germain – is very often. The soil around the cemetery isn't too rich due to the lack of life around there, so I feast on quite crinkly

insects. It's the same thing every day. No change in my step because I can't do anything or go anywhere without the permission of my master, and that doesn't happen because he only comes to life once a month. During that day I have to stick with him right by his side to make sure he is safe. That's all folks; that's the greatest life of all.

* * *

Oliver was the first of the cemetery to float off, and the rest slowly scattered through the city. With Lucifer by his side, he finally felt liberated, ready to go to his wife Estelle's house to lay the picture of them together on her bedside table, reminding her that Oliver will always be with her no matter what. She would always find it once a month and then the next day she would find it gone thinking that she had gone mad, but that was because Lucifer would always sneak in, retaking the picture to return it to Oliver by midnight so he could place it again next month.

He slowly settled onto the grounds of Germain Park and saw a young girl crying on a bench. She had navy leggings with little birdy patterns and a pink turtleneck underneath her green zipper jacket with a pair of sketchers from 2017 – a little ripped and a little torn. He sat next to her thinking that she wouldn't hear or see him... but oh how badly mistaken he was. She looked and stared as he rambled on about how crying isn't worth it and how weak it resembled a person.

'... life isn't worth crying for 'cause life ain't fair, kid,' he said, staring up to the clouds.

'My name is Rosie, sir. May I help you?'

He was frightened from the realization of her seeing him in physical form.

'You can see and hear me?'

'Yes?' she said, slightly concerned.

'You aren't meant to see me. I'm a ghost: Sir Oliver James, a scientist

that died in 1995 from a dangerous disease nobody can control.’ He faced towards the girl, posture sharp and serious, kind of proud of his little autobiography.

‘OMG... you died in the almikinin virus. That killed thousands around here and so many people had to evacuate for safety. The whole city was on deep clean lock down. It wrote history.’

Oliver, stunned, explained how it all started and why he’s here. Rosie, on the other hand, explained that she was here because her parents body-shame her and verbally abuse her constantly, hence he found her in the park crying.

‘Would you like to come with me to give this to Estelle? You could wait outside if you want; I see you don’t have much to do and you clearly don’t want to go back home, so you can come with me if you like.’

Oliver didn’t expect much of an answer, but she agreed as long as she could hold Lucifer, and they had a deal.

They finally arrived and Estelle and Dr Joseph (Estelle’s husband now) were out in the garden, so Rosie could hide behind a bush. Since humans can’t see ghosts (except her), he could go inside easily, placing it on her bedside table. He went into Estelle’s bed, sitting carefully and inhaling, the sweet scent blessing his nose with the past memories from the good times. In his ghost form, he’d never seen Dr Joseph before, because he was too scared to see the love of his life with someone who he knew was potentially better than he ever was.

Suddenly, he heard footsteps coming up the stairs. Then faded giggles. A man’s voice; it was Joseph. He was walking into his room where Oliver was. Since people can’t see ghosts, Oliver wasn’t worried when he came into the room, but when Joseph came, his face drained and he turned pale white...

‘ESTELLE, CALL SECURITY!’ Joseph roared.

Security came rushing up the stairs. As Joseph was a doctor, he had a lot of money to have these types of people. The men came in, their muddy boots from the Germain autumn weather smudging the white

Italian marble on their bedroom floor. Estelle caught up behind them

‘Who’s here?!’ both the guards boomed. No answer, because no one was there. Oliver stood still, whilst Joseph was staring directly at him, security suspecting the whole room and Estelle looking worried and confused. Oliver looked at her: her eyes glowing and her skin aging like the jasmine blossom that she is. She was beautiful and Oliver couldn’t keep her eyes off her. She was his Cinderella, his beauty to his beast, his everything.

‘There is no one here, sir,’ called one of the guys from the bathroom.

‘HE’S RIGHT THERE, YOU BRAINLESS HUMANS, ON TOP OF THE BED!’ Joseph yelled.

No one could see Oliver because he was a ghost, yet it turns out that not only Rosie could see him; Joseph could too.

‘IT’S OLIVER, YOUR DEAD HUSBAND!’ he finally spilled.

Estelle realised the picture on her bedside table and thought for one millisecond that Joseph could be correct. The bodyguards were dismissed, and Joseph left out of anger, thinking he went crazy and just hallucinated. Estelle stayed there.

She sat next to the dent on her bed. She couldn’t feel, see, hear or smell anything, but she sensed his presence in the room. Oliver smiled and laughed with his hand on her lap, finally able to see her and able to be with her knowing that he is here in front of her and that she knows it. Next to her bedside table were a couple of post-it notes and a pen. He was writing his name and a small, ‘Hi’ next to it, with his signature proving that it was him.

‘Oh, my god... it’s really you,’ she shuddered under her breath.

‘Yes, it’s me,’ he whispered, shedding a tear of joy.

Then and there, after all these years, they finally reunited. Together at last...

The Telling of Liam Calamander

by Eno

[CLICK HERE](#) TO HEAR ENO READ AN EXCITING EXTRACT FROM THIS TALE

‘Do it,’ shrieked Gerald, ‘Just look at him. Liam Calamander, such a coward he won’t even go into the little cottage down the road.’

The entire street laughed at him, surrounding him. The large figures of people shadowed him, smothering him as he gazed around. The suffocating space hugged him tighter and tighter until he was breathless. The laughter continued to roar on and on, pounding at his skull like it had been smashed against a concrete surface. Beads of salt bubbled at his forehead. He wasn’t a coward. He wasn’t.

‘Fine!’ bellowed Liam, ‘Fine, I’ll go into the stupid house. In fact, I’ll go in at night and you’ll see that I’m no coward!’

So, then they waited. Waited for the sky to darken and kindle his fear. Entering the house on the hill. He felt his lungs shrink and the air quickly run away from him as if to escape the dreaded house itself.

‘It’s night then. Off you go Liam. See you at 10.’ And off he went, taking the tiniest steps of his life, anything to delay this horrid trip to the house.

The moon loomed over the house, the bright yellow celestial body illuminated the cracks upon the cobblestone walls; the overarching house emerged in the distance, and he felt tiny in the presence of the house. Regal and historic, nothing had changed in its 200-year life.

“She began chanting.

Black spirals
slithered out
of her mouth

and
surrounded Liam,

her eyes
turning black,



As he turned the door, the foreboding feeling intensified. The inside of the house looked just as he had imagined it: dark wooden floors glimmering sinisterly in the moonlight gaze...Domineering paintings, each one different yet the same, multiplying as he walked down the corridor. Placed sparingly around the entrance were angels, dragons, gargoyles. Gargoyles. As he peered around and waited right in the middle of the entrance hall, the deafening silence was booming in his ear. He was scared. And as he turned his back to leave the house, the gargoyle began to move piece by piece, its eyes following him. The next step he took was one that caught him by surprise. And before he knew it, he was falling in a never ending infinite desolate, black hole.

He had been transported. As he fell and hit the floor, he witnessed something extraordinary.

The moonlight shone from under the tyrannical clouds, the sky was no longer lively but sombre and bleak, oppressed under the nocturnal supernatural dictators. The clouds darkened with rage, an intensity that could only be seen before a mass gathering of evil. Ominous clouds of despair shadowed over the town as he watched the peculiar and contrasting fragments of the town come alive. The road had been thin and covered in dull and dead leaves that created a boundary separating the mob of people from uniting. The trees leaned over him and twisted like huge, foul distorted limbs. Nothing could stop the feverish feeling in the air created from the various forms of evil who lived underneath the ground and awoke at the last light. The alley was filled to the brim with sin; the cracked walls filled with cobwebs and other scuttling creatures ranged from every side of him. He had entered the supernatural market.

'I'll trade you a wish for that little ring of yours,' croaked an old witch.

There she stood not too far from him: greying black hair on her head wrinkled and as dry as a bone. Teeth that were rotted out to the core, decayed and spoilt. His head shot around, and he stepped back eyes wide full of fear.

'Don't look so scared little boy, I just wanna trade you. A wish for your ring and a ring for your wish. You can wish for just anything and you will receive it,' she rasped.

He knew he shouldn't have. He knew that this was stupid and something he was going to regret, but he couldn't stop himself remembering when that crowd gathered around him and called him a coward. He wasn't a coward. He would show them, show them that he was better than them. So, he made a deal with the devil.

He ripped off his ring, a ring that had been in his family for generations. A small stainless-steel carbon ring that he would never know the power of, and shoved it into the witch's hand.

'All right. Fine, take it. I wish to be stronger and more powerful than I am right now. And since you took my ring, why don't you give me another wish. After all you came to me, I didn't come to you,' he insisted. He knew that he should get more out of this bargain considering she came to him begging for his ring.

The witch remained calm, but underneath she was red. How dare this impenitent little human boy come around demanding wishes from him! He would learn that you should take what others give you and not ask for more.

'Since you gave me this ring, I will let you wish for one more little thing,' she muttered

'I want to look handsome forever. Even when I am old, I want to look like I've never aged,' he spoke.

'Your wish is my command.'

She began chanting. Black spirals slithered out of her mouth and surrounded Liam, her eyes turning black, jet black.

She smirked.

At that moment he knew he had been too hasty. But it was too late.

* * *

5 years later

Swish!

He was a sleek and vicious creature, ripping through the air as though he were Excalibur until he met his target. His fangs sliced through the delicate flesh and muscle, hooking into the human's neck and tearing its carotid artery into two. It cried. Its cry was a satisfying noise of chokes and excruciating screams. His first kill.

The body staggered and then dropped.

Splat!

Smells had taken over. He no longer cared what people were; he could no longer resist the itch. The scent of her blood was tempting. So tempting.

The ruby red liquid splattered on his face, drenching him with human blood as it continued to rain around him. The body lay squirting and there Liam stood oozing out evil, reeking of damnation and sin. He had paid the ultimate price.



“When
the
front
door
shut,
Lance
shook
and
looked
back.
No one
was
there.”

The Invasion

by William

The grave

I was walking home from school. There was fog everywhere. I came across a grave when my telephone rang. I jumped with fright!

It was my mum. ‘Where are you, Lance?’

‘Nearly home, I’ve reached the grave,’ I said.

Then we lost connection.

I thought about how to go around the creepy grave. I had no options while I was walking. I heard a twig snap. I was frightened. I froze, and I could hear my heart thumping loudly and fast. I ran, so fast that I tripped. I glanced back and saw nothing, but then when I was going to stand up, a hand came out from the ground and got my leg. It was green and skinny – it looked like a zombie’s hand.

I started screaming, ‘HELP ME, SOMEBODY PLEASE HELP ME!’ I heard the twig snap again. A man came out with a pistol, like the pistol from the pirates – it was long and had many patterns. He shot at the miserable hand.

The hand let go of me and the man then said: ‘Why are you here?’ I was scared and couldn’t move my mouth. He told me to go home. I continued running home, still not knowing what just happened. I arrived home then I said everything that happened to my mum. She was surprised and thankful.

It was Saturday morning, so Lance decided to investigate the grave a little bit more. He brought some sandwiches and put on the 'Mission Impossible' theme and went out. When he arrived, he remembered everything that happened to him yesterday at midnight.

Lance entered and went to the place where his leg got caught by the awful hand. There was still a hole. Lance reached out his hand, there was nothing. How strange, he thought. So he decided to go towards where the man came out. He found a little house, and decided to enter the forest.

Lance finds the man

Lance felt uncomfortable when he entered. Everything was dark and gloomy, and he could see two pistols like from the pirates on the wall making an X, and on the other side there were two swords making an X as well. Strange, Lance thought. Lance kept on walking deeper through the hut. When the front door shut, Lance shook and looked back. No one was there. He was scared... he rushed to the door and couldn't open it. He slowly went to the stairs. When he got there, the floor creaked loudly. Lance quickly looked back. It was dark.

Then all of a sudden, a hand came out and grabbed him.

The man came out and said, 'What are you doing here again?'

This time Lance responded. 'I want to know what is happening in this grave. Also, why did that hand come out?'

'Just because you want to know, I will tell you, but do not laugh.'

Lance listened hard.

'So,' he said, 'That hand that caught you is a zombie... these zombies have been here centuries now underneath the ground. There are tunnels for the zombies to go to different cities or countries to eat people, and I discovered that tomorrow, they are going to try to invade the world.'

Lance was shocked by this. Then a loud bang came from the ground, crunching, and the man whispered, 'It's eating a human.'

The crunching stopped and the floors started moving upwards. Lance and the man stepped back and a green and came out... then a head.

The escape

The zombies were coming out of the floor! Lance was scared, and so was the man. They ran upstairs. There was a window and they decided to open it and go through it. They were out.

The ground was close, so they jumped and ran to the city. The zombies were chasing them, but of course slowly.

They arrived in the city and went to Lance's house. Lance's mother said, 'Is this the man who saved you?'

Lance replied in a panic, 'Yes, and one more thing, he says there is going to be zombies invading the world tomorrow and they are chasing us right now.'

Lance's mother smiled at him and said: 'Oh sweetheart, you and your imagination. Mister, thank you for saving him.'

Hideout

The man said, 'My name is Pirate because I look like a pirate. And your son is correct – there will be an invasion of zombies, ma'am. We have to go. Pack anything you need that will help you survive. Hurry up, ma'am.'

They all started packing: they got tents, food with water and other stuff.

They heard a banging on the door. Lance looked through the window and said: 'They arrived.'

Lance's mother said, 'Follow me.'

They followed her into a box which had a circular submarine door, which led to a humongous underground bunker which had a lot of food and drinks.

They escaped

Lance's mother said, 'I put cameras around the house in the morning, so let us see what they're doing... So it looks like they are still trying to get in.'

Lance had an idea and said, 'Could we dig our way out with a spoon? The metal is not hard.'

So, they started digging their way. They went back to get the food and drinks that were there, and ran back to the hole and out and into the forest. After a few moments, they found a spot and camped there.

The plan

The pirate was thinking of something really smart and said, 'I know what we could do to kill the zombies tomorrow. We could bomb them.'

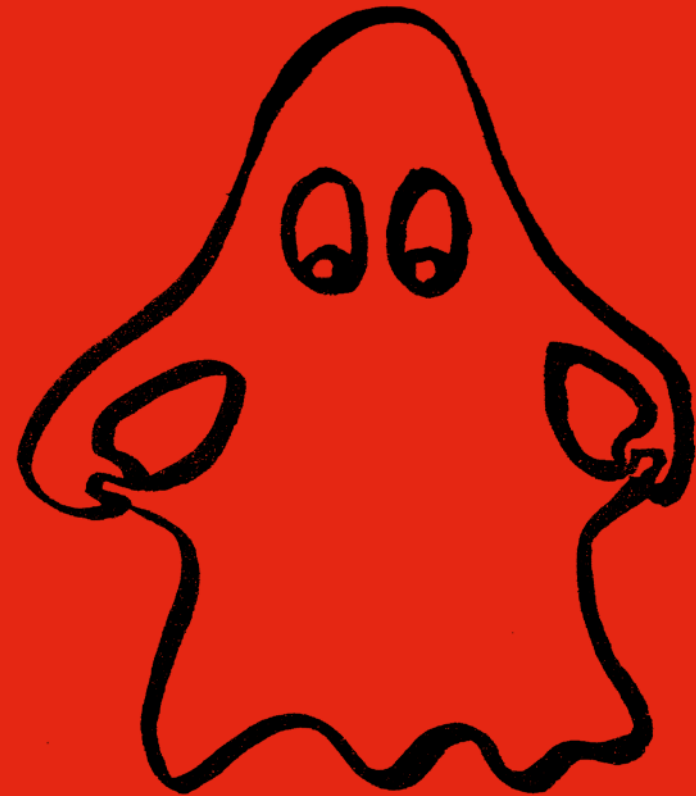
Lance and his mother replied, 'Yes.'

The next day, they went towards Pirate's hut. They entered and it was really easy to find the bomb which was in a box. The bomb was half the size of Lance. They took it to the Jeep and went towards the zombies.

Half an hour later, they all were behind the Jeep. There were about one thousand zombies. Lance took out the bomb and ran outside with Pirate and his mother. They ran towards a small old plane. They were in the air in one minute.

Lance and his mother dropped the bomb, and took out every zombie.

The world was safe.



Disorder

by Yasu

Chapter One

At the heart of all disorder, there is always conflict. Evidently, it may be portrayed in a variety of formats. However, its existence is inevitable, whether that dispute or lack of congruence is against society, nature, or even one's own character.

The latter, I find, is most entertaining. To have the presence of different or opposing emotions, to question your identity and self-significance, is a concept that particularly demonstrates human vulnerability, as well as challenges our maturity. It portrays our vulnerability because it shows how we avoid self-confrontation at all costs. Therefore, we allow our environment to influence us as it best sees fit. It challenges our maturity, because very few have the willpower to overcome the situation, and find internal peace.

As you can see, to deal with the individuality of one persona, is considerably difficult. Yet to deal with two, which are oppositions in every way possible, is, to state it simply, problematic.

Nonetheless, no interesting story, which sets curiosity ablaze, has ever had any sense of coherency, and possessing this aspect of calamity, is what captivates awe.

Disorder is what captivates awe.

Welcome, to my genesis.

Otherwise known as, the story of Hero Cahill.

*"Cursive letters were
sprawled over the pages,
some misspellings
here and there . . .*

*He admired the way
the words appeared to
look so beautiful, when
the words themselves
were horrific."*

Hero Cahill sat in the darkest corner of his ink-black and crimson-red apartment, fixating his gaze on a dim-lit, sunset-orange light. This illumination came from a street-lamp outside, which flickered and glinted frequently, causing long, lean silhouettes to be cast upon slate-grey pavements. As a result, it appeared as if fragments of the light had been scattered upon a navy-blue canvas; the colour of the darkness, which now began to seep into the sky.

Around him were several paintings immersed in a thick coating of dust, and their caramel-brown frames were battered and scarred. The humans within his art had large, attentive eyes, brimming with malice and wickedness. Their coal-black, dilated pupils were tunnels of infinite dusk, the depths of it stretching beyond comprehension.

When observing this, Cahill found it quite peculiar, for in spite of their eerie appearance, his intentions were not so that the beings in his artwork obtained such expressions of vengeance. Instead, he had hoped for ones of innocence and purity, and although he had faith that the ideal image he had envisioned would become reality, the results of his work had proved the contrary.

As for the smiles, they were wide, porcelain-white and as sharp as shards of glass. Their iridescence was overwhelmingly vibrant, and it appeared as if a puppeteer had tied invisible strings to the upper corners of their mouths in order for the unsettling grin to occur.

Clearly, the unkept state of the paintings had a very simple explanation, a fact which Hero refused to acknowledge. His craft had been classified as mediocre by several critics, and there was not a single instance where it did not wound his pride. Their laughter suffocated him, to the point where he felt as if the air was thicker and that a claw, scorching hot and as red as fire, was seizing hold of his throat. Their cruel remarks, which they claimed was only constructive criticism, were like bright yellow caution tape, limiting his ability and chances of triumph.

Staggering across an ivory-white carpet, Hero leisurely reached for the jet-black remote on the table, replacing the thunderous voice of doubt with the muffled ones on TV. The voice belonged to a woman, whose long, chestnut-brown hair cascaded upon her shoulders, and who also wore a dove-grey suit. According to the young lady, a ten-year-old girl had been found lifeless about an hour and a half away from the town. The child's name and face I need not trouble myself with. Yet, there was one crucial fact that could not be dismissed or overlooked; the girls' dress had disappeared. Stolen, to be more precise. A sky-blue frock, with daisies embroidered on the sleeves. This had been the eighth child murder this week.

And it was only Tuesday.

Disturbed, Cahill took the initiative to redirect his attention to something more positive, when his dark-brown eyes landed on a sage-green, plastic bag. Anxiety seized hold of his body as he made an attempt not to recall the severity of the error he had committed. The events unfolded before him like a play, and he was mesmerised that he still had some vague memory of it.

Her sand-blonde hair, which was dyed a lilac-purple at the ends, seemed to gleam as she rapidly sprinted away from him. Next, came the screams. After all, to this very day, he felt as if her shrieks rang through his ears, causing goosebumps to raise on his pale skin. Cornering her, he then proceeded to hurt her (although her exact injuries, to him at least, remain unknown). When the chaos finally drew to a close, he ambled to the nearest park, finding the next victim. Lamentably, what Cahill had done to this victim was more than a few injuries, and the mistake this time around, was permanent. Realising this, he hid all evidence in the plastic bag.

The plastic bag, which had been placed in the corner of the room, for far too long.

Grabbing the item, he exited his apartment with haste, slamming the heavy door with such rage and impatience. Swiftly, he stumbled down

the flight of narrow stairs, taking two steps at a time and muttering curse words under his breath.

Reaching the ground floor, Hero strolled his way towards the building incinerator, whistling an upbeat tune. Approaching the charcoal-grey gates, he confirmed his suspicions; the room was locked. However, this barely fazed him, for he knew how to pick the lock, and had done so a diverse set of times on separate occasions. Extracting a paper clip from his pocket, he did just that, and was presented with the familiar clicking sound it made when the gate opened.

Finally, he threw the bag in the incinerator, pushing the button, before thanking the heavens that he was eventually cleansed of his sin. As Hero whistled for the last couple of instances, the sage-green item was engulfed in rose-red, apricot-orange, and acid-yellow flames.

And inside, was a sky-blue frock, with daisies embroidered on the sleeves.

Chapter Two

The room was bathed in ocean-blue lighting, and a psychiatrist – whose dark hair was tousled and whose cotton-white, button-up was loose around his petite frame – tapped continuously at the coal-black keyboard. Distressed, Hero fidgeted, and whilst sitting opposite the psychiatrist (Doctor Truman), he began biting his nails, taking several long breaths, and even pulling at the ends of his brown hair.

After much waiting, Doctor Truman turned to the young man with the same stern look he had upon his countenance for the last six months. Then, he delivered the following news:

‘Mr Cahill,’ he said, his voice hoarse and deep. ‘After the blood test, the symptoms you told me you were experiencing, and the mental health assessment you did a while back, I have come to the conclusion that...’ His voice trailed off, drowned by the ticking of a clock hung at the back of the room.

‘You have come to a conclusion about what?’ Hero inquired, his eyes wide in bewilderment as a slight fear took control of him.

Truman sighed, gulping back the bile rising at the back of his throat, before deciding that the unnecessary tension would just make matters worse.

‘It appears you suffer from Dissociative Identity Disorder.’

Beige walls seemed to close in on Cahill, as it appeared as if the floor had vanished from beneath him, and the whole world had lost all sense and reasoning.

‘Excuse me?’ He chuckled, with a face of utter confusion.

‘Dissociate...’

‘Dissociative Identity Disorder,’ the doctor reiterated slowly, clearly concerned for his patient. ‘Otherwise known as multiple personality disorder.’

Hero sat back in his chair, shaking his head. Moments passed, until his shoulders slumped, and he placed his face in his large hands. Regaining his composure, he sat up straight, jaw tightened and fists clenched.

‘Explain this to me,’ he retorted through gritted teeth. Surprised by the sudden change in demeanour, the psychiatrist pondered whether or not he should offer the boy a cup of water, or something of the sort. Instead, he told Hero everything he needed to know, the questions he had asked during the evaluation, the physical conditions that could cause the symptoms he had, and of course, the symptoms themselves; from lack of sleep, to memory gaps, and ‘out of character behaviour’.

Listening to the information he had been imparted with, it was difficult for our protagonist to accept this.

‘I want you to know,’ Truman whispered quietly, ‘that you are not any different from anyone else. You are human and sure, this may affect you but with the right treatment and support, everything will be okay. Understand?’

Staring at his shoes, Hero processed all that was being said, simply

nodding and hoping this would be a sufficient response. The doctor, realising that he probably shouldn't press further, resumed the excessive tapping.

'What should I name it?' The words escaped Hero's mouth.

Truman stopped momentarily, perplexed and troubled for the well-being of the person, who sat in front of him. Shrugging, he then replied: 'I don't think naming your second personality is the priority right now, Mr Cahill.'

Ignoring this remark, Hero continued to wonder over the name. After all, this second character was a part of him and he couldn't deny its existence as if it would miraculously disappear.

And then it came to him.

Oreh.

He would name it Oreh.

Even if it wasn't the 'main priority', even if it may later be his greatest demise, he knew that he had some responsibility to nurture it.

Even if it destroyed him in the end...

Chapter Three

Solitary Symphony. The name of the girl with the sand-blonde hair, which was dyed a lilac-purple at the ends. Her light-brown eyes stared into the depths of Hero's soul, and every minute, which ticked by with such haste, seemed as if it were her time to assess him, to contemplate whether or not her decision had been as simple as she thought.

They agreed to meet at a small cafe, located opposite a run-down theme park. It had apple-green walls, with a gingerbread-brown bookshelf in the corner. Inside, the room smelt like cinnamon and fluffy, white whip cream.

Hero took refuge here when his thoughts were burdensome, or when the weight of tiredness and stress overwhelmed him exceedingly. Normally, he was consoled by the warm embrace of the four walls surrounding him, as well as the whispers of the pages when those

accommodating the tables beside him would read the books and quietly mumble the words as they progressed further and further into the story.

Unfortunately, after today, he would always think back to the disagreements which were bound to be made over this conversation, the way the golden words on the spines of the books were so utterly blinding that he looked away in fear of being exposed to such an intense glow. Reason being, that the intensity of it reminded him of the same extremity held within his ex-partner's gaze.

Sighing, Solitary ran her hands over her bruised and scarred face, before leaning forwards and saying: 'I don't know what came over you that night.'

Neither do I, thought Hero, as he looked down, ashamed at the fact that he only recalled bits and pieces of his mistake.

'Actually,' Solitary replied, 'I do know what came over you. That was Oreh, wasn't it?'

Surprised, Hero tried to avoid the subject, refusing to talk about it. When he realised that she insisted on the answer to her inquiry, he muttered: 'Some things remain best unknown.'

'Stop it!' She raised her voice, slamming her fists against the chestnut-wooden table. 'Stop it because... because... because I know it was him!' Sobbing, Solitary began to howl, her cries resonating. 'I know it was him, and as much as you try to hide it from me, I know that he's the part of you that you didn't want me to find out about.'

Shaking violently, she bowed her head, sand-blonde hair covering her face like a curtain. Her outburst gained an immense amount of unwanted attention, not to mention, several looks conveying disappointment and disapproval. Most were directed at Hero, due to the fact that from any outsider, it would appear as if this was a break-up, or that Hero had cheated on Solitary and this was her way of confronting him. Although these weren't the exact scenarios, he knew that the embarrassment would be too great to ignore.

'Hey,' he said softly, 'can you maybe... stop crying?'

He asked this question with a hopeful grin and soon came to the conclusion that it was wishful thinking, for Solitary frowned and rolled her eyes.

‘Am I causing a scene?’ She mocked, tilting her head. ‘Am I an inconvenience to you?’

Kind of, thought Hero. And considering that I come here regularly, I’m not sure if this is an inconvenience, or just discomfort and awkwardness at its finest.

‘You hit me,’ hissed his ex-partner in disgust. ‘You hit me and you never hit me before. Together for five years and you never laid a hand on me. Then... and then...’

Tears ran down her cheeks as she took a moment to look away from the dark-brown eyes which watched her intently.

‘And you probably killed that eight-year-old girl, didn’t you?’

Suppressing all sentiments and wanting to remain nonchalant, Hero took a deep breath.

‘You’re crossing the line,’ he chuckled half-heartedly. ‘This is a public place.’

‘So what?’ She asked. ‘You want me to refrain from saying the truth?!’

Rising to her feet, Solitary shouted her previous statement, attracting even more spectators.

Gently, Cahill reached for her hand.

‘What I’m saying,’ he whispered quietly, ‘is remember where we are and try to be discreet. Me killing someone isn’t something I want everyone knowing about.’

‘Did you kill her?’ She asked slowly. ‘That’s all I want to know.’

A moment or two passed when Hero finally broke the silence with his answer. ‘Yes.’

Solitary’s face brightened and upon noticing this, Hero questioned her sudden change of mood.

‘You admitted it,’ she laughed, almost disbelieving. ‘You actually admitted it.’

‘What?’

‘This whole meeting,’ she continued. ‘This was all so you can confess and you fell right into the trap.’

‘Trap?’ He thought before feeling like an absolute fool.

‘Yes,’ Solitary smiled. Sitting back in with a newfound joy, she told Hero that she had been investigating him for five months.

In the duration of that time, Solitary had managed to produce the rest of the police department with decisive clues. Some revolved around the culprit of the murders having Dissociative Identity Disorder, other pieces of evidence regarded the location of the homicides (for these were places that Hero visited frequently). Moreover, hair cells and skin cells found on the body of the victim proved that he was present and most likely killed them. All Solitary needed was the confession.

And Hero had given it to her.

‘I’m going to the bathroom,’ she announced, grabbing her maroon bag. ‘Are you paying?’

‘Yeah,’ said Hero, giving a lifeless smile. ‘I’ll pay.’

Nodding, Solitary ambled towards the female bathrooms.

‘You should have ended her,’ came a sinister voice, from deep inside him.

‘No,’ said Hero.

‘Then at least let me finish the job,’ the person chuckled, amused at Hero’s reluctance and lack of courage.

‘I don’t want you to,’ was the reply.

‘Please,’ the voice begged with urgency.

However, Hero was not able to give his answer because his vision darkened, and it seemed as if he had fallen into an abrupt slumber, whilst Ore had just woken up from his. Briefly, he glanced at the arts and crafts supplies lying on a table nearby. Occasionally, parents or guardians would frequent the cafe and bring their children along. So, the supplies were a form of entertainment for the young boys and girls.

Beside some coloured paper, there were magenta-purple scissors.

These were evidently regarded as a safety hazard, due to their relatively sharp edge and the fact that children were inevitably curious. Hence why, parents were instructed to watch their kids, when their son or daughter was utilising them.

They're perfect, thought Oreh. Just the thing I need.

Staggering towards the table, he grabbed two pairs of scissors and made his way to the female bathrooms.

After he left the cafe, Oreh sat in the run-down theme park, observing the moss that had attached itself to every piece of machinery, and every rip and tear in the brightly-neon coloured signs.

Aqua-blue and muted-pink intertwined with each other, as these were the shades which dominated the sky. Long, lean, fluffy clouds drifted eastwards like ships, sailing over a sea of glass buildings.

Oreh giggled as he trampled over the twigs and dead leaves underneath the weight of his foot, and allowed the evening breeze to embrace him as he continued his journey.

To think, that just opposite from where he was, a lady would be unfortunate enough to walk into a stall, and find a body of a woman, suspended roughly a meter above the floor, with magenta-purple scissors.

Not to mention, the blood on the victim's head, suggesting that she was beaten with something.

Or possibly kicked...

Alone on this day, reminiscing the quietude of it all, the thought of that almost made Oreh feel sympathetic.

The key word being almost.

Chapter 4

He was drowning in articles, catalogues, research pages. The italics, the words scribbled in bold, washing over him as phrases he had never heard before, hammered at his mind. Falling through the rabbit hole of the internet, he couldn't help scrolling through various website pages in awe.

Inside, Hero felt as if he were peering at articles, the way some people do when watching horror movies; through the gaps of his fingers, fearfully awaiting for the jump-scare.

Nonetheless, he tried to convince his body that everything was fine, that there was no reason for any level of concern. In spite of this, Cahill could only tolerate so much because pretending to be ignorant didn't change the facts.

Oreh had killed Solitary in the most gruesome way possible. He murdered her, took her life and laughed and smiled at her death, as if it were... entertainment.

Hero's dark-brown eyes filled to the brim with tears as he recalled the conversation between him and his second personality. When closing his eyes, all he could see was an estimated image of the expression of shock, which Solitary's face must have displayed when encountering Oreh.

'You can't blame me,' he giggled. 'She was going to turn me in. She was going to turn us in.'

'But... that was completely unnecessary,' Hero mumbled. 'There had to be another way, we could've gotten rid of her without using any major and risky methods.'

Oreh rolled his eyes. 'You're so soft. People die all the time. She would have left this earth anyways, the way she did doesn't matter,' he stated with a shrug of his shoulders.

'You're dismissing her life so easily,' Hero sobbed. 'As if killing her brought no weight of guilt to your conscience.'

Oreh remained silent, the electric fan in Hero's apartment generating a slight vibrating sound. Outside, rain pattered against windows, sliding down the pearl-white panes leisurely.

'I think you need to let go,' whispered Oreh.

'Let go of her and everyone that could hurt us. I'm not all that bad once you get to know me,' he grinned, from ear to ear.

'I'm not a monster,' Hero replied.

'Neither am I. I'm you and I'm a part of you.'

'What if... what if I said I didn't want you around anymore?'

This took Oreh by surprise, for he never expected such a thing to be requested from Hero's part. Clearly, Oreh couldn't 'just leave'. He indeed was a part of him, and their detachment was simply impossible.

Oreh slipped into the back of Hero's thoughts, refusing to answer any remarks or inquiries.

Needless to say, after that unfortunate event, Hero took the initiative to do some research on his disorder, since it was obvious by now that his condition was abnormal from all other cases of multiple personality disorder. Reading each page with speed and eagerness, he decided to grab a notebook, and dedicate a page of crisp-white, lined paper for the notes of his research.

* * *

Laying back, Hero put his hands behind his head, staring at what he'd written in shock. Cursive letters were sprawled over the pages, some misspellings here and there, however for the most part, his handwriting was legible. He admired the way the words appeared to look so beautiful, when the words themselves were horrific.

According to the information on the page regarding everything about dissociative personality disorder, Hero's condition was abnormal. Of course, most patients would experience mood swings every once in a while, but nothing too extreme.

And that's when he realised.

Had he been misdiagnosed?

At the back of his mind, he could hear Oreh laughing.

Chapter 5

There he was, sat in his ink-black and crimson-red apartment, observing the bleach-white stars glinting behind glass buildings. Hearing bits and pieces of conversations, as people crossed the busied streets, and watching dawn fade into dusk as the city was concealed in a layer of darkness, Hero grabbed one of the empty canvases laying around the room, along with his acrylic paints.

Reaching for his brush and taking a deep breath, he began making light strokes of blue and red on the paper, allowing his mind to relax.

Just as he was surrendering to the calmness of it all, Hero began to lose control. His scarred hands wavered, his fingers stretched as he dropped the light-brown paintbrush, causing it to roll under the sofa. All the muscles within his right hand tensed as a being beyond this universe, wished to dominate him.

Swiftly, he swooped down and retrieved the brush and the hand painted soft and smooth strokes along the paper. Every line, curve, and edge was done with delicate and care. For a fraction of a second, Hero almost worshipped the work for its beauty. However, that worship soon became envy, for he soon arrived to the undeniable conclusion; the mastermind behind this.

Oreh.

Frustration took over Cahill, as Oreh continued to administrate his part of the artwork. It was one thing to be unsuccessful in the profession he loved the most, but to have his second personality be better at him than art, was a complete mockery to his craft. Hero shook his head in disbelief, disappointed at how he had reached such a low point in his life.

It was then that he spoke the words that shocked everyone.

'I want to swap!' he screamed.

Oreh paused, brush in mid-air.

'Pardon?' said Oreh.

'I want to swap. If you've been tormenting me this much... if you've been terrorising the people I love... then there must be a way to swap.'

It's the only reason which explains why you've been doing this,' sobbed Hero.

Oreh smiled.

'You really want to?' He asked in a sinister tone.

Hero nodded.

'Finally,' breathed Oreh, as Hero slipped to the back of the mind.

He was now in control.



“THE HANDS
 ATTACHED
 TO THESE ARMS
 HAD LONG DIRTY
 FINGERNAILS,
 SHARP ENOUGH
 TO CUT A NORMAL
 HUMAN BEING
 IN HALF”

The Creature of Loneliness

by Eliada

Tip, tap, tip, tap.... An abnormally long leg made an appearance at the edge of the door which was then followed by another seven! It was truly a terrifying sight to behold – you might have never seen something so ghastly. A spider hybrid? The torso was long and grey with a multitude of scars and sharp objects hanging from it, but the mysterious creature seemed to not be affected by the weapons protruding from its decaying body. What made it even worse was that it had human arms and a human head contrasting from a majority of its limbs. The hands attached to these arms had long dirty fingernails, sharp enough to cut a normal human being in half, and the head attached to its elongated neck had a gorgeous head of black hair, the only thing that looked appealing about this creature. It would be amazing if it wasn't gifted with a face resembling The Scream painting by Edvard Munch. What a sight!

There was a bright flash of lightning that sent a sharp shiver down the spider's spine, making their feelings of fear increase. The sky was getting as dark as the emptiness in the hybrid's crushed heart. Rain fell like tears after you're told bad news. It was usual for the weather to be like this, but it just felt different this time... was it the eeriness of the building? Or just the constant feelings of loneliness starting to build up? It did not matter; no matter how they felt or how hard they tried to be good, they would never be reverted to their normal selves. The

abandoned skyscraper was a good place to hide out – there was a place to rest their head and enough flies to satisfy them. The skyscraper was an abandoned project after the community thought that there was no use for it and it would be a waste of resources. As long as the community didn't decide to bulldoze the remains or explore it, it would be home to the lonely spider hybrid.

I walked through the building with a flashlight in hand.

Ugh, I thought, *why did I go through with that dare...* The building gave off a spine-chilling vibe. I was dared to explore that abandoned building and bring back a hair from a creature that was said to be living there.

They had to be pranking me... Monsters aren't real, they can't be—

My thoughts were interrupted by a loud clatter and I whipped round to see a horrifying, eldritch, macabre creature staring back at me. 8 legs... long claws... and silky flowing hair? My life flashed before my eyes as the monster reached out for me, and I held my breath waiting for death to come upon me...

Wait... this cannot be! I was waiting for a blow and cut, anything... but instead I was getting scooped up? I was getting ready for the pain of being eaten alive, but still it did not come. I looked into their eyes and they cocked their head to the left before softly setting me down and beckoning for me to follow them.

A normal human... maybe she could help me break this unfortunate curse? Great! She got the message to follow me, maybe if I could lead her to my last possession, which was a picture of my former self, she would understand that I was trapped inside my greatest fear... spiders. I'm not sure of what I did, or what I said for me to be cursed in such a way, but all I know was that on the fateful day I woke up with a note saying, 'You will be alone forever until you accept that they are a part of life.'

What was this creature doing? I'm sure we must've reached our destination because it started to slow down. When I saw them reach for something I got ready to strike, and then they showed me a picture. I did not recognise this person but I did recognise that hair... it was

t-t-the spider's. I gulped before speaking.

'Is this you?'

Then they looked hesitant but slowly opened their lips for a word: '-y-yes,' they croaked.

I dropped my flashlight in shock and bolted out of the building and tried to get away as fast as I could. Should I tell someone? What if they kill them if I do? I can't hide this forever can I? I thought, then I stopped. I saw blood dripping on the floor before realising it was my own and looked down to see a bloody spider leg impaling my stomach. My eyes rolled to the back of my head and I collapsed.

I did not want to have to do that, but it was the only way to help myself – I was cursed to be alone. There is not a creature or person that can stay without being killed later. It was just instinct... I never meant to... it just happens like I'm not even in control of myself sometimes. Maybe I should move somewhere else... somewhere no one is...

I didn't know what I had to accept, and I sure wasn't going to follow any instructions from the person who did this to me. Maybe it's for the best, maybe I am made to be a lonesome creature...

“

A HUGE CASTLE

wrapped with ivy and guarded by tall,
proud trees – now stripped of their leaves –
was further ahead

”



The Good Werewolf

by Leanne

Our story begins on a Friday evening with a young girl heading through intimidating woods – which oddly felt welcoming. She was bombarded with orange autumn leaves painting the surface of the ground. The aroma of nature comforted her. The sound of twigs breaking under feet contrasted perfectly with the lake ahead. A huge castle wrapped with ivy and guarded by tall, proud trees – now stripped of their leaves – was further ahead. It was inhabited by no one. Legend has it there was a king that walked on these very grounds and lived in that very castle... but one eerie and mysterious night the king disappeared. Nowhere to be found, just his ancient castle left behind. No one had ever entered it after the king, and no one will. Yet.

Suddenly, strong, loud footsteps were heard. They were getting louder with every step. Closer with every step. The girl started breathing heavily. Without warning a hooded figure began to approach the girl. Fear and anticipation flooded through the young girl's veins.

The figure's face was concealed. As it began to move closer, she moved back. Scrutinizing her surroundings for a possible defence weapon, she tripped over something. It wasn't a twig. A branch? She began to feel it. It was difficult to determine what it was, considering the darkness engulfing her. It was soft. She began to move across what was lying in front of her. A finger. Five in fact. A dead body. A scream was emitted

from her misty lungs. The figure didn't stop heading towards her. This time, the bony fingers of this mysterious being were wrapped around an axe. The hooded figure loomed above her ready to get his share. This was it. This was her end...

A growl could be heard from a distance. It sounded like it had come from the castle. Dangerous animals were coming her way. What was the point of running if she was going to be chopped in half at this very moment? Unfortunately, these hungry calls did not distract the predator that she had to worry about. All possible methods of finding a way out, alive, had deserted her. More powerful hungry growls started erupting. If it wasn't the axe above her that would determine her fate, it would be the fangs of hungry animals. There was no way out...

I was searching my surroundings for a potential supper when my ears were greeted with a deafening scream. Something was definitely wrong. Then it clicked; the mysterious being that ambushed me – and left me severely wounded in my left leg – must have come back for more. I began to limp over to the source of the noise, growling; trying to sound intimidating, though I doubt it worked. The other werewolves seemed to have noticed my absence and may have thought that I had found food after the long hunt. Then I saw it. The menacing figure that left me in this feeble state. I will not let it attack anything or anyone else, though I had a dilemma. I wasn't nearly as strong as that carnivorous being and not as sharp as that axe. I tried to growl but it didn't distract the predator. He began to lift his axe.

The rest of the pack had arrived. I could only hope that they didn't do the job I was hoping the hooded figure did not do. Kill the innocent figure on the ground...

The beast in front of her finally realised what was happening and immediately ran off into the shadows, exposing a hungry werewolf. The beast left nothing but an axe behind.

Oh no. The animal was still running towards her. Her legs had frozen

and her senses had lost devotion. But something unthinkable happened. The violent creature merely sat in front of the girl, by her feet, panting and whimpering. This creature was in pain. She soon concluded that the feeble, abnormal animal was not here for flesh but had come for some sort of asylum. She heard similar growls, just more powerful and dangerous. She could see rushing animals heading towards her. This wasn't going to be a happy ending. They ended up rushing towards something a few metres in front of her. The dead body. It was too late to try and determine who the corpse was, and she was glad she didn't have to. She had to know who held that axe and if that dead body was its doing. Something that had contributed to her showing mercy to the poor animal was the fact that this animal had saved her life even through its pain. While comforting the shivering wolf, she pondered about whether it had saved her consciously or not...

She began to hear discreet mumbles and looked at the feeble creature in her lap. She heard complaints about leg pain and that he was getting too old.

'Do you know the ancient legend about the dead king that used to rule this country and used to live in that very castle?'

The girl gulped and nodded fearfully. How was this relevant?

'I am the king.'

What? That is not possible. The king died centuries ago. And he was a human not a werewolf. A laugh nearly dodged her sealed lips. This was so far-fetched it was amusing.

The wolf recognised her puzzled face and began to elaborate. 'You see, I died centuries ago – was killed, rather – and I was forced to come back in the form of a wolf as you can see. I have been living in the abandoned garden and tried to hide from the regular werewolf visitors. Not easy blending in with them or walking on fours. I get attacked now and then.'

This was absolutely barbaric. She probably should have chosen not to believe this lunatic, but it was a wolf speaking. That was unusual.

The mere miracle of the wolf not attacking her was absurd. This whole situation was ridiculous; the thought of a king in a body of a werewolf isn't unusual at this point.

She suddenly was getting pulled up from the damp ground, in the direction of the castle.



Monstrosia (extract)

by Iffat

[CLICK HERE TO READ THE WHOLE STORY](#)

Part 4: The Portal

‘Well well well. What do we have here? A boy. My boy.’ Marco growled, his scar looking more red than ever, as if it was a fuel bar of anger.

‘That’s such a cliché opening, and who are you anyway? You aren’t my dad. He doesn’t have a scar like that.’

‘Child, you haven’t the faintest idea of who I am, do you?’

‘Again, you copy lines from TV shows.’

‘Shut up, kid. I know who you are. You’re Lucas. And I am General Marco.’ Lucas quickly became pale, fear clinging onto his heart. His hands shook violently and his jaw quivered. His eyes bulged wide open, and he raised a hand.

‘No... not you... you aren’t him... you aren’t him... you can’t be him... there is no way you can be him... please spare me... what have I done... please—’

‘I am not going to do anything to you.’ Marco rolled his eyes and giggled for a bit, and Lucas sighed very loudly.

‘You, I will never forget you.’ A voice spoke. It had a very deep and terrifying tone, a murderous theme creeping in its voice. A few seconds later, Rebecca came from the shadows, her shoulders arched, eyes glowing red, looking like a demon.

‘You. Rebecca Caliban. The snotty kid in the park who needed to



“THEN SMALL
SPLATTERS OF BLOOD
STARTED TO
POUR FROM THE SKY,
DEEPLY RED...”

meet her doom.’ Marco stared at Rebecca’s body, her legs disappeared in a cloud of mist. ‘You should be rotting in your grave by now.’

‘I will never rot. I will always live. I am here now, and you weren’t expecting it.’

‘Work on your sentence. Anyways, Lucas. Pleasant to meet you.’ Marco reached out his hand to expect a handshake. Lucas coiled back, gazing at his fingers. Rebecca smiled.

‘Lucas doesn’t want to be with you. He will always be on the side of the just, not the murderers.’ Marco became infuriated, and threw a pot at her direction, but it just went through her. Gulab Raj was stuffing his face with ladoos. Ada Müller looked at Marco in a horrified expression, mouth wide open. Then, out of the blue, the walls of the garage cracked. The floors trembled. Lucas grabbed his TVC. Marco grabbed his ruck-sack. Rebecca still glared at Marco, unaware of the sudden tremor. Gulab squeezed his sweets, and Ada started to pray. The crack began to worsen, and then purple light shone brightly through the cracks. Strange words began to speak. They could hear roaring and speaking of different tongues. Then, a hole was made in the wall, a portal shining brightly behind the mysterious cracks. It looked like it came straight from Minecraft. Everyone froze. After, everyone was sucked inside the portal, screams muffled through the night, only a crow squawking could be heard in the midnight of Crow Avenue.

Part 5: Welcome to Monstrosia

When the blue sun rose, and the skies turned green, and the blue clouds gathered, crolibirds started to chirp silent tunes of sweet harmony into the morning sky. The red grass swayed slowly to the wind, and purple trees with red leaves stood firmly in the countryside. In the Far East, you could see the Haragha Mountains, claimed by Empress Haragha in her conquest of conquering the whole world. And on the Far West, you could see tall skyscrapers, castles, houses, the town square, and monsters.

The portal opened in the middle of nowhere in a steel frame, shaped to look like thorns encircling a building. It read strange words that weren’t known to human tongues. When the portal became red, wind blew fiercely from the inside and then everyone that was taken from the garage (you know who it is, don’t you) was thrown out in the red grass. They landed on the red grass with mighty and painful thuds. Only Lucas and Marco felt pain. The ghosts were completely fine.

‘What is this pla— AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAGH! WHERE ARE WE! KANA JI WHERE HAVE YOU TAKEN US OH BAGVAN OH BAGVAN— Oh, my sweets are here. Let me just have a few nibbles.’ Gulab Raj screamed. Everyone else instantly woke up, rubbing their heads and waking up from what would have been their sleep. Once their eyes fully opened, they screamed.

‘Oh, shut up everyone! We’re In a foreign land, I get it, but no need to become so terrified,’ Marco said, ‘Besides, I probably know where we are!’

‘Oh yeah? Then what country or place in the world has RED GRASS AND A BLUE SUN YOU IDIOT!?’ Rebecca shouted. It sounded like she still was angry at Marco. (Wowie can ghosts hold grudges. Well, her.)

‘Um, I dunno. You tell me, what place are we in, huh?’ Marco asked Lucas. Lucas was known to be the clever one in the group, but not even he knew this.

‘You’re in Monstrosia, lads.’ The others jumped when they heard that voice. It was all growly and croaky. It had an old tone in it, probably an old man. But when they turned to see who was speaking, it wasn’t even a man. It was a monster.

‘What in the history of the world are you? It isn’t Halloween! I get that your costume is awesome but take it off!’ Lucas cried. He stepped back, as if he was ready to roundhouse whoever was performing this ridiculous joke.

‘Uh, this is my skin.’ Just like that, everyone started to freak out. A creature that looked like a purple crocodile in a tuxedo? No way!

‘Just to let ya bums know, my name is Mr. Kuhili. I am a Dracodile species. I work at that skyscraper over there. The company ‘MONSTERS AND SPECIES’ owns the building, and I’m a banker there.’ His finger pointed over to the biggest skyscraper there, a huge red triangle. It read in huge neon letters ‘MONSTERS AND SPECIES co.’

The mysterious creature quickly walked to his workplace, his tail slowly wagging away as he walked. Everyone was puzzled. Happy, sad, butterflies in the tummy, you name it.

‘Well, that was strange, wasn’t it?’ Lucas questioned. He wanted to strike a conversation, as he couldn’t really follow on with what was happening to his day. Was this even one whole day or more? Who knows...

‘Well, we better get moving. If we’re ever going to get out of here, then there must be someone here who can lead us out,’ Ada said. She was ruffling her arms as if it were cold, but it was actually a warm, sunny day. Confused but with only one option to go ahead with, they slowly walked to the city. Maybe there was an adventure waiting there for them?

Part 6: The City and the Countryside

As they walked to the city, with Marco in front of them all, Marco spotted that they were on a hill this whole time. There was lower ground, and this time, it had blue grass! There was a little countryside, with spooky and gothic settings, whereas in the city, it was all modern and perfect.

‘Look at this land! It is ever so strange! Red grass on the hills, and blue grass on lower land? What’s next? Blood rain?’ And just when he finished his sentence, the clouds gathered over the hills and city. They could see the monsters quickly packing up and shutting down their workspaces and shops, rain shelters springing up. Then they read a sign saying: ‘BLOOD RAIN. PLEASE REFRAIN FROM STAYING

OUTSIDE. TAKE IN EVERYTHING NECESSARY FOR THIS STORM. BLOOD RAIN WARNING.’ Then small splatters of blood started to pour from the sky, deeply red. After a few seconds, it turned into a blood storm! Small, white spiders crawled quickly on the grass, looking for shelter. Skeletons ran around in circles, enjoying the weather. They were bare and black, but when blood poured onto their bones, muscles began to form, and then skin grew. The skin was blue and jelly-like. Then they became monsters and ran home, scared of the blood. It absolutely made no sense to Lucas and Marco, or the ghosts. But the only thing that made sense was that they were drenched in blood. (Of course that makes sense! What am I saying...) Once the storm stopped, they weighed their clothes and ruffled their hair. Well, only Marco and Lucas. The others just floated, amused by their struggle. Did you know that ghosts are very good at acting like hair-dryers? Well, now you do! Rebecca blew on Lucas, and he was dry! But when Gulab blew on Marco, his jacket flew off.

‘No! That was a Gucci jacket! My son Arvin bought it for me!’ Marco cried. He ran as fast as he can to retrieve the jacket that was all bloody and ruined on the red, soaking grass. He kept cursing the ghosts and stomped on the grass, but Lucas was confused. Arvin? He knew Arvin. Arvin was his cousin who was killed by Lucanian thugs. He was burnt alive. Was Marco talking about that Arvin? No. It couldn’t be. There are millions of Arvins in this world, and Marco’s Arvin wasn’t dead, but probably alive. But Lucas kept thinking about Arvin and Marco.

Lucas, Marco and the ghosts all went down to the countryside, where Lucas and Marco had to roll over and land on giant mushrooms that acted like pillows. It was their only way to not become ghosts in a land that wasn’t even Earth. The ghosts just ‘flew’ their way down, acting as if they were surfing on big, blue waves on the beach, only that their wave was red grass. They kept laughing at Lucas and Marco as they struggled to get off the mushrooms. They eventually slid down, and crept past the huge stalks of the mushrooms, and there they were. In the countryside.

It was a horrible place to be. Skeletons, zombies, humanoid monsters with black lips and black eyes, huge spiders and pumpkin men. Yes. This was something that would come straight out of some Halloween story made for little children that can't tolerate it's just 'All Saints' Day'. The ghosts greeted the other terrifying species, and they chatted about how horrible death was and other cursed subjects, whilst Lucas and Marco avoided death from spider bites as they loomed over their heads, growling menacingly. The houses were all black and twisted, and they had little demons carved into their doors.

'For all I know, they could worship Satan!' Lucas fearfully said, 'Is this because I don't seek Jesus' help often?'

'No. It's because these abnormal people need humans to teach them a lesson!'

'But look at their skyscrapers and technology! They're just as smart as humans in the city!'

'Well in the country, people tend to be dumber, don't they? These aren't even people! We have to leave and flee to the city if we don't want to become spider snacks!' They slowly crept their way through mysterious alleyways and creepy roads with dolls running around and flying kites with skulls painted on them. The ghosts flew over the heads of Lucas and Marco as they pathetically tip-toed their way to the city entrance. They kept tip-toeing until they saw a blue light. The city entrance, it must be! There, they saw a three-eyed blob with a builder hat, and it was watching the countryside with binoculars. When it saw Lucas, Marco and the ghosts, he quickly opened the door to the city entrance and hurried them in. At this point, Lucas was speeding along the roads for safety, and Marco was riding a spider which moved like greased lightning. Once they were inside the city, the blob closed the door and welcomed them in. They were finally in the city.

The city was adorned in blue spotlights, lighting up almost every single lamppost, bus shelter, building, structure, and more. There were huge roads that were painted purple, and the traffic lights were painted

pink, with the usual red, amber and green lights. Monsters walked casually along the streets, normally dressed in fine clothes and unique robes. Skyscrapers stood tall and proud and little houses and shops were crammed into the small space of the town square.

'Have fun, humans.' The blob said, walking to its watch post. They were amazed. They had never seen any city look so nice like this! Lucas and Marco ran onto the streets and followed the signals to the main town square, where the M&S co. (Not the ones on Earth, but the ones in Monstrosia.) skyscraper was standing. Apparently, there was even a couple of statues, bakeries, shops, and castles to look at. But just when Lucas and Marco were about to enter the town square, some monster ran after them and pinned them down to the floor. They were being arrested.

Part 7: King Kaku

'So, humans, in my court, aren't I more excited to execute humans in this fine court of mine and maybe drink their blood.'

Lucas and Marco were kneeling down on the steps of a palace, where duck-like monster guards held spears and shields, glaring angrily at them. Lucas looked up at whoever was speaking, and Marco just looked down, embarrassed. The most feared terrorist in Lucania was being pinned down by a bunch of fictional hoo-haas? Nonsense!

'So, state your purpose here. Well, let me guess, you're here to plant bombs in my castle and kill me. Isn't that right?' An angry and congested voice spoke, as if its neck was being squeezed. It was a fat monster, green skin, huge lips and teeth. He had his hands crossed together. He just walked side to side, his eleven heads staring at Lucas' face.

'He Kana Ji! Why did you send Raavan here to slay my friends! Why are you so unmerciful!! Oh, look, a laddoo.' The ghosts barged into the doors. Well, they just went through it, but they went very quick. And then they analysed the whole court.

It was a similar replica to the countryside. Huge skulls the size of elephants were hung on each sides of the front wall, where the throne was. It was decorated with splashes of blood and bones peeking out of the main frame. The walls were black, and the lights were blue flames that looked as if It came straight from Minecraft. (Why are there so many Minecraft references?) Swords were attached to one single rope and circled the entire room, as if this King was a warmonger. Then, he finally sat down in his throne and rested his beard In his hands, stroking it.

‘My name is Kaku. King Kaku Jalazer of the Jalazian Era. I can understand you all are scared, and I don’t know why I spoke like that, I know you are all just tourists. I won’t execute anyone today.’ The soldiers all went sad. They got excited for executions, as they were rare. The screams of humans really were the best part in the process, and also the grand feast. Human meat tasted sweet with blood.

‘Well, hello Kaku. I am Lucas. This is Marco, and these are my ghost friends.’

‘Nice to meet you all. I apologise once again for the behaviour of mine and the kingdom, it’s all hereditary.’

‘Wait, this city is a kingdom?’ Ada asked.

‘Used to be. When the war of 1899 occurred, the whole of Monstrosia was divided into different kingdoms. They teamed up to fight off the humans from Britain. They had an Empire, and were greedy for our materials, which couldn’t be found on Earth. We fought and won. We became the United Monster’s Republic of Monstrosia. Nice little story, isn’t it?’ Lucas enjoyed the story, but when Kaku talked about rare materials, he lit up like a bulb. Rare materials not found on Earth! Maybe these materials could be used for the TCV? He suddenly started to become very excited and grinned ear to ear. Marco noticed his sudden reaction and shuffled away from him. Everybody else also moved away, but Kaku didn’t notice it.

‘Can we use some of your materials for a little invention?’ Lucas

asked. Kaku looked surprised. He stood up immediately from his chair and said,

‘You may. But only 1kg of any material may be taken. We don’t want our elements to be mixed up in your periodic table. No way.’ Lucas screamed silently in joy and started to jump, even though his hands were chained behind his back. One monster stuck out his hand, and a saw flew out, cutting the chains off. (This is absolutely crazy. From garage to a monster palace. Wicked.) Once Marco opened the doors to the palace, Lucas sped out, his shouts of joy could be heard from miles away. Time for some material seeking.

The Shadow Within

by Sara

1: Emilia

Social groups, therapy, self-care, and mindfulness are all solutions to problems but not mine. The constant fear of something inevitable causes severe depression and anxiety. The pain that comes with unchanging emotions causes mental scars that even the common eye can see. The pain rushes through my entire body like a dam burst. The physical pain causes me to hate myself as well as stares of pity that only pour water onto the flooded flame of my existence that I wish to extinguish. The people that surround me can't help but cry and weep at the thought of such a hurtful life, but they don't understand that I am content with my consciousness as I know it keeps me safe.

The fear of happiness that I harbour is the sword and shield that makes me special. I am attending my first day at university, and I am far from excited as the first day always consists of greetings and introductions, and as I am an extreme introvert I am even more anxious that I will make a mistake and ruin my peaceful time alone. This greeting will paint the future that I have at this school, and I am focused on making sure I am alone for most of it.

My dream job is an independent artist, as I think art is the closest form of communication I can have with a person. I like to draw what I think someone's inner personality can show outwardly but I will also

I start to
BREATHE HEAVILY
and
LOSE MY BALANCE
whilst sitting down.
THE AIR
seems to be
RUNNING AWAY
FROM ME
like I have
THE PLAGUE,
and my eyes seem to be
BREEDING
THE OCEAN

do it to show that I am not interested in talking much. I do not want people to hate me; I am only interested in my studies.

I get onto the train that takes the direct route to the university. I stand there, unnoticeable and blending into the crowd. The place is suffocating and smells of iron and unfamiliar people. I can't do anything but look at the floor.

I suddenly feel a person's breath creep onto my neck. It has a warm stench to it that chills my spine. I turn my head slightly to see an old man standing very close to me. There are plenty of places to stand, and he stands next to me. I know the reason for the man's presence, but I don't want to believe it. My stop is coming close, and I'm not sure if I will be able to take a step if the man doesn't overt his gaze. I can see the stop, and I start to move. I feel a hand grab me by the wrist, and I know it is the man's. So, I jerk forwards, feeling the hand not pulling me back. In a male's voice I hear:

'Hey, this is our stop. We should get off now, come on!'

I see a boy my age pulling me away from the strange man in a confident act. We get off the train and the guy begins to speak again. 'Sorry for scaring you. I saw you were having some trouble so I thought I could help. My name is Jason. You don't have to tell me yours, but are you okay?'

Very grateful for his help, I whisper, 'Thank you, I'm fine.'

Sensing the awkwardness in the air, he tells me, 'we should probably go.'

We walk out of the station, where I finally feel comfortable to say, 'My name is Emilia. Thank you for helping me out there.'

2: Jason

I saw a girl on the train to university and couldn't help but see she looked really uncomfortable. I didn't want to help until she made a face that somehow reminded me of myself in a dark time of mine and couldn't hold back my urge to help her even if it ended in a failed

mission. She wore an oversized black hoodie but her pale, white face was overcome with fear; I could see it from miles away. I had to help so I ran as quietly as possible, so I wouldn't scare her whilst trying to help. When I was less than an inch away from her...

I froze.

I got nervous and started to concoct ideas to go against every thought I had towards helping her. What if I misunderstood the situation? What if I was seeing things? What if she didn't need help? What if the man was trying to help her? After all these thoughts and questions paralysed me, self-loathing soon came – not paralysing me, but expelling me from my own body to the point I was forced to live in the hurtful thoughts I created. As soon as these horrifying thoughts took over, they left... because for the first time I was hit by a thought that I never had before.

I could do something right.

No other thought followed, and I just went for my gut instinct. I grabbed the girl's wrist and started to say anything that would warn the man to stay away. I felt her pull back and realised that she didn't know me and had no reason to trust me. That being said, I could only hope.

And now we arrive at the current situation. I see the step and walk into the train station along with the girl. I look down and realise I am still holding her hand. I jerk away, hoping not to scare her, and say, 'Sorry for scaring you. I saw you were having some trouble, so I thought I could help. My name is Jason. You don't have to tell me yours, but are you okay?'

All I can think about is keeping her calm so she doesn't freak out. She takes her time to gather her strength and whispers in a sweet voice, 'Thank you, I'm fine.'

She says this, and I can feel awkward silence filling the air. I need to say something to break the silence.

'We should probably go.'

The girl then takes more time to gather her breath. I can see she's not

good with people. ‘My name is Emilia. Thank you for helping me out there.’

I smile with relief that she looks comfortable around me now.

3: Jason

I had never done anything so spontaneous before that I hadn’t taken my time to observe her properly. She looked around my age, and very tired at that. She seemed to have brown eyes and long, brunette hair hidden underneath her hoodie. Just by the short introduction, I could see her shy, enclosed persona underneath her baggy clothes. I could see the pain that can be mistaken for dislike towards others.

‘Well Emilia, it’s nice to meet you. I’m sorry I took you off the train. You might have to get a new one to go to— well wherever you were going. I hope I didn’t make you late.’

By shocking surprise, she contradicted me. ‘Actually this was my stop, and I was wondering if I would be able to even leave the train, so thank you. But I really have to go now. I don’t want to be late.’

She walked off in a hurry, which immediately made me think it was me. I knew I shouldn’t dwell on these feelings, so I went on to distract myself.

I walked and walked, and I began to notice that I was going in the same direction as her. When I finally reached my university, I realised she goes there too and I could only see the many social disasters in my future. It was only a matter of time before she noticed me, so at this point it was best that I just took a separate route.

I made it to school taking a gruelling, unnecessary and scary route. Despite this, I didn’t regret my decision because anything to avoid awkward conversation is worth it. Orientation began and I allowed myself to relax and focus on my new beginning at this school. I had doubts that we’d have the same course; she looked like quite an introverted person, so I doubted that she would want to take something so social as archaeology.

I was wrong.

4: Emilia

I couldn’t have been more grateful for what Jason did for me, but if I stayed in that station a moment longer, I may have forgotten my language just by how nervous I was. My deepest hope was that I never have to meet him again.

I make my way to my class after orientation and find myself in a conflicting situation to what I’d hoped would not come to light. We attend the same course. The face he makes is identical to mine; we both have the look of fear of judgment. We both understand that we can’t just ignore each other.

In an attempt to make this interaction as natural as possible, he moves aside to make space for me to sit beside him and settle in. Throughout this interaction, we make no eye contact and don’t even try to speak with each other.

This is until I hear him move and reach for something out of his bag. Wondering what it is, I stare at him when he brings out his phone. It baffles me as to why he has his phone in his bag, but before I have an opportunity to ask, he unlocks his phone and hands it to me. It’s open on his contacts app.

‘I feel that after all we have been through, it is acceptable for me to ask for your number. There is no pressure if you don’t want to, but it would be lovely.’

‘I wouldn’t mind at all.’

This guy did not seem that bad and it is normal to have an acquaintance’s number. He also helped me and I would not want to be disrespectful to that fact. The ice isn’t broken yet, but it has started to melt.

‘Here.’ I hand the phone back with the new contact added.

‘Great,’ he exclaimed happily. ‘So, why did you pick archaeology? No offence, but you don’t seem like the type.’

Not only is this true but it’s a question I’d prepared for, before orientation.

‘I actually am interested in a career in art, but I find the most inspiration from the historical values of hidden things. Just like how when you draw a picture it can have a hidden meaning inside it, too!’

Realising how excited I am, I also realise how I embarrassed myself and just say anything to cover my mistake. ‘Sorry, I never encountered this question before and was a little excited for actually knowing the answer.’

With a smirk he replies, ‘It’s okay, I fully understand. I would love to hear more about your artwork someday.’ Adding a little laughter. Class begins, and the ice between us is nothing but an evaporating puddle.

5: Jason

After class, I decided to talk to Emilia again. I was surprised by my own interest in her – I usually don’t like talking to people and only make the effort to talk when someone is persistent.

She doesn’t speak much aside from the practised answer she gave in our first conversation. During class, we’re told that we would have an excavation during this term. I wanted to ask if Emilia will go part of the way home with me, given by the fact we took the same train.

‘I was wondering whether you wanted to go home with me?’

Waiting for a response, I couldn’t help but look away.

She soon replied, ‘Sure.’

We walked to the train station and waited. Whilst we waited, we found ourselves talking about the upcoming excavation. ‘I’m excited to have the experience before our exams,’ I stated.

‘I agree, the test would be easier with first-hand experience.’

The train got here not long after, and we parted ways at different stops.

Our relationship only grew over the month while we waited for the excavation. I learned that she also draws people because of the hidden thoughts of a person she could try to incorporate – which made me think she could be hiding something too. But I didn’t want to pry, so I left

those thoughts behind. Once the excavation had arrived, excitement and wonder filled the lecture hall.

But was this excitement truly the right emotion?

6: Emilia

We are told to meet in the hall for the excavation, and the team of people going on our particular team include scientists, explorers, medical teams, and more. Me and Jason are chosen to be on this team, as assistants, because of our diligence in assignments.

When I arrive, Jason isn’t there, I am forced to talk to everyone and make a fool of myself in the process. I could not have wished for another person’s company more than today. The hall is large and has an echo if anyone talks loud enough, and the floor squeaks whenever someone drags their feet. The light from outside is so bright there’s no need for the lights to be on.

When Jason finally arrives, I take my opportunity to hide behind him. I tell myself, ‘I’m just letting him introduce himself. I may be scared but it’s only for a little while,’ when I am just avoiding the internal paralysis I have by the overwhelming expectations of the people around me.

The only person I can be comfortable around is Jason, and even then, my words are articulated. He speaks to the rest of the team, which gives me time to calm my nerves, until Jason finally turns around and whispers in a gentle, caring, voice, ‘Are you ok? Sorry I came after you, I should’ve known that it would be hard for you.’

My heart melted by his care for the situation, I reply, ‘I’m fine, thank you for caring.’

With a giggle he replies, ‘if I didn’t know you by now, that would be kind of sad, don’t you think?’

‘Good thing we ended up on the same train, right?’

‘Of course.’

We leave, and the journey takes a lot out of us, but once we make it to the boat, we at least have some rest. We are travelling to a place

called Yunshi island – it's an island that turned up on the map approximately eight months ago, when it fell out of the sky like an asteroid, which is actually what Yunshi means. It caused many tsunamis and earthquakes from the impact and disturbance in the ground. A strange purple smoke surrounds it, and many experiments have gone on before now to make sure that the place is safe for people to explore.

We are not the first people to set foot on the island nor see all of it, but we are the first to gather information on it. That's considered a very big privilege, especially since we aren't a big university. The Professor said that the reason we got this chance is because we have connections with the university that were closest and had good personnel to carry out the task. We will also see them at the island, but they will be leaving later to match the timing.

With so many people at the site, I doubt that us assistants will stand out much, which brings me comfort considering the size of the workforce. I have many questions about the island, and some of them are questions I never get an answer to, or questions where I hope the answers I predicted are wrong. But overall, I would never miss this chance out for anything.

7: Jason

The ominous gas that surrounded the area was not only deadly to flesh, it made everyone shiver by the sheer look of it. The gas was cold, which only added to shivers, turning them into pure terror. As we got used to the chilling air, we reached the shore of the island and once one step was taken, gas seeped out of sand. It made us hold our breath out of fear, even though the suits kept us safe at all times.

Our food and supplies were kept safe in a sealed container in case of an emergency, and the oxygen tanks were easily accessible on our backpacks. Once we saw the land, we decided to make a quick venture there before we all took a break. To our amazement, the area that was inhabited by trees was clear of the gas. I looked around and saw

odd-looking trees that had pitch-black bark and were so tall I couldn't see the top. The grass seemed harder than the grass I was used to and was a turquoise colour. The scientist told us this area was safe, as the previous scientist made a report on it. Everyone started to take the suits off and bask in the glory of the unknown environment. The entire island smelt of gases which the scientist immediately took note of.

Once everyone was aware of themselves getting distracted, we were told to set up camp and the excavation would start tomorrow, but we were allowed within visual distance of everyone else, if we wanted to explore. Me and the other guys shared a very large tent and the girls the slightly smaller, but still considerably large, tent as there were fewer girls than guys.

Once everyone had set up camp, we all went out and stared at the scenery more. I felt the charcoal-like surface of the tree bark and the very delicate leaves that had fallen on the grass. No one went barefoot on the ground as it was able to hurt us, even if not by much. We also laid protective mats underneath the tent as well.

The next day came so slowly, it was unbearable. But once it came, I was not the only one excited for what we would find. I could see it on Emilia's face. And she could see it on mine.

8: Emilia

The crisp air is chilling in the morning. I am the first one to wake up, and part of it may be because of my excitement.

I make myself some food and wait for others to wake up. It's fortunate for me to wake up so early, because I can always blame my aversion to talking or socialising on my tiredness.

I see someone come out of the men's tent, and to my surprise it's the other assistant of the leading archaeologist. I never learned his name though I tried to during the trip over here, but he seemed occupied and I'd rather not interrupt him.

I think I can get on his good side, just in case something was to

jeopardise my work in the college. He goes to get a coffee and soon stands next to me. I look up and can see really how tall he is. I want to speak to him so badly, but I stop and can't think of anything to say to make the situation less awkward.

He then looks down and screams. This makes me jump, and when he is done screaming, he takes his time to gather his breath and look at me.

He asks with a shocked look on his face, 'How long have you been standing there?'

Quietly, I say, 'I—I was here before you came out of the tent.' I get my thoughts and ask the very one question that was blaring in my head: 'Why did you scream?'

He then gathers the rest of his composure and answers, 'I guess I didn't notice you and when I finally did it scared me, sorry.'

'I guess I'm quite small.'

He chuckles and smiles. We then introduce ourselves and have a small conversation before others wake up. His name is Wilson and he is nicer than expected. What really surprises me is that Jason keeps staring at him for the rest of the preparation of the excavation. I can't put a figure on what he was thinking when he was staring, but I know that whatever it is, it troubles him. Once he catches himself staring, he always looks uncomfortable and disgusted.

9: Jason

The preparation was only a day long, and on the next day the excavation began. We ventured out to find anything that could tell us about the history of the place. I was with my respective archaeologist and Emilia was with hers. We mainly got drinks or did the dirty work, but the archaeologist took time to teach us everything they could. We then found a cave near the middle of the island; I could hear the scientist we worked with whispering that it wasn't noticed before by the scientist who came previously.

Without a blink of hesitation, the lead archaeologist shouted enthusiastically, 'Everyone! We are going to explore this cave, but we need to split everyone up into groups for safety! Please get into those groups, and make sure no one is left behind!'

Everyone hurried to get into a group, and naturally I was told to go with the archaeologist I was working with. I luckily ended up with Emilia, and we decided to stick together since the people we had been working with left to find their friends. We stayed in silence mostly, baffled by everything we could see. The cave smelt musty and old, as if dead bodies had been there for centuries. The colour of the cave was a muddy green and purple themed, with various different symbols on it.

The pictures were unusual. They were of dark figures which looked to be coming out of different species and once they came out, they disappeared. Though the cave was deep and large, the echo was very unnoticeable, but with every step each person took, a loud crunch of the crushed rock pierced my ears. The air had a hint of burnt metal that lingered on my tongue, and only got stronger the further into the cave we went. The rocks were just like the grass outside – it was fragile and sharp.

The walls, on the other hand, were made of a type of concrete different to our own. That could possibly be because of the stone here – it was soft but structurally stable, as it could maintain a cave like this.

Emilia asked, 'it's amazing isn't it?' without averting her gaze from the cave. 'It is... I've never seen anything like it. Of course you haven't. This is our first excavation,' she replied, giggling as if the joke was good in the slightest. She looked at me, and the only thing I could do was look at her with disappointment.

We kept moving, and hoping to catch up with our group as we fell behind looking around. The further we walked, the more we were unsure of where the others were. In our own unrealistic optimism, we finally realised that we were lost.

10: Emilia

My hands are moving slowly and shaking at the thought of us being lost. The more I look at my hands, the more they start to blur. Tears accumulate in my eyes, and I fall to the ground.

Jason saw me fall. 'Emilia!' he shouts and runs to me, not knowing how to help

I start to breathe heavily and lose my balance whilst sitting down. The air seems to be running away from me like I have the plague, and my eyes seem to be breeding the ocean.

This is the moment I realise I am having a panic attack.

All I can think about is how we could be lost for long enough to die of hunger. The foreseeable death I would have in this cave screams in my head, to the point I can't avoid my fear. Jason holds my hand and stops me from falling, and he tells me everything will be okay, and that no one should have such a scared look on their face.

'We will be okay! They gave us an emergency phone, and luckily I was the second one holding it for our group.'

I look up and stop crying, but am still in fear. 'We can call them, and we can arrange to meet them and we will be okay, and we also have a survival kit'

'We *will* be ok.'

He says it with such sincerity that I calm down enough to sit on my own and stop shaking. I sit in silence with Jason comforting me until I can stand. I gather my thoughts. And think about how willing Jason was to me. I'd had the chance to help him when he was uncomfortable, and I didn't do anything to help.

But how can I help when I don't know what he is troubled about. So, I think I will ask and hope I don't make anything worse.

'Umm, hey... so I wanted to know why you were staring at the other assistant, Wilson?

Jason drops the bag that he's looking for the phone in and doesn't respond.

'Jason?' I ask, in wonder of why he stopped. I walk up to him and I suddenly see the same look I had when I was having a panic attack

He then stutters, 'I'm fine, but I don't want to talk about that.' He then makes a call to get help, and the entire time I am baffled as to why he would be so elusive about the topic.

I'm not sure what to do but offer my comfort and hope he tells me. 'Umm, if you are scared or something, I won't judge or say anything if you don't want me to.'

'Look, I get that you're trying to help, but it's my fault and my problem,' he says, suddenly moving away from eye contact immediately.

What did he mean by *his* fault? So, he's not mad at Wilson? I can't take the guilt anymore. I have to help him no matter what.

'I know you're troubled about something, and I didn't want to mention it before because I thought it was insensitive, but if we are going to be stuck here we have to help each other, like you did for me. Please let me help.'

He turns around looking quite shy, but his eyes overflow with suffering and rage. I stay still, determined to find out what is bothering him.

'My dad has very strong opinions about... you know, society and, well, people.' He then sits down, and I think he notices that he isn't really explaining anything. I go to sit down next to him, whilst we both wait for help to arrive.

When he finally feels comfortable to speak, he says, 'He doesn't want me to be friends with homosexuals.'

I don't really understand why he would say something like that, so I continue to question: 'Would you like to elaborate?'

He then looks at me and sternly says, 'What if his son was one of the people he hates? He might find his favourite fist again.'

11: Jason

The silence killed me as she thought about what I said. I'd been dreading the moment this came to be.

A nerve-racking choke would wake me up every morning and delay me from sleep every evening. My father's rage overflowed just like his cup of gin that he used to have regularly every morning. The scars I have from when he couldn't control himself can be hidden underneath my clothes, luckily. I never told anyone because the hurtful words my father said got to me at the time and still haunt me until this day. He expressed that anything he didn't like, I wouldn't be a part of. He controlled me at my every move, until I picked a career he wasn't a fan of. He hurt me the worst I have experienced my entire life living there. I moved out not too long ago. Even though I'm not with him, I still look at a knife and nearly black out.

Emilia sat there in silence for so long, I started to feel self-conscious. I stood up and huffed, 'Sorry I shouldn't have said anything. It was a mistake.'

I felt a hand pull me back, and Emilia said, 'Sorry I took so long to respond, I was just thinking about what that has to do with Wilson.' She looked at the floor and when she looked up, she asked, 'I don't know much but I can tell that you think about him a lot, but why do you always look disgusted?'

'Because I like a guy, Emilia, do you understand that I don't like to stand out? Plus isn't it weird?'

Emilia looked confused and exclaimed, 'You know that being gay isn't wrong, or weird, and definitely won't make you stand out. I know what it's like to not want to stand out but, even if you do, I will be there.'

She said it with such warm earnestness that I slowly felt more comfortable with telling Emilia more about me. 'Thanks,' I said gratefully. 'I needed that, but can we keep this between us.'

'Of course.'

The choking air that had a stiff grip on my throat let me breathe for the first time in years. The heartfelt comfort of someone close to me brought a new light to my evil shadow. I could become more accepting

of others, and more importantly myself. It would take a while, but I can do it.

We waited for help to arrive, but they couldn't find us. We decided to find out where we were, but not go too far out. I went left and Emilia went right. I looked and looked, but couldn't find anything that would help us at all.

I decided to go find Emilia and when I found her—

'EMILIA! LOOK OUT—!'

“
 I was wondering
 whether you might
 perform a ritual
 to find the murderer
 going around,
 for your sake,
 and the sake of the
 rest of humanity.
 ”

A Twisted Tale

by Astrid

As the bodkin was plunged deeper into the lifeless body, the faint sound of hooves were heard – the rhythmic sound rapidly increasing by the second. Gobsmacked by the sudden appearance of the castle guards, the young woman cautiously got up from her previous position on the greenwood floor, dusting off the leaves from the joint between her forearm and upper arm. She swiftly grabbed the knife previously placed in the old man’s chest and ran away, hoping to forget about the peccant act just performed whilst taking no notice of the blood dripping from her arm to her lace corset. Another death occurred that night, the fourth murder of that year in the small yet infamous village of Steveville. The fact all the targets were all wealthy, elderly men (whose expiry date was soon) couldn’t have been a coincidence, albeit there was no possible explanation for their deaths.

The sun was starting to set, sea smoke started surrounding the cottage – that highly resembled a fairy tale cabin – in which Apheleia resided. Her smooth unbruised legs were covered with the thin velvet material of her frock. Despite the gloomy weather, she had an almost ungodly glow to her. She was seen as one of the most ethereal women in the village yet she was of a lower condition simply because of her race. A lady of colour in the 19th century means getting a harder life than you expected.

Being called many racist terms (which are rather unspeakable because of the level of vileness) is not generally seen as the ideal existence.

Making sure to close the wooden door adorned with dead flowers and embellished with marks from people who hadn't particularly taken a liking to her, Apheleia rushed to her room, filled with glims¹. She sat crossed-legged, lit up a strong-smelling wax glim and chanted about finding a lover. The dark-haired beauty continued with the ritual, hoping she'd find true love. As the candle was about to fully melt – the indication that her love spell had worked – a knocking on the door woke her up from her daze. Even though the heat of the flame had not fully vaporized the wax molecules and reacted with the oxygen of the air, she knew couldn't delay the duration of welcoming the uninvited guest unless she wanted to be without life. Debating whether she wanted to ruin her spell or face an almost definite chance of joining the dead, she strode to the hinged barrier at the entrance.

Esther Devenigh, also known as the wealthiest woman in Steveville, once again knocked on the door – her annoyance growing by the second. The door cautiously was opened, and as Esther was about to yell at the young woman, she immediately froze. Completely stunned and speechless at Apheleia's fairness², she gained confidence and asked the also wide-eyed lady to colloque³. Broken from her astonishment, she reluctantly let her in – judging from the expensive silks used in her corset that she was prosperous. Esther's over-critical emerald orbs didn't help with the matter; in fact, it made her seem like a quidnunc⁴. Blue sapphires scanned the internal decor of the small house as she stepped in, a look of disgust displayed on the woman's face. Flicking a strand of her auburn hair, she stopped being impolite and instead

1 candles

2 beauty

3 talk confidentially

4 person who gossips

plastered a tight smile on her face whilst she gracefully spun around to face Apheleia.

'I would rather get burnt alive than spend another second of my life in this filthy excuse of an abode, so please skip the introductions and let us just finish this as quickly as possible!' Esther spoke with all the fake politeness she could muster. 'I need some bane⁵ – the highest quality of course, oh and make sure it has no scent... also be a darling and make me a cup of tea... I'm rather parched.'

Apheleia just rolled her eyes and did not bother proving her innocence, wanting to get this over and done with. Mixing some herbs with water, Apheleia stretched her arm to reach for the bane shoved in a cabinet. As soon as the auburn-haired girl had a sip of the tea, she swallowed it with distaste and placed the bone china cup on the wooden table. She took the bane, shoved some silver in the hands belonging to the owner of the house and departed. As she departed a pair of brown eyes followed her movement. The innocent skips belonging to Esther contrasted deeply with her sinister thoughts.

'Esther Devenigh Dimitri,' said the aged man with greying hair, catching the said girl in startlement.

'Greetings, Mr. Taylor!' Esther announced with a light curtsy, scowling when the opulent individual took a quick glance at his pocket watch.

A broad smile was a reply to the acknowledgement – but was more like a punishment to Esther, as the sight of crooked and stained teeth made her grimace. The placement of a veined hand on her arm had Esther in a cloud of anxiety. Stirring in uneasiness, Esther hummed as a response to the wrinkled male's interrogation about her husband.

Like a storm of snow at the start of summertime, a slap was placed on the woman's face (by none other than the over-privileged 'gentleman'),

5 poison

breaking the calmness of the atmosphere. Eyes glistening with fluorescent tears and anger pumping with each second that passed, Esther got a hold of Mr. Taylor's throat and applied great pressure whilst taking out the dagger located on a band around her upper thigh. Skilfully, the bladed knife was spun and thrust into the man's heart, the weapon getting stained with blood. As the last choke was heard, a kick was the cause of the dead body to fall in the river and coloured both the river and the woman's face.

Racing to the castle with delicate footsteps after washing her hands in the scarlet river, Esther was like a ballerina leaping to finish her scene. The light pirouette of her mind led her to misplace her bane, the small bottle of poison rolling down the beorg⁶ of the evergreen holt⁷ and eventually settling at the trunk of a tree.

The young woman sighed again and looked around at the world in which she lived, thinking back to the incident that took place hardly a week ago. She laid in her field of flowers, most of the rows of tulips and orchids being half dead – as an occurrence of both the lack of sun and intensive care. She thought back to the unfair treatment towards her as she stared intensely at her cottage. The sweat⁸ stone abode contrasted with the colourful interior inside – a Cézanne painting. Gamol⁹ potions and books were stacked on various shelves. In every region, an outcast would have to paint their house the darkest shade of black so everyone is aware of their lower status. You would be cast as different for reasons such as having alternative views or even being an unmarried woman.

The gloomy atmosphere added to Apheleia's despair, and her frown turned even deeper. She gazed at the castle that was practically invisible

6 mountain, hill

7 woods, forest

8 dark, black

9 old, ancient

from her field of vision because of the wolcen¹⁰ partially covering the large medieval building. Almost in a trance she stared longingly at the palace, suddenly reminding herself of the king's marriage that had occurred under half a decade ago. Even though it had been about five years, Apheleia had not been graced with the chance of meeting the casere's¹¹ wife. Much to her displeasure, she had remembered about the connection which she and the beloved ruler had shared, and unfortunately her identity had been revealed before she had the opportunity to walk down the aisle. Blinded by love, the king had fallen right into her trap and she would have received the power and tir¹², which she had yearned for, if it wasn't for the wretched servant. Lost in thought about the woman who visited her home, she heard the sound of bells ringing, alarming society of the curfew that had been recently commissioned due to the reduction of the population. Jumping in fear she hastily ran towards her cottage – dropping the half-plucked daisy.

Rushing to open the door of her cottage, Apheleia was tripping over her own feet whilst she tried to tug her white pump on her foot. After almost knocking over a lamp placed nearby on a wooden table, she made sure to be more cautious about her surroundings. Squinting to look at the time displayed on the clock, she quickly jolted her eyes open in panic when she realised it was already evening. She hurried around the room and searched for anything, any proof that showed that she was not extremely tardy. In answer to her call, a ray of sunlight lit up her chamber. With a sigh of relief, she recalled back to the time when the upper class crowd bludgeoned into her abode and broke many of her valuables including her mothers' clock.

Walking gently to her garden, Apheleia made sure to water her various vegetables and fragile flowers. She was just about to head to the

10 clouds

11 emperor

12 glory

castle when she heard the snap of a twig. Turning her head to the source of the sudden sound, her eyes widened in astonishment when she observed the rarest and most beautiful creature: a fallow deer. Not wanting to scare the antlered animal away, she reached for some acorns she previously saw scattered on the ground and kindly offered it to the doe.

Dusting the snow off my hinds, I spotted a few acorns sparsely scattered across the ground. Even though my usual preference is grass and leaves or a few wyrt¹³ – acorns would have to do. I have a strong hatred towards the seasons of winter and autumn because my favourite form of food happens to be grass (thought I'm not rather picky), and it can tend to choke in our throats like needles during dry seasons. Currently being in between the leaves falling and the temperatures decreasing, me and my family were very displeased. Trotting to the location of my supper, I noticed a glow – a really beorht¹⁴ glow.

Normally, I would have immediately galloped away. However, something was pulling me in and prevented me to leave – it was either the glow or the food. It was most likely the latter. Despite having one of the best eyesights in the whole woodland, I struggled to see what or who was walking towards me, the light blinding me. A moment or two later, I peeled my eyes open and saw the most alluring creature in this whole world. Her hair tumbled down her back in small waves and her brown skin shone in contrast with the dreary weather. It was a human. My mother has told me that they are downright wicked, but – ignoring that thought – I still just gazed delightfully at her. I expected her to scream and treat me like a deer¹⁵. The human smiled softly looking directly at me, her outstretched hand filled with berries.

Signalling me to come forwards, I was ready to accept her offer of the

¹³ herb, plant

¹⁴ bright

¹⁵ wild animal

variety of red and blue fruit. Just as I was about to walk in the direction of the young woman, my peripheral sight saw two men with bows and arrows situated in the crevice of their elbows. Hastily, I stotted away, not wanting to be hunted and eaten for the cruel men's supper. My antler lightly grazed the oak tree whilst I got ready to jump and swim under the freezing water. The things I do to not get eaten. Talking about supper, I really craved those berries in the human's hand and I await the day in which I get to see her again. Wenfully¹⁶, my dear brothers and sisters would not mind the lack of food after they hear my fascinating tale.

Apheleia finally arrived at the castle with great tardiness and a lack of breath after reassuring the castle hunters that the deer wasn't any form of danger. She tried to slow down her panting and instead focused on the male with a raised eyebrow staring at her in disapproval. With an excessive speed and urgency, the young woman bowed and stated 'your majesty'. You could hear the forced respect in her tone albeit the mockery was incredibly evident. After she received a lecture by the king on her inappropriate appearance and unacceptable behaviour – which she rolled her eyes at – she finally decided to cut to the chase. 'What might be the purpose for my needed arrival, other than to be graced with the pleasure of meeting you, of course?'

Atlas Dimitri, the King of Steveville, had an immediate response to the question asked, almost as if he prepared for this exact scenario. His lengthy speech about the recent killings of the residents came to a sudden halt when Apheleia's face scrunched up in pure confusion. Questioning about her need to know this, her frown deepened mirroring her lack of interest in this case. 'Last night, I thought back to the past and the fact you were and still are a... what would you call it... a witch? Therefore, I was wondering whether you might perform a ritual to find the murderer going around, for your sake and the sake of the rest of

¹⁶ hopefully

humanity.’ Atlas choked it out, knowing how much his past lover hated the title of ‘witch’.

‘No.’ The female’s reply was quick and no trace of hesitance was found.

Unfortunately, Apheleia’s reply did not meet up to the emperor’s expectations. ‘What did you just say!’ the masculine voice boomed out. In an attempt to trap the young girl, the man moved a step towards her.

‘I said no,’ Apheleia strongly replied back, but her expression fully contrasted the confidence of her voice as she softly whimpered.

Rage was expressed on the monarch’s face whilst he closed the distance between them and pinned the girl’s arms to the wall. ‘Easily, I could have easily had you burned for being a witch, but no – I sympathised with you and did you a huge favour, so do me a favour and find out what the cause of these deaths are or I will personally make sure you end up like the victims of the murderer!’

After what felt like a few hours, Atlas finally let the woman’s arms loose. Immediately gazing at the bruise forming from the harsh grip of the male, Apheleia wiped the tears from her dark eyes. ‘I will do it,’ she softly whispered.

At the sound of this, the ends of the king’s mouth curled up in a sinister smirk. ‘It’s not like I had a choice,’ Apheleia muttered under her breath. Choosing to ignore her impolite remark, Atlas led her to a more secluded place in the castle.

Concentrated in dead silence, the sound of the chilly breeze could be heard in the room Apheleia currently resided in. The heavy breaths of the king could be heard as he stared hardly at the focused woman. His patience was not the only thing getting shorter by the second, as his temper was rapidly rising until a gasp could be heard from the witch. A gasp as quiet as a mouse albeit audible in the tranquil space. In an instant, Atlas was directly in her gaze of vision, questioning about what she saw. However, the girl paid no attention to him and instead thought back to the vision, hoping what she saw was just a trick of her mind.

Walking back to the forest, the vision still haunted her thoughts, refusing to leave. Her mind now the vines looped around a tall oak tree, it trailed off back to the adventure spent at the castle. Apheleia had to be dishonest to her king. Even though she believed the monarchy was corrupt, she still has the faintest respect for him. The lie was persuadable enough for the king to accept, making Aphia believe that she was a great liar, but if we were being honest, it was most likely that the king just lacked common sense. The murderer was now seen to be a lanky pale man... but she was the only one who knew instead of lanky, they were graceful and instead of short brown hair, they had the most striking locks of auburn. You could never miss the locks of auburn!

The door banged with tedious strides. The door was opened so Esther could catch a sight of Apheleia with a determined yet puzzled expression captured on her face. Without letting the young woman speak, the door was shut by Esther. Deciding that the visitor wasn’t adequate enough for her time and company, Esther went back to simply staring outside the glass window without a wonder in her delicate mind.

A creak of the floor and a light sniffle was all the indication Esther needed to know that the young woman who was recently standing outside her door, hands clasped and head held high, was currently invading her privacy. She tightly tilted her head and stared at the girl, in contrast to her previous position; she now stood stark straight, hand awkwardly trying to find a comfortable place to rest and head bowed down as a solution to avoid eye contact with eyes as blue as the soft waves of an ocean: calm but filled with a storm.

‘I know you are the one in charge of thy kingdom’s sufferings,’ Apheleia approached in a hushed tone, anger seeping through her words.

‘Pardon me,’ Esther replied, face morphed in obliviousness.

‘The murders – it was all you and don’t try to deny it. It should have been suspected ever since you bought bane from me!’

Heading to the door with quick strides, a hand was felt on the bare skin of the woman's forearm. Rotating her body to glance at the intruding source of contacts, she gazed at pale skin stained with tears flowing out of beautiful blue eyes, eyelashes collected in small bunches due to the moisture of the excessive shedding of tears.

'Please, I beg with all my might... don't tell any of this to my husband,' Esther, now on her knees, spoke through multiple hiccups.

'Husband?' Apheleia repeated, the question echoing with disappointment incredibly laced with the simple title.

'The king, Atlas,' Esther replied, too busy crying to notice the colour draining from Apheleia's face. 'Look, let me explain – I would never kill anyone without a valid reason. My mother, God bless her soul, worked as a maid in this castle. The men in this castle murdered her – I saw it with my own two eyes. I vowed to claim revenge and bring justice to my mother, no matter the outcome.'

Sympathising with her, Apheleia related somewhat to her story and Esther's persuasive whines barely helped with the matter. The now-conflicted girl decided to temporarily cover for the king's wife. Instead of lingering on her thoughts, she engulfed the girl in her arms, Esther's auburn hair getting shaped with the nape of her neck. No words were exchanged as they sat still. Apheleia's heavy breaths were the only sound audible while she shuffled – a way to ease the tension.

These past chain of events – although melancholic – brought the two women together. Their routine now included seeing each other at least once a day, whether it included cooking together – whilst Apheleia overbaked the bread – or Esther getting mud on her white pumps with the simple thought of planting flowers. Pure euphoria was genuinely expressed on their faces, flowers as bright and colourful as ultraviolet lights laughing along with them, and the sun beamed with joy.

THUD! THUD! An explosion, that's what it was. The sudden outburst astounded Apheleia as Esther snapped. Dozens of plates were

thrown on the floor as the auburn haired girl violently cried. Streams of tears cascaded down her face, gracing her high cheekbones and prominent chin. Lamps were shoved in the process of Esther escaping the befuddled woman's home, with Apheleia chasing her out. I guess what they say is true – 'happiness is a butterfly'. The infrequent sentiment could make you feel wonders of bliss, but as soon as it is felt, it flies away and the grin displayed then turns into a frown.

My satin slippers, now soaked with the persistent rain, splashed against the everlasting puddles. The cold crystals blending in with my tears. Thuds forming in my head as I thought of all the memories we shared. My auburn hair, previously tugged with my hands, got pulled more as I expressed all the pressure piled on my back. Stringy and bedraggled, my hair swung back and forth, thumping my pale skin – that was reddened due to the sweet numbness.

Sniffing and sobbing, I rubbed my hands together to collect warmth. My pace of running matching the beat of the raindrops falling from the heavenly clouds – illuminated by the pale moonlight. Knowing that Apheleia was following me made my heart beat with both fear and love. Gazing up, I spotted at the castle and made sure to muster the most shaken expression I could. Eyes widened and my breaths constant, I knew I was physically ready to go in, mentally not so much. Staring dreamily at two adolescents, I desired to go back and live a life as innocently as theirs, throwing pebbles into the flowy water, no troubles on my mind. But life doesn't work that way, and youth slips away as you fall into a period of despair.

Following Esther wasn't easy for Apheleia, because of Esther's quickness and slyness – traits of a murderer, Apheleia reminded herself. This coaxed Apheleia to use a tracking spell so she knew where exactly Esther was heading. Unexpectedly, she saw the destination was the castle yet she entered without hesitance. However, the scene she witnessed was not what she expected in the slightest. Esther was nestled

in the king's arms, weeping into his chest. Resentful eyes belonging to no other than the king himself stared hardly at Apheleia. Betrayal featured in both their eyes.

'Guards, seize her!' Atlas said pointing directly at the girl with puzzled features situated on her freckled face.

Apheleia hurriedly retracted, 'W-what did I do?' Laughs belonging to the king boomed through the throne room; not humorously, but rather in disbelief.

'I still can't believe you're trying to prove your innocence. We know you're the murderer going around killing all the people associated with the castle. My wife would never lie to me; I should have never put my faith in you! Guards, burn the witch!'

As two of the guards held Apheleia's arms captive, she looked back at Esther and scoffed as she saw her wink, when the king turned his gaze the other way.

Accompanied (more like forced), Apheleia followed the guards, sadness and vulnerability glazed on her velvety face. The guards coming to a sudden halt however made Apheleia stop her temporary period of misery. Clearing the path which led to none other than the queen, the guards turned around simultaneously and headed inside the castle. Thinking she was free, Apeleia gave a stern twirl and was about to stride back to her residence, but a soft cough interrupted her movement.

Looking around with a bat of her eyelash, Apheleia saw Esther standing still with a tulip in her hand and an emotionless expression on her face.

'Thy mother?' Apheleia asked as her last resort of hope that she wasn't completely fooled.

'Dead, but she wasn't killed by the castle men,' Esther replied softly as the air stilled with their gentleness and instead moved in soft waves.

'Why would thou lie?' The only whisper heard and the only question playing in Apeleia's head.

Finding an appropriate answer, Esther answered the lingering inquiry, 'for the power, what other?'

It sounded more like a question than a statement to Apeleia, but the sight of the previous guards made her disregard the moment and instead sprint off, but not before catching a glimpse of sorrow in Esther's eyes.

Taking occasional glimpses at the man dressed in the finest of armour, Apeleia continued to sprint to her destined location. Constant pants and groans were heard from both of the now-breathless individuals. Due to her tragic vicissitude of fortune, the tulle of her silk gown was caught in a branch of an oak tree. Persistently, the young woman tugged on the hem of her delicate dress with as much force as she could exert. With teardrops spilling rapidly out of her doe-like eyes and her heartbeat increasing expeditiously by the second, she continued to wrench at the intricate material.

At the sound of a twig breaking, Apeleia starkly whipped her head to find the cause of the sound. The guard from earlier stared at her longingly as if he was in a trance, slightly cocking his head to the side. In a panic, Apeleia cast a spell under a breath – a spell which would cause the blonde guard to freeze for a few minutes. This spell was rather convenient during this particular situation, albeit it had major consequences – consequences Apeleia wouldn't face due to the future events about to occur.

Despite the guard being frozen, a look of consternation settled on Apeleia's flushed face. Hurriedly, she continued to pull at her dress looking around in panic, to make sure another guard sent by the king didn't find her. All of a sudden, something particular caught her eye – it was so small that you would easily skim past it; however it didn't go unnoticed by the young girl. A look of realisation graced Apeleia's features when she spotted the glass jar filled with bane. The same jar she gave Esther. Esther, who she still could not regret falling in love with, even after the amount of embarrassment and betrayal she felt.

Picking up the delicate jar she deeply sighed, pulling the cork situated in the tiny space of the jar opening with immense force. She sighed again and poured the brun¹⁷ liquid down her throat, swallowing it with great imperativeness. Her eyelids grew heavy and her breaths drastically grew less constant. The thud of a fragile and lifeless body falling to the ground was heard by the whole of Steveville however it did not have any impact on the residents of the village.

Well, except the woman with the auburn hair, crouched on the ground, her face swelling from the constant weeping as she stared at the female spread exquisitely in the isolated meadow, her deorc¹⁸ hair framing her blac¹⁹ face. Isolated excluding the still sobbing woman and the individual staring at her, wondering why his wife was crying over his past lover. He wondered as to why his bride was melancholic over an outcast when she was the cwen²⁰. I mean his wife was married to him – the cyning²¹.

17 purple, red

18 dark

19 pale

20 queen

21 king

Glossary

Old English vocabulary

Old English	Translation
Bane	Poison
Beorg	Mountain, hill
Beorht	Bright
Blac	Pale
Brun	Purple, red
Casere	Emperor
Collogue	Talk confidentially
Cwen	Queen
Cyning	King
Deor	Wild animal
Deorc	Dark
Fairness	Beauty
Gamol	Old, ancient
Glim	A candle
Holt	Woods, forest
Quidnunc	Person who gossips
Sweart	Dark, black
Tir	Glory
Wenfully	Hopefully
Wolcen	Clouds
Wyrft	Herb, plant

A Gentleman's Tale of Death

by Nathan

Stale cold air drifting, gliding, carrying the mid-autumn breeze high above, lightly kissing my rugged dark brown cheeks. The concoction of car fumes and human smog following suit tracing the night air. The lights fading and shifting amongst them, a cascade of bustling movement drearily scraping past. Being the master of Death does give one a very large perspective of their Human lives. But I must confess I do love them so, although they do bore me half to death. Although some are fascinating, I love seeing them grow, they make me feel happy amongst all my nothingness. I feel at home here; I do not feel alone.

Most of all overseeing the mundane world to keep it safe from Daemons does have a somewhat *loveliness* to it. I can never find a day boring. Lately these Daemons seem to be taking a huge interest in the mortal realm, many murdering and taking human forms, infiltrating their very existence. All whispering the same name, 'Asmodeus'. It is exciting... is it not this ambiguous character... oh, I do love when they come out to play. Although this Asmodeus is causing a lot of trepidation amongst the humans and I too am concerned. Daemons have never worked together like this before.

I jumped down from the spire just inches away from the edge of the ledge, peering down. It looked about 300ft down, but where is the fun in a 20ft jump. I brushed my hands down my suit, picking at the loose

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cotton strands, waving the other over my messy black mane. I delved my hand into my jacket pocket pulling out my favourite red Skittle, chewing it and swallowing it, then burning the empty packet in my palm. *Hmmm*. Peeling over the leather gloves, I slanted forward. Time to go to work.

I fell to the back alley of the church, the air racing past me, my arms outstretched wading through the thickness of it all. I crashed to the ground (kneeling like a damn superhero). I stood up hearing the late-night mass. Mother would be proud her little Death is still attending church. Well, at least near a church on a Sunday. I pulled out my phone to check if the world still needs me... and *ah* a miss call from Skye.

'Hey Dee, where are you? Just call soon and get out of whatever doom and gloom state you're in because we have another one, and... um— seems to be a very special one, this.' The message ended with her worry resonating in my head. If there is one thing I know about Skye, it's that she is never worried. Scared, even emotional at the best of times... so this must be something special indeed.

I headed towards my car, a pristine black 1970 Ford Mustang with hints of white for colour. I clambered in, texting Skye for the whereabouts of our 'special murder'. I opened the door as the fumes of heated leather and pine trees wafted, waving my hand over my face trying to save whatever sense I had left, slumping into the driver's seat. I looked to see the message from Skye for the address. *Buzz, buzz*. 'Piccadilly Circus.' What sick, twisted person has the senses to murder a poor person at this ungodly hour in one of the busiest areas of London? Oh, how fascinating. I felt my skin prick the hairs bristling my jacket with excitement, but before I set off, I delved my hand in rustling through the glove compartment, only to find empty wrappers. 'No, no, no,' I whispered hastily. 'Damn it I'm out.' I slumped back banging my head on the headrest. 'Where am I going to get them?' I sighed, reluctantly turning the key and setting off.

I turned the corner from Regent Street, the dark blue lights etching their way through the shadows. The bright billboards showed the new *Dark Ages* TV show, a mockery to what it was, I say. Shining a spotlight to the yellow tapes sectioning off the giant centre square, a bustle of cars lined up, police officers shakily muttering into radios pushing back the crowds, a dozen or two workers a sea of cheap suits and dresses mixed with the playful youth trying to excite their lives, worried faces twisting and turning whispering and muttering their theories, and of course the idiots holding cameras. I pulled into a spot, grabbing my coat from the back seat and calling Skye in the process. 'Hey Skye,' I chirped.

'Where the bloody hell are you, I've been standing here like a moron for like half an hour now waiting for your sorry behind. It's freezing,' she retorted.

'I was just thinking. You know me and my evening condescension on Humanity,' I cheerfully replied, quickly getting out and walking to the yellow tape.

'Just know you owe me for this. Done it too many times before... and to add to the good news, Daniels has started his prodding around the victim.'

I furrowed my brow, exhaling in frustration. 'Skye you have got to be kidding me. I- I- I can't work with that sweaty Oaf.'

'Look if you got here an *hour ago* then maybe you could have had your say, but no, you're late as usual.' Here I could sense the judgement piling in her voice. 'But look, just play nice, share your toys and maybe we won't have another cathedral incident.'

I laughed mockingly and hung up. Scraping my badge out of my jacket pocket almost putting it up in the officer's face, she waved me on in. I saw Skye by the Forensics tent with her bike helmet clutched in her hand, brown hair relaxed over her right shoulder, tensely stood, smouldering at me, her green eyes peering.

I swayed towards her childishly smiling, 'Hello bestie, quick question... you don't happen to have my spare—'

She smirked and pulled out the red beauties – a glistening beacon of perfectly blended chemicals. 'Yes, you 10-year-old, I still have them, still don't get why you like them as much.'

I snatched them out of her hand and opened the resealable bag, pulling one Skittle out.

'Well, you can talk with your Hello Kitty phone case I saw you trying to hide,' I teased. She scoffed, flicking her hair in resentment, turning swiftly towards the mass of white and green crowded around the body.

'Look, can you just not be Death for five minutes please,' she declared.

'Yes, I'll behave myself,' I muttered.

We both stopped as Daniels appeared from the mass of white overalls, 'What do you think you are doing here?' he spat out, looking us up and down folding his arms. *Mundie*.

'Well, Daniels, this is just a theory and please correct me on this, but I think I am about to do my bloody job,' I mocked, stepping close to him.

'I wouldn't call you a detective, freak' he chortled to himself. I clenched my fist, but Skye caught my arm.

'Daniels, cool it. Just tell everyone to step away, plus this freak collects more evidence than you wisecracks ever do.'

I smirked to myself, stepping away and allowing Daniels to storm off. I smiled down at Skye, she nodded in approval. We both stepped through to the centre square where we saw the body.

'Oh Jesus,' Skye nervously clenched. 'They told me it was something special, but I didn't expect this.'

She stood in awe. It laid there, mangled arms twisted and bruised, pushed to the side from the body painted red, what was left dripping slowly to the floor. His face pale, hints of blue blotched around his eyes; lips purple a canvas of fearful fright. Every pore in his body irradiating

a foul stench, making my insides churn. Then again you cannot expect a dead man to smell like strawberries and vanilla, now can you.

I stepped closer, noticing the carved marks etched into his chest – our killers' trademark. 'Do we have an identification?' I spoke, intrigued. Something about him seemed familiar. What was left of his complexion sparked the memory of the tree I used to climb in my youth, the bristled green leaves perking from the brown oak, the warm summer sun glistening creaking through the cracks of the branches, Madame Adelina my Nanny beckoning me down for lunch. *Happiness. Well, close enough to it.*

'Ummm... yeah he is a Bradley Adams, film editor just finished his shift, on his way to see his niece who lives not far, on Regent Street. We have confirmed it as a homicide. Still don't know how he got here, but this place has been deserted for the filming.' Her speech was paced. 'Estimated time of death around 8 to 9 pm. Witness reports say they found him while walking by,' she started, muttering to herself at the end, probably her condolences to the dead man.

I scoffed to myself.

'Well, get busy with your next thing then Dee,' she smiled childishly.

'Nexus, you mean,' I stepped over the numbered markers spaced around glancing back over to Skye. 'Do you have any theories, maybe you could beat me this time?' I smirked, staring at her playfully.

'Ha, HA!' She laughed mockingly. 'Look Poirot, I know it's like 50-0 to you, but no need to stamp on my intelligence every time.' She punched me in my arm. 'Just do your weird thing. Come on, I need to get home, remember.' She heaved out a heavy sigh. I forgot about her new blood lust. *Damn Vampires.*

'Just, make sure nobody is looking, can't imagine what people will do if they found out I was Death.'

She giggled at this, making me blush slightly. I brushed my hair behind my ear. I liked it when she laughed. She turned away, ushering

people away and leaving me alone. Peeling the black leather off my hands, I placed my hand gently on his head, focusing my mind to the last fleeting memories that flashed before he died.

This I call the Nexus, my innate ability to wander a dead mind searching for memories pre-mortem.

A concoction of childhood laughter and pale screams erupted in my head as his death started taking form in my mind. *There you go Bradley – talk to Uncle Death.* I overlooked as Bradley stumbled to the ground, an eerie shadow craned over him. ‘Please, I don’t know where he is. You must believe me, I haven’t seen him in 20 years.’

He stifled panic echoing from him. Come on Bradley, work with me here... who is it that killed you?

‘Oh Friar, don’t lie to me. I’ve already slaughtered your brothers and all that’s left is you.’ The shadow’s voice was deep and raspy, quite malevolent. ‘I know you gave him away those years ago, so for the last time Father, I implore you tell me’ He grabbed Bradley by the cuff dragging him to the centre square dumping him down.

‘Okay fine. Yes, I know the child you speak of, but I will die first before ever revealing where and who he is,’ Bradley spat back at the Shadow. The shadowed figure stepped forward, stepping over him. ‘I see. Well, I guess we have reached a stalemate,’ the shadow whispered coldly in his ear. ‘I’ll find him another way.’

Suddenly it all went black, the screeching returned, bouncing around in my head. I opened my eyes quickly... heaving, falling backwards as if a strong wind pushed me down. Skye rushed over in a fleet of panic.

‘Dee, you okay?’ She asked, helping me off the floor. ‘What happened in there?’

I started to calm my breath, looking around a little frantically. Daniels and the others glared in my direction. I could sense the judgement, all of them whispering *freak* under their breath.

I stood up, brushing the loose gravel and dirt of my suit, straightening my tie and hair. ‘Oh my, it’s him,’ I said, looking at the body now

suddenly realising who this man was. ‘Madame Adelina would meet this man every month.’ I placed my hand to my mouth in shock at my sudden revelation. ‘This goes deep Skye, and I don’t think you’re going to like this one,’ I added, solemnly looking at her puzzled face.

‘Dee, you’re not making any sense. Who is this? Talk slow this time.’ She stepped closer to me. ‘Start again.’

I breathed out and breathed in slowly collecting myself. ‘Our friend here is acquainted with my old Nanny Madame Adelina. You remember the tall lady always wore black... made you the soup you loved...’

‘Oh yeah, soup lady,’ she snickered ‘and that leads to Bradley Adams being—’

I cleared my throat. ‘I don’t know, but I remember he would come visit every so often to my home, and I was told to play outside or do something else away from their secret meetings.’ I paced over to the tent, leaning against the table propped up outside it. ‘But I do remember this one time I was bored and tried to eavesdrop, and I overheard them talking about Asmodeus and how he was getting stronger, trying to escape somewhere. But before I could hear the rest, Adelina got up, so I ran away.’ I bowed my head rubbing my eyes.

‘So, what does this mean about Bradley then?’ she asked, biting her lip in concern.

I tapped my finger on the table, trying to drum a beat to the racing thoughts still hurtling through my mind, bringing some order to the chaos. ‘In any case, this all goes deeper than I thought. These senseless murders are part of a larger game, Skye.’ I bowed my head rubbing my face in my palms. ‘When did being Death and becoming a crime-fighting detective become so hard, Skye?’ I chuckled lightly, looking at her.

She bobbed her head to the side, smirking. ‘I don’t know, probably after you became such a condescending douchebag, but maybe a little before that.’ She rubbed my arm, grabbing her helmet from the table. ‘Just, go home and rest, Dee, or whatever you do.’ She yawned,

stretching out her arms. 'Let's meet at Rosie's tomorrow at 10.'

I scoffed in approval, shaking my head. 'Oh, come on, I promise to get you a colouring book from the waiter.' I chuckled, walking with her to my car and her bike leaning against the wall adjacent.

'Well detective, I bid you a good night and good fortunes.' I bowed and she scoffed in reply, clambering onto her bike, saluting me with two fingers and then driving off. I watched her until she turned the corner. Opening the car door, I rested against the seat. Oh, Death, you do love to pick the unattainable and manage to find the unsolvable.

* * *

Ah. Rosie's Café – a gruelling part of Soho, where the food is so greasy that it could fry the next meal and where the drinks taste like they have been pasteurized in the sun... but a silver lining is their Earl Grey, borderline impeccable. I looked at the pink monstress standing between a Boots and newsagents, the sun leaking through the trees, grazing the window, adding hints of dull yellows to the bleak grey painted by the overlooking clouds. I creaked open the splintered pink door. The eruption of students complaining about tuition fees dragged towards me, in the corner a mass of the elder cohort either working or dining. What a pitiful sight. I opened the door to the chime of the bell, locating Skye sitting huddled against the wall by a small table. I stepped through, minding the chairs set out like landmines, manoeuvring past the occupied seats and staff.

'Hey Dee,' Skye chimed, as I took a seat slumping down on the squeaky metal.

'Busy,' I said annoyed. 'Blimey it's like school all over again.' I turned, staring down the human mess laid before me.

'Oh, come on Dee, it's not that bad. I mean, everyone loves the drinkable grease and sloppy orange juice,' she smirked, stirring her coffee gently. 'Besides, let's talk shop.' She leaned in. Like *that* makes it any less conspicuous.

I raised a hand to the waiter next to us, ordering a tea. 'Well, I was

doing some thinking last night. If Bradley is the man I remember, then Madame Adelina is the only possible key to this.' I noticed the waiter coming back with my order setting it down in front of me. 'Well, I was doing some digging into our deceased Mr Bradley – turns out he was an inferno guard.' I peered at her intently.

She sat back shocked. She gulped staring down.

'Wait, they're real?' she questioned stirring in her seat. 'I thought they were just a fairy tale; I mean, we used to sing that rhyme about them as children.'

I sat back, still gently sipping, smiling. I dipped my hand into my pocket dragging the folded document pushing it along the table to Skye.

'What's this?' she asked swiftly, picking up the paper.

'The prophecy to put all other prophecies to shame,' I said, pursing my lips to my tea. 'This describes the end of the world in a week's time.'

She still looked, confused furrowing her brow.

I continued. 'Well, it says here that the great being Asmodeus will rise when the chains are broken and smite the world, raising a new age of darkness upon the world.' I shuffled in my seat, still looking at her blank expression.

'But Dee, you don't really mean that... like, we have come across a lot of these before and they have all been wrong,' she desperately sputtered out. 'No. No I don't believe you, Dee. Come on.' She shook her head, trembling. If only you were right, I thought to myself.

'Skye, I wish it were true, but all signs point to this.' I brushed my hand across my mouth. 'The death of the *inferno* guard, the markings on the bodies and now our dear mystery friend Asmodeus.' I breathed a heavy sigh, reaching out to hold her folded hands. 'Look, last night I was as scared as you. Honestly, I was,' I said softly. 'But right now we can't be scared – we need to be strong and stop Asmodeus and save the world.' I patted her hands as she started to sit upright.

She nodded at me and smiled. There's my detective, I thought to myself smirking along with her.

'Even if the world is going to end, we can stop it, but hey, I have something that can help us with this.' I abruptly got up and dragged her towards the door as we shuffled past the crowd milling around the café.

Opening the door, the afternoon sun shone, flashing blue spots in my eyes as the dreary London bustle came into a clear focus. 'I parked my car in the carpark just up there.' I pointed and she nodded as we both started strolling towards the concrete mass. It's been a while since I have been out and about amongst the mortal coil. I mean, they are just still so fascinating – how can they keep going with their dreary day-to-days? I started thinking about the prophecy I had folded in my breast pocket, tucked away like a handkerchief. How am I going to pull this one off? This is not going to be the run-of-the-mill catch-the-bad-guy, have-a-pint-and-chill-out; it is the whole bloody world at stake. No more innocent people to be sarcastic to, no more humans to belittle and no more Skittles. I halted at that thought. Everything seemed so much more important now, but really it was because I wanted to protect Skye. I do all that I do for her, really.

'Is it this... turn up here, Dee,' she asked, about to turn the corner to the carpark.

I nodded, catching up to her, snapping back to reality. The barren carpark came into view – nothing but cracked gravel and chipped white lines laying wake on the floor. The odd stain painting on the walls, the winding road paving up to the upper floors, the stale air mixed with alcohol and cheap tobacco clumped together in the air. I could taste the foul air – a mix of tar and car fumes. Coughing the almost poisonous odour out of my system, I ushered Skye closer to my car. 'Right, you ready for my big surprise?' I said, rubbing my hands vigorously together, a manic smile on my face.

'Yeah, Dee, sure,' she said, a little confused, stepping closer. I dipped my hand into my trouser pocket, fishing out the car keys. I opened the passenger side door, dragging out the squirming man shuffling in my hand, tied and gagged, trying to get out of my clutch as I threw him on

the floor next to Skye's feet. His shirt was crumpled and greasy, reflecting his slicked back hair all tangled and dry, his eyes a shade of red which balanced the pink flustered on his cheeks. 'Say 'hello' to a Mr Nathan Wright, a slime bag drug dealer who I found near our crime scene.' I looked chuffed with myself, slowly turning to see her shocked expression. She took a step back.

'Dee, what the hell were you thinking? We don't do this to people even if they are bad, come on!' She looked at me furiously.

'I know, I know,' I said defensively. 'I mean, I still don't know why we don't do this, but that's beside the point. Just look at the markings.' I pointed at his right arm, which was riddled with tattoos and markings.

'So, he's a Daemon,' she said, calming down a little. 'But that doesn't explain why you have him tied up and thrown in the back of your boot, Dee.' She paced towards me, eyes peering.

'Look, I know this isn't my finest hour, but whilst I was doing some thinking last night, I saw this piece of crap dealing his product out and then he took a call.' I leaned back on the car. 'When, what do you, know our man of the hour mentions the name Asmodeus, which was all I needed to *apprehend* him and drag him here.'

'So, what then Batman?' she uttered mockingly, still looking at me a little angrily.

'We interrogate him. I know he knows something that he didn't tell me yesterday, and I thought I could use your thoughts on this.' I stepped over him and made my way towards Skye. 'Look, just trust me on this – he knows something, I can feel it.' I looked pleadingly into her eyes.

Finally, she caved, as my batting eyelids broke her stern expression.

'Fine, Dee. I trust you, but it better be worth it.' She relaxed her arms and helped me prop Nathan against the car boot. I untied the rope from his hands and pulled the cloth from his mouth. I stopped as spit hurled from his mouth, landing and dribbling down my cheek. I clenched my fist, connecting it to his side. He heaved as I took a step back.

He laughed coughing a raspy breath escaping his mouth 'You pack a

punch, don't you Death?' he said, his gravelly voice beckoning across the carpark. I gently rubbed my knuckle, staring indignantly at him, although shocked that he knew my name

'Oh, don't look surprised,' he smirked coldly. 'We all know the great detective and his creature that scurries by him.' He laughed manically. I went to lunge at him, but Skye held me back.

'Look... We can't – no matter how much he deserves it – beat him senselessly, so pull it together and let's get what we need from him,' she whispered softly, shaking my arm. I nodded, half-heartedly straightening my suit jacket and tie.

'Right then!' I exclaimed, clapping my hands together, swaying towards the car, smiling feverishly. I clasped my hand down gently on the car. 'Tell me what you know about Asmodeus and I'll promise I might let you walk out of here instead of crawl,' I said close to his face, gritting my teeth. 'If you have any idea who I am, you'll know that Death isn't patient.' I backed away, slowly letting my frustration linger around him, trying to find a crack in his façade.

He stood there in silence watching me

Skye tapped her foot impatiently, looking at me with confusion.

'Dee, I hope you have something more than that.' She leaned forward as if forcing me to do something else.

I thought for a moment, looking around until my eyes caught the glimpse of the metal pole leaning ever so gracefully on the dumpster, as if beckoning me to slam it over his head.

'This'll do,' I whispered to her, striding over, childishly grabbing the pole. I paced towards Nathan who had now started to nervously twist against the car. 'Oh, so you have noticed my new toy,' I said, smiling wildly, waving the pole and clunking it against the floor like a cane. 'Right. Skye, at your discretion, will you allow me to use ulterior methods to make this dirtbag talk?' I spun round to her, awaiting a reply as she anxiously looked at me deciding.

'I mean, can I say yes... no. Can I take a call and by all means leave

you here not knowing what went on, sure.' She smirked at me walking off into the distance.

I turned hastily towards him, watching the fear twinge in his eye as I patted the pole delicately in my palm.

'You... you can't do this; they'll take you off the job,' he nervously spluttered, beginning to squirm again.

'Now,' I coldly whispered, craning over him. 'You have two options Nathan, and I know you're a smart bloke so make the right decision. You have 5 seconds to tell me everything you know,' I licked my lips still gazing down at him, hands clenched to the hood of the car, 'or, I beat you oh-so-heavily with this here pole until you start to sing.' I spat next to him, pushing off the car, now gripping the pole with all my might, ready to swing. 'I know you Daemons have a high pain threshold, so the first few might just tickle.'

I raised the pole above my head until he screamed out in a plea of safety,

'OKAY! OKAY!' he heaved out, fear struck across him, his face turning a dark shade of red. I threw the pole away, wiping my brow on the back of my arm, stifling a laugh.

'I must say I'm a little disappointed, Nathan. I would have thought you would let me have some fun,' I shrugged back, cracking my neck. 'So, come now, why did you mention Asmodeus last night?' He relaxed against the car still heavily panting, sniffing as he gathered himself, wiping the sweat dripping from his face.

'I helped him find those guards, he told me if I did that, he could help me stay here and not go back.' I stood intently listening as he began breathing slowly again. 'I don't care what you do with me, Death, but know this is one fight you can't win.' He snickered, stepping towards me.

'How's that, exactly?' I replied, stepping back from the foul stench that escaped his mouth.

He straightened his shirt and hair sniffing, he looked up smiling. 'Firstly, Humans destroyed our Kind, Death. They slaughtered

thousands of us, and now you swear to protect them from the end?' He sneered, patting down his hair into a neat straight pattern. 'Asmodeus will bring blood and fire and purge this world of them. Daemons and dark creatures alike will finally be given what was ours back.' He went back and leaned on the car, still carrying the same stupid smirk. 'Secondly, you won't have your pet by your side for this one, *Dee*.'

I lunged forward grabbing his collar.

'Don't you dare—' I spat out, but was stopped as I heard a scream coming from outside.

I ran frantically, stopping to see Skye being pulled into a murky white van. People stopped, gasping at the sight, while I stood frozen in shock, my body limp from fear.

'NO!' I screamed into the air as the van screeched off, tires smoking. I spun quickly, frantically pacing back to the carpark. I sparked a dark flame in my palm ready to burn Nathan, but stopped as the dark Mustang was left empty. He'd gone.

Content Notes

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Death into Realisation	Zombies, Ghosts
The Telling of Liam Calamander	Gore, Murder
The Invasion	Zombies, Violence
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The Creature of Loneliness	Gore, Death
The Good Werewolf	Murder
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The Shadow Within	Suicidal thoughts, Panic attack, Brief description of abuse
A Twisted Tale	Murder, Suicide
A Gentleman's Tale of Death	Death, Murder, Torture

Thanks and Acknowledgements

A lot of people made this programme and anthology possible! Official Ministerial thanks to:

Charlotte Harrison at Bishop Challoner School, whose dedication to the imaginations of her students is inspiring, and made the club possible even in a pandemic.

Our wonderful team of **writing mentors**, who volunteered their time to offer thoughtful, enthusiastic and encouraging feedback throughout the term – even though they never got to meet the writers. You’ve helped these young writers create an extraordinary book! **Grace Atkinson, Kathrine Bancroft, Ciara Briggs, Charlotte Cromie, Michelle Czechak, Patricia Gorczak, Alex Henson, Delia Lloyd, Katie Mason, Jane Rollason, Veena Saunder, Nadia Sardar, Nicolai Schuemann, Heidi K Smith, Xain Storey, Julia Tuffs** and **Anna Zabow**.

Volunteer editor **Mara Alperin**, for carefully proofreading and structuring this anthology.

Lily Ash Sakula, for creating illustrations that brought the programme to life.

Holly Gillanders, Ministry of Stories’ Education Programme Manager, who organised and supported behind the scenes, and made sure everything ran smoothly.

All the teachers and families who supported the writers in taking part.



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