

*November 21, 1979 (Later That Morning)*

After taking a moment to reorient myself following the unexpected (not to mention unsettling) change in my circumstances, I carefully examined the room in which Midge's trickery had confined me.

Four plain walls, fashioned from large concrete blocks (which on first glance I had taken to be stone), sheathed in a dull industrial beige paint marked in various places by multiple dark shapes, some of them resembling handprints, the rest streaks and spatters like the patterns blood makes after spraying from a freshly opened wound.

The bulb I had turned on only moments before hung from a ceiling composed of a series of rectangular metal plates supported by beams spotted with rust. There was no furniture other than the cot, its framework a series of what looked to be iron pipes welded together and bolted into the floor. That and the chamber pot, combined with some filthy cheap metal shelving strewn with cobwebs, constituted the entirety of the decor. It looked for all the world like an abandoned bomb shelter from the 1950's.

Finished with my examination of the room, I returned my attention to the sole exit, a metallic portcullis that reminded me of one of those large doors used for walk-in refrigerators, save that it lacked a handle on my side. A small glass window reinforced with a wire lattice would have allowed me a view of the stairway down which I had come, had it not been blocked by a small sliding panel, like something one might see in a mental institution. A large splotch had stained the concrete floor just this side of the threshold. Another bloodstain, I assumed. The metal facing on my side (the opposite having been plain wood) overlapped the narrow gap where door met frame, discouraging any effort to pry it open, assuming one possessed the tools with which to make such an attempt in the first place. An intimidating portal, to be sure.

*Please, dear. You've ripped the hinges from far more imposing gateways than this in the past.*

True enough. The keyword being *ripped*, however. While I had no (well, not much) doubt I could free myself, given sufficient time, that was the crux of the matter. Time. Or, rather, the absence of it which would surely follow the noise (and subsequent) attention any effort to free myself would almost certainly generate.

Which begged another question. Was my internment a product of chance? A fortuitous opportunity? A random bit of good fortune on the part of my captors? Or bad luck on mine? Did Midge and her cohorts know what, and most especially who, they now held in captivity?

*If they know who we are or, lacking that, what we are, then it is safe to assume that they will be prepared to deal with any attempt on our part to escape. So, shall we roll the dice and see what comes up?*

But how could they know? After all, my plane had been blown out of the sky, and those who had arranged the bombing had done so with the expectation that I would perish, if not in the initial explosion then in the aftermath to follow. That I had not I could only attribute to the plane unexpectedly crash landing in a lake, coupled with the difficulty of killing a being who was, technically, already dead. At least, as humans view death.

*There is another possibility, you know . . .*

I shook my head. While He has seen to the preservation of my life twice in the past, each time there had been no doubt as to Who was responsible. Subtlety has never been His strong suit. Trust me on this.

*The two times that you know of, you mean.*

I shrugged, such speculations were pointless. Whatever my captors knew or did not know about me changed nothing of consequence, I still had to escape as quickly as possible. The problem was that in a very short time dawn would break, and even if I did manage to break down that vault of a door before drawing attention, I still could not leave while the sun was up.

Which meant I had to remain in this room until nightfall, at which time there would be an almost certain confrontation with the inhabitants of this place, a sobering consideration. For while we Breed are hard to kill, hard does not translate to 'impossible'. A blow with an edged weapon strong enough to sever the neck, say, or a bullet of sufficient caliber to explode my head like an overripe cantaloupe would end my life as quickly as it would any human's. And even if I survived such a wound (a questionable premise) such a high degree of brain trauma might result in the destruction of my identity, the bulk of my memories of who and what I am, even if--given time--my physical body itself were to heal from the injury.

Such things have happened before, you see.

No, I decided. Odds were that these people thought of me as just another helpless victim, an illusion which--should I shatter it at the wrong moment--would create more problems than it solved. Annoying though it was, I realized that my safest option would be to play into their likely assumptions of my relative helplessness. For the time being, at least.

I switched my attention to my satchel. Midge, in leading me down to this mousetrap of a room, had apparently decided that any attempt to gain possession of my bag prior to making me a prisoner would be far too risky a proposition. Of course she had no way of knowing whether or not it contained a weapon (it didn't), but since my story was that I had been robbed, she probably found it reasonable to assume I was unarmed. But since 'probably' does not mean definitely, I felt

confident I could count on an attempt to take possession of it, perhaps very soon now.

Which led me to wonder, what about the deputy? Was he a partner in my kidnapping? Most likely so, though I had to allow for the possibility that this might not be the case.

Mulling over that question led me to ponder another, how many other women had been confined to this room prior to my own incarceration? And what had happened to them?

Irritated by my lack of information, I got up, then walked back to the door and curled against the bottom with one side of my face pressed flat against it, unnecessary breath stilled, ears attuned. It has been said that the White Lady can hear the heartbeat of a moth as it flutters in the night, and her blood flows (so to speak) in my veins. I listened, ear to metal, quiet as a stone.

Nothing.

*Perhaps she went back to bed.*

I checked my watch. Almost five am. At that time of the year another sixteen hours would have guaranteed a darkness sufficient to allow me to escape. There would almost certainly be bodies to account for afterwards, since Midge and her cohorts would not willingly allow me to leave, but with the old truck outside and enough lead time I believed I could put considerable distance between myself and this place long before any outsiders discovered anything amiss. Now all there was to do was wait until, inevitably, one or more of my jailers waltzed through that metal door.

*Assuming, of course, that they're unprepared for hostilities. And what do we suppose the odds are of that, my dear?*

Getting to my feet, I returned to the cot. "Goddammit," I muttered, kicking the chamberpot across the room.

The empty container banged and rattled across the floor as I flounced down onto the smelly, cardboard-thin mattress. Then, while adjusting my left buttock to avoid a broken spring, I heard the faintest of whispers. "Who's there?"

Immediately I sprang to my feet, ears straining.

"Where are you?" I called out, louder no doubt than necessary, but I wanted to make certain I was heard.

Nothing. Only a prolonged silence, until I began to wonder if I had somehow imagined the voice.

Then I heard it again. "I'm under the floor."

I stared down at the surface beneath my bare feet, an ancient slab of concrete painted the same dull, uninspiring color as the walls. Had the owner of the voice, female by the sound of it (and a young female at that) been buried alive? I

suppressed the image (not to mention the momentary panic it inspired), then looked up.

There. A small vent in the ceiling.

"Who are you?" I asked in a low whisper, mindful now of being overheard. "And why are you under the floor?"

More silence. I was about to repeat myself more loudly when I heard the girl reply. "My name's Charity," she said, "and I'm under the floor because that's where they keep me."

As I focused on the barely audible voice I heard breathing, short staccato breaths like the panting of an animal, accompanied by a heartbeat as rapid as a xylophone concerto.

"They used to keep me locked up in the closet, until they opened the door one day and caught me halfway through a hole where I'd pulled some boards off the back wall," the girl said, "so now they keep me under the floor, closed off with a trapdoor and a padlock so I can't get out. Unless they want to use me, that is, or I have to go to the bathroom." The girl made a gulping sound, as though swallowing a sob. "But they always put me back."

Use? "So you're a prisoner too?"

Again the breathing. "Yes," she whimpered.

"For how long?"

"Um, I dunno," she said. "What month is it?"

I felt my nails extend. I retracted them with an effort. "It's November. The twenty-first, I believe."

The silence that followed went on for so long I grew anxious. "That means I've been here for, ah, maybe three months," she finally said.

*Three, eh? Will they keep us so long, do you think?*

I turned a deaf ear to the voice in my head. "Who are these people?"

"I don't know!" came the reply, almost a wail. "I snuck out of the house and went down the block to the QuickMart to get a soda and something to eat. Mom and Dad sent me to bed without supper for . . . uh, saying some things I shouldn't have, and I got hungry. But when I left to go home, somebody stuck a bag over my head and dragged me into a car. I started screaming, so they put me in a choke hold. I don't remember what happened after that." She paused before speaking again. "Are you in the basement?"

"Yes," I said, lip curling into a snarl.

Another silence. "I'm sorry," she whispered.

The sincerity of her remark sent an uneasy shudder through me. "And why is that?" I asked, forcing a calmness into the question I in no way felt.

The girl did not reply. "Charity?" I said.

"Oh, sorry. I was talking to one of my, ah, special friends."

Special? "Is someone with you?"

That question prompted a low laugh, borderline hysterical. "Charlotte can't be with anybody, silly. She's dead."

Splendid, I thought. My sole companion in incarceration was apparently a lunatic. Although it must be admitted that had I been held captive in a similar fashion for three months, the preservation of my own sanity might have been a lost cause as well. "Why are you sorry I'm in the basement?" I asked.

I heard the girl make a sound, a low moan.. "You won't like it," she warned.

"As opposed to my current cheerful demeanor?" I muttered, regretting my ill humor when the girl did not immediately reply.

"You'll be mad at me," she eventually whispered. "Just like all the others . . ."

"No I won't," I said, forcing a smile into my voice. "Now tell me. Please," I added

"Weeell," Charity said, "the ones who get put in the basement? They don't keep them for very long."

My relief came quick. So there had been others. Which implied that, at least so far as Midge and her cronies knew, I was no one particularly special.

"I don't think they know," Charity said, just as the aforementioned thought occurred to me. "But I do."

The child's words froze me in place. "Know what?" I asked, forcing a lightness into my tone I in no way felt.

Charity's next words came low, almost beyond the range of even my hearing. "I know what you *are*," she half sang.

Several possible replies occurred to me, but before I could select one to respond with, I heard her gasp.

"Charity?" I asked. "Are you all right?"

To my surprise, I heard her make a small cry. "You've met *Him*!?"

And while the girl could have been referring to almost anyone, I had no doubt Who she meant.

But that was . . . impossible.

"You know Him?" I asked with forced calmness.

The pace of her breathing increased. "No, not me. They know Him," she replied. "They *all* know Him."

"They who?" I asked. "People like your . . . friend?"

She let out a small whimper. "Like Charlotte, yes," she said. "And they're all afraid of Him. Every last one."

It was only with the greatest of efforts that I maintained my composure. "And why are the dead afraid of Him?"

Another long pause. "Charity?"

The reply came with a vehemence that took me aback, in a strange, almost unrecognizable voice. "Because He answers to no one. *No one!*"

A dizziness came over me. I fought to ignore it. "Your friend Charlotte? She told you this?"

"Yeess," Charity responded, a sibilant hiss. "But that doesn't necessarily mean anything."

"And why is that?"

The girl did not answer at first. "You want to know something about the dead?" she finally said, apropos of nothing.

"What?"

She giggled, a noise not quite sane, then whispered almost inaudibly, "The dead *lie!*"

I rolled my eyes. "They do?"

"Uh huh. Not always, though," she said matter-of-factly. "Not even most of the time. But sometimes."

The girl's bipolar mood swings had convinced me that a change of topic might be order. "Charity, how old are you?"

"Nine."

"Really?"

"Yes! Well, almost. My sisters and I are the same age."

"Because you're all, what? Triplets?"

A gasp. "That's right! How did you . . . ? Oh." She giggled again.

"Fraternal?"

"No! I . . . identical."

"Charity?" I said, returning to a topic of more immediate concern than imaginary dead friends. "You said they don't keep the ones in the basement, like me, for very long. Tell me, what do they do with them? With us?" I amended.

"I told you, you'll get mad at me!" she whined.

"Why do you say that?"

"Because the last one did!" the child declared emphatically. "I told her, then she got really mad, and after that she wouldn't talk anymore. Until later, that is, when the people upstairs came for her." Charity went quiet for a moment. "She talked a lot then, even though I couldn't understand anything she said. After a while she started crying. Then, later on, she started screaming. I felt so sorry for her, knowing what was going to happen next. But since she was so upset already, I didn't tell her about *Them.*"

Them? "About who?"

I heard the girl swallow several times before speaking again. "The ones that hunt the dead."

Hysterical delusions, I decided. Not surprising, really. Hidden Ones alone knew what she had been through over the preceding three months.

*Oh, the child is definitely crazy. Which must be how she knows about you.*

She knows *nothing* about me!

*Perhaps. Or perhaps not. But she most definitely knows about Him.*

"What are . . . *They*?" I asked, giving the pronoun the same emphasis she had given *Them*.

The girl hiccuped. "I don't know. None of the dead know either. Even Charlotte. And she knows a *lot*. They fill up this space, like a canyon that the dead call the Chasm, a big hole that separates Earth from whatever it is that's on the other side. Charlotte calls it Heaven, but some of the dead? They don't believe in Heaven. At least, not anymore. And different ones call it something else." Her voice took on a reflective tone. "Charlotte says it didn't used to be that way, that getting from one side to the other was easy, a long time ago. Then all of a sudden the Chasm was there, full of *Them*."

"What are they?" I asked, curious despite myself.

"I dunno." she said with a hysterical giggle. "But the dead? The ones who've been around for a really long time? They call them the *Golgorhim*."

What have these people done to your mind, child? I wondered silently. "And why are the dead afraid of these . . . *Golgorhim*?"

The girl made a noise, as if she were in great pain. "Because when the dead get desperate, and try to cross the Chasm to the other side, *They* chase them. They're so much faster than the dead, just like the big shark in that movie. And when they catch the dead, they eat them."

"Eat them?"

"Well, not *all* of them. At least, not all at once. Usually they just chase the dead and take a really big bite, then circle around and watch whatever's left over try to get away. Except the dead can't move very fast after that. But sometimes the *Golgorhim* get *really* hungry. Then a bunch of them will fight over the dead, like dogs fighting over a bone. But usually they just take a bite, or maybe two, then circle around listening to the dead cry. Not all the time, though. Sometimes the *Golgorhim* pretend to go away. Then the part of the dead that hasn't been eaten tries to cross the Chasm again, or tries to make it back to Earth. But *They* always come back and catch them before they can get very far. Then they punish the dead for trying to get away." A pause. "Sometimes the *Golgorhim* get mad, and punish the dead really, really hard."

Obviously someone in her formative years had been gifted with an unexpurgated copy of the Tales from the Brothers Grimm. "So why do the dead try to cross over, if these--creatures--won't allow it?" I asked with a restless sigh.

"Well, because sometimes the *Golgorhim* come close to Earth when they're starving, and try to snatch away the dead, even on this side of the Chasm, where they don't normally come."

The child's bizarre imaginings threatened to give me a headache, but challenging them would probably have alienated her, and she almost certainly possessed information useful to me, if I could somehow manage to get it out of her. So I continued to indulge the child. "But that makes no sense, If these--*Golgorhim*-can do that, then why don't they come to Earth all the time?"

"Because," she said patiently, as if explaining the complexities of the universe to a dullard, "they're afraid of *Him*. He doesn't do it a lot, but once in a while, if a *Golgorhim* comes too close to the Earth, He does something to that one. Then all the others attack it, just like they attack the dead."

"I see."

"They're really scared of Him," the child whispered. "Except the dead are even more scared."

"And why is that?"

"Because once in a while, He lets a *Golgorhim* take the dead." Charity paused before speaking again. "Sometimes He'll even open up a hole where we are, and let them take live people."

She was quiet for a time before speaking again, much to my relief. "Would you make me like you?" she eventually asked in the lowest of tones,

I almost asked what did she meant by 'like me', then sanity returned. What if we were overheard? Even now there might be eyes watching, or ears listening.

And what did she mean by 'like me'? She could not possibly know what I was. Could she?

*Best not give that thought room to grow. After all, if she knows what we are, then what might that say about her babbles about demonic creatures hunting souls on the other side of the grave?*

"And why would you want to be like me?" I said in as soft a voice as I could manage, hoping the child would respond in kind.

There were a few more snuffles. "Because if I die," the girl said, "the *Golgorhim* will come after me too. Me *especially*."

"Why you especially?"

The child made a choked sound. "Because they don't like it when the dead talk to me about them." She made an unidentifiable noise. "They don't want anyone to know about them. I hear them sometimes, whispering across space that they're waiting for me, and that when I die, they're going to play a *special* game with me. And the winner gets *all* of me, and won't even have to fight with the rest to keep me to itself." Now she sobbed openly.

I should mention here that I have little use for children. Among any number of other annoying habits and predilections, they are so very . . . sticky.

But the girl's delusions and obvious mental illness were, well, let us say, distracting. "We die too," I murmured, thinking of Sebastian.

"But not for a really long time!"

You cannot know. You *cannot*! "Sometimes not so long."

A pause. Then a vehement, "You're mean! I don't want to talk to you any more!"

Not the worst news I had heard since my arrival, but I said nothing. Tormenting the child with the disparagement of her psychosis would only frustrate, and further anger, her.

Assuming of course, that this entire scenario was not part of some elaborate game on the part of my captors (who even now might have been smiling at one another while overhearing our conversation). No doubt some depraved form of physical torment was how these games of theirs always ended, but perhaps terrorizing prisoners with horror stories from a child about boogeymen waiting to torture and devour the souls of the deceased served my captors as some sort of sadistic appetizer prior to the main entrée.

If so, I almost admired their ingenuity.

"Oh, by the way," the child said casually, "Curtis asked me to tell you hello."

I heard the sound of fabric shredding as my talons ripped into the sheets of my cot.

"He said that he knows about the boy in the basement, and that you have to be very careful," she added.

I swallowed the knot in my throat. "You're lying."

"He says you have to get out of here fast, and that you have to take me with you," Charity said. "If you do, he'll tell you what really happened that night in the attic."

I cannot recall the last time I shed tears. Nor did I do so now. But a swelling, like the memory of pain, squeezed its narrow fingers around my throat.

*How long have you tormented yourself over the truth of it, what really happened that night?*

"Does he hate me?" I whispered.

The girl paused before speaking. "He says he used to, for a really long time. But now he's just sad."

I shut my eyes. "I had no choice."

"You did have a choice, he says. You just didn't chose him."

Little girl, I thought, I have always taken some small amount of pride that, in all the evil I have done over so many decades, I have never, at least knowingly, slain a child.

But you test me.

"Don't be mad at me," she said hesitantly. "Everybody always gets so mad at me, when I tell them what the dead say. Then they call me such horrible names. Even Mom and Dad. But it's not my fault. It's not my fault!"

I opened my mouth, not knowing what words would come out. But before I could speak, I heard Charity gasp.

"They're coming," she whispered.