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Gallery  
of  
Nightmares

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# Bullies

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Dark Fantasy Stories by

**DOUG HOPPES**

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# Welcome to the Gallery

Jonathan knew life would never be the same when he entered the Gallery of Nightmares. Inherited from his mother, the gallery flooded his sense of reality with mysterious shadow people and dark voices from creepy paintings. He thought he could handle it until he stepped into the Shadow Nook. In that room, he was transported to a world of nightmares and realized his problems had just begun.

This book comprises a series of short stories that can be read independently or as part of a larger narrative, such as a novella.

All paintings in this book are original oil paintings.

When entering the Gallery of Nightmares, the viewer can hear the life lesson of each painting in their mind. These are documented in the Shadows and Light Series of books.



## Karma is Best Served Cold

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I stood there staring at my cottage and couldn't believe I had done it. I had bought a home. Me. A home. Now look... I know that it wasn't the perfect cottage. The roof needed to be redone. The doorframe was a bit crooked, and several windows were broken. That was okay. It was my home.

Also... it was supposedly haunted. Oooohhhh.... Spooky....

There were rumors among the old and overly religious townspeople about how the previous owner, Arthur, had told stories about the strange basement, where warriors and dragons fought, and the demons that lived there. They said to him that the place was evil and that he needed to leave. If he didn't watch himself, he'd lose his other eye to the demons.

He didn't listen.

Now, I'd seen Arthur a couple of times at the local pub where he told the stories. Many of the patrons laughed at him, but put up with his stories because... honestly... he paid for the drinks while they listened. He was a nice enough guy, but he tended to drink a little too much.

Eventually, the stories he told at the pub grew wilder, and people began to avoid him. The offer to pay for drinks changed as his mental state changed, and soon, he was the one wanting free drinks from everybody else.

“Ungrateful! That’s what you all is! Ungrateful!” He would slur to the group sitting around the bar. He drank more than when I first ran into him there, and his house became known as “that place.”

“Jonathan,” he slurred as he drained his beer that I just bought him, “I gotta show you the basement. You’d believe me. I know ya would. You’ve got that look to ya.”

“Sure, Arthur. Sure,” I said uncommittedly, looking into my own beer. I knew what he wanted. He wanted me to get him another round, but that wasn’t going to happen. He tried that with the other people in the bar and, over time, we all avoided him.

Then he disappeared.

More rumors spread around town about the thing in the basement that got Arthur.

After several months, the Merchant Center took possession of the home and put it up for auction. Before doing so, they employed the best mages from the sacramancer guild and found no evidence of Arthur or anything wrong with the house. They couldn’t have rumors about a demon house affecting the sale of the cottage.

It went up for auction.

I was surprised and not surprised when the well-off didn’t even show up for the auction. From the outside, the place wasn’t the type of place they would invest in, and I don’t think they were the type to listen to rumors. The other bids were too low, but I had just enough to pay for it without needing to ask for advances from my job.

It was mine now, and I was sure that I could take care of what was happening in there. Besides, demons didn’t exist. Sure, strange things were near the swamps, but I was in the middle of town, just off the main street. Stuff like that just never happened here.

Inside the cottage, the air was damp and musty, and I could see parts of the sky from the holes in the roof, so that and the windows would be the first things to get done. Other

than that, the floor was in good shape. Thieves had already ransacked the rooms and taken everything Arthur had left behind. Several of the rooms looked like they'd been lived in for a while, with a couple of small fire pits in the center and a hole in the roof above it, but there was no one now. I'd also have to get the door fixed.

I'd leave the basement until later. Not that I was afraid to go down there. Not me.

By the end of the week, the roof had been repaired, the windows replaced, the doorframe fixed, and all rooms were cleaned and furnished. Nothing fancy. Just a table, some chairs, a bench for the living area, and a bed. It would do for now. It cost me most of my savings, but I had a home. No more renting small rooms in boarding homes.

Well, it was time to see what was in the basement.

I wasn't scared. Really. I wasn't. However, when I pulled down the latch on the door to the basement, my heart beat a bit faster, and my right hand was a bit clammy. Those stories in town really must have affected me.

Well... there was nothing to see other than a dark set of stairs leading down to an area of blackness.

I retrieved a portable light ball from my pocket, touched it to activate the light, and tossed it into the blackness. The ball floated to the bottom of the stairs, and I followed suit.

The basement looked like every other one: dirt floor, stone walls, damp smell, and wooden bins to hold potatoes and other vegetables. Nothing remarkable. Smirking, I looked around and couldn't believe I was so nervous. That'll teach me to listen to those old people.

I could have sworn, though, that a glint of light came from the far wall, and cautiously, I walked over to it and felt the stones. Felt like stone. Nothing special, but one stone on

the right side was smoother than the others. I brought the floating light ball over; it was a different type of stone. Arthur probably didn't know how to repair it properly. I'll have to fix it later.

The light behind that stone flickered as I headed out of the basement. I walked over to inspect it again. A bright light pulsed behind the stone this time, even with the light ball next to it. When I touched the stone, it moved, fell out, and a tunnel appeared behind it.

It was easy to make a large enough hole to crawl through by removing a large portion of the stones. The air in the tunnel was fresh and clean, and it didn't smell musty, unlike the rest of the basement. With my light ball, I headed down the corridor towards...

The weirdest room that I'd ever seen. The side walls were made of silky white material that showed moving images of warriors and winged monsters fighting one another. When one died, it quickly disappeared and was replaced by another warrior or monster. Sometimes, one would look at me, wink, smile slightly, and then return to combat.

The wall in front was made of the same material, but looked more like a thick black curtain that extended from the ceiling to the floor.

In contrast to the walls, the center of the room featured a dull brown rug, each corner of which bore a symbol of three overlapping circles with a ring surrounding them. The symbols on three corners glowed bright blue, but the fourth corner was a dull grey and did not glow. In the center of the rug was a glowing red symbol of a body covered in flames.

When I stepped onto the rug, the black curtain wall moved as hands emerged from its center and peeled it back to the side. The area behind the black curtain appeared obsidian,

and I could see a dull reflection of myself.

On the rug, dozens of small playing-card-sized cards rose from each glowing corner symbol and, floating, formed into a single stack vertically in front of me at chest level.

Naturally, I jumped back off the rug, the black curtains closed, and the cards disappeared. The rug returned to its normal state.

Cautiously, I stepped back onto the rug, and, as before, the curtain parted, and the cards returned to their spot in front of me.

Now what? Do I touch the cards? Do I wait for something to happen? For several moments, I waited, and then I saw it.

The obsidian wall shimmered slightly in front of me, and it looked like an empty room similar to the one I was standing in. Although the side walls were white and featured fighting scenes, the rug was absent, and in the back corner of the room, a strange, spider-like monster huddled against the wall.

The creature resembled a misshapen man transformed into a spider-like form. His bulbous abdomen was dull white, and a shadow of a man-like figure extended from it. There was no face to be seen, but dark red roots caressed the shadow along the head and torso to create a human form. All eight legs were scarred and torn.

I couldn't tell if, like the walls on the side of me, this was a picture or if it was a physical room in front of me. When I left the rug to approach the wall, as before, the curtain closed, and the cards disappeared.

I couldn't pull the curtain aside to see what was behind it. It was as solid as a flat wall—just an illusion.

I returned to the rug and resumed viewing the strange creature in the room.

Bored, I hesitantly grabbed the stack of cards floating in front of me. Some cards showed pictures of edible food, such as sushi, steak, bread, and fruits. Other cards possessed pictures of razors, needles, nails, and other small, dangerous items.

I wasn't sure what to do, but I drew a card showing unagi nigiri sushi—a piece of cooked eel on a small rice ball—and held it up to my face. At that point, the card disappeared, and a long table appeared in the room holding the spider-like creature. On the table, several large ornate plates of unagi appeared.

The creature got up from the corner and moved slowly toward the table. It looked hesitant, but eventually made its way there. In front of the table, one of the red roots on its torso reached out, picked up the sushi, and placed it into the shadowed area where a face would normally be. Faster and faster, as if it were starving, more roots grabbed what was left of the sushi and shoved it into its “mouth.”

I flipped through the cards again and drew a ribeye steak this time. Several platters of steaming steak appeared, and it consumed those as fast as it did the unagi.

Hamburgers. Porridge. Eggs. Didn't matter. Whatever I put on the table, the monster consumed the food as fast as it appeared. As it ate, its abdomen would grow larger and larger, and I could see sores appear and dark black lines work their way until it split open. From the sores and cracks in the abdomen, unconsumed food poured out, and it would crawl away from the table.

Lying near the table, shivering, the sores disappeared, and the abdomen reformed as if nothing had happened. It would prop itself up, look at me, and then crawl back to

the table. Slower than before, but It would always go back and consume more food.

I couldn't take it anymore. It didn't matter that this was a video. I stopped, and it returned to its corner once the food was gone.

I stood and watched the thing shivering in the darkness. It had to be real. It felt so real.

I left the room and headed back through the tunnel to my basement. Once there, I cleared out more of the stone wall to make access easier.

For the next month, I returned to Samuel—I had to give him a name because calling him an “it” just didn't seem right. I didn't know if I was projecting, but I felt we were becoming friends for that month. Sometimes, I would bring my dinner down as if we were eating together. I also stopped drawing too many cards because I had no real evidence to prove that I had overfed him the first time, but I did notice that he was no longer going to the corner and shivering. Also, he seemed to get up and approach the table faster each time I showed up.

By the end of that month, honestly, I became bored.



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He survived the razor blades, which told me he was not a living creature. Nothing could do that. He was just like the moving paintings on the wall.

As before, my curiosity got the better of me.

Mixed in with the edible food, I fed him razors, nails, bugs, and anything that seemed inedible. Every time, his abdomen was destroyed, and every time, it repaired itself.

You know what? I'd gotten to the point that, honestly, I liked doing that to him. He wasn't real, and I felt myself feeling better every time I did it. The initial squeamishness passed, and, Mazram, forgive me, I was enjoying myself.

Then it happened. One month after I had started feeding Samuel the inedible items. That was the day that was burned into my mind, and I realized that I wasn't a good person.

As usual, I headed down to the basement. For the last several weeks, I'd forgo bringing food to have dinner with Samuel. He wasn't real. This was just a magical game that was part and parcel with the house.

When I stepped onto the rug this time, however, no cards appeared. The black curtain was pulled apart, and behind it was not Samuel but a masked winged creature with long talons hovering over a spinning ball floating in the room.

She pulled her mask off, and underneath was the cruel face of an old woman with stringy grey hair and no left eye. Her smile unnerved me as she spoke in a gravelly voice.

"Jonathan. Have you been having fun?" she said.

Unlike other times, I jumped back off the rug, but the curtain didn't close. She was still floating in front of me.

“Don’t be shy. I know that you named the poor creature Samuel. That’s so cute. You people always want to name them,” she continued.

“Are you having fun?” she asked again.

I looked at the warriors and dragons on the white walls beside me, and they all stopped moving. They were all looking at me, also.

“Uh... yeah... kind of... but it gets kind of boring after a while. This is a game, right? He’s not real, is he?” I asked, tentatively. I hoped her answer wasn’t what I thought it was going to be... but my heart told me I was wrong.

“Oh. He’s very real, but he’s not like you and me.... well... not now, anyway.”

My heart sank when I heard what she had said. I’m not that type of person. It was just a game. Nothing more.

“Uh... can he do anything other than eat? Can he play games or talk?” Maybe there was a way that I could be kind to him so that he could forgive me.

The ball in front of the creature spun faster and faster, changing from blue to red to purple and back to blue.

“Yes and no. Many things can happen to him, but he can never talk to you, and he can’t be hurt. I know that is what you want. Forgiveness. Those before you all thought the same thing. What would you like?” she said.

I racked my brain. I could make him comfortable, but...

I didn’t know what was wrong with me.

I wondered how strong he was.

With a gleam in my eye, I asked, “So, he can’t be hurt, right? He’s pretty strong? So, if he was crushed by... I don’t

know... a tree or something, he could just shrug it off?"

A wicked smile crossed her face as she said, "Yes. He can't be hurt, and he is quite strong. A tree falling on him would squash him for a bit, but he'd survive without a problem. Want to try?"

The globe before her spun faster and faster and turned pure white.

"Is that what you want?" she asked again.

"Yes," I said. "Yes. That's what I want. I want to see how strong he really is. I'm curious, and since you said that I can't hurt him, he won't mind."

"Done! The next set of cards will be all things that can crush. Have fun!" she cackled as she smiled broadly.

The old woman returned her mask to her face and looked down at the spinning white ball. It spun faster and faster as she chanted. I couldn't quite make out the words, but I did catch a couple of them that sounded like "fate," "karma," or "retribution."

The faster the ball spun, the brighter it glowed as the old woman turned into a white mist and faded into the ball.

The room took on the familiar form: Samuel was in the corner, staring at the spinning white ball at its center. Faster than ever before, he sprang up on his eight legs and skittered over to the spinning ball.

The closer he got to the ball, the faster it spun.

When Samuel reached the center of the room, the ball floated above him and plunged into his abdomen. Convulsing on the ground, his white bulbous belly split open, and white smoke poured out and covered his entire body.

Everywhere the smoke touched him, his skin cracked and dissipated into white smoke. The more he shook on the ground, the faster the process. Moments before the final parts of his body were consumed by the smoke, his face showed through the inky blackness of his fading form, and he smiled at me.

It was Arthur! He smiled at me! Why!?!

“Arthur! I’m sorry!” I cried out.

Would he return? What is happening? Will it be someone else?

As the spinning ball fully consumed Arthur, the old woman appeared behind it, her mask removed. She dragged one talon along the top of the ball that floated in front of her, and, in a flash, it was positioned above my head.

Four glass walls formed on the edges of the rug and encased me. Startled, I pushed against the walls, and even though they gave a bit under pressure, they returned to their solid form when I removed my hands.

I was trapped in a glass cage, with the white ball spinning above my head.

In the other room, the old woman cackled as she clapped her hands and disappeared. “Don’t be shy. I know that you named the poor creature Samuel. That’s so cute. You people always want to name them,” she continued.

“Are you having fun?” she asked again.

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As the ball above my head spun faster and faster, thin white filaments flowed out and crawled down the seams of the glass cage. Like tiny arcs of lightning, the filaments spread from the seams to cover the glass and, from there, flowed in the direction of my chest and body.

I tried pushing on the glass as hard as possible, but couldn't break it. As if it were made of rubber, it gave way under my pounding fists and kicks and then reverted to its normal surface.

As more filaments covered the cage, I squatted down to get as far away from them as possible, but I knew it would not work for long.

Then one filament touched me... then another... and then more. I screamed as a cube of flesh fell off every part of my body where the filament touched. The cube was only an inch or so in size, but I'd never been hurt that much in my entire life. Where the cube fell off, my body was sealed so that no blood was apparent, but I could see inside my body.

Desperately, I tried pushing harder on the glass wall, but to no avail.

More filaments touched. More cubes of flesh piled up around me on the floor. I could no longer stand, as my legs and arms were lying in various piles around me.

The glass cage faded and melted into the sides of the rug. It didn't matter. I wasn't going anywhere.

The strangest part of this scene was that I could still feel and think, even though my body was rapidly turned into quivering cubes. My senses were overstimulated because I could feel the rug under one touch point and over hundreds

of little touch points.

My eyes weren't looking in the same direction, and considering that some of the cubes created from my tongue touched the rug and some touched other flesh cubes, I was confused about what I was tasting.

After my body had been fully converted, the pieces that were once my body floated up and flew toward the obsidian wall before me. Each cube was stuck to the center of the wall, and all of the white walls, the floor, and the ceiling changed into mirrors.

Fascinated, in a disjointed vision since some of the cubes that held my eyes were still on the rug, I watched the cubes move along the obsidian wall, creating a mosaic that resembled a stained-glass window in a church. It was me, and it wasn't. My brain somehow detached from the situation and allowed me to view it without going insane.

Some of the cubes changed colors as they moved. Some turned black, and others turned white. In one area, closer to the floor, I could see most of the cubes form into a white circular shape with a dark man-like shape above it. Eight white legs splayed out to the sides.

The mosaic of me on the wall was... Samuel.

This must be what happened to Arthur!

When all the cubes finally reassembled into my new form, I fell backward into darkness. I didn't know how long I fell, but it felt like an eternity.

One day, I woke up in the corner of a dark room with a black curtain covering the far wall.

Two hands appeared in the center of the curtain and pulled it toward the edge. On the wall, there was the room in my cottage. The room with my rug! In the room, a young

couple stood on the rug with a set of cards floating in front of them.

They looked like they were arguing since the woman kept trying to pull the deck out of the man's hands. He eventually calmed down and held the deck out to her. Hesitantly, she drew three cards from the deck and held them to her face.

Three cards floated on the wall between me and the couple. The first card showed a tree falling and crushing me. On the second card, I was running down a hill with a large boulder gaining on me. The final card showed me lying in the middle of a street, and a wagon was rapidly approaching.

I tried my hardest to stay in the corner, but couldn't. I couldn't find anything to grip on, and, against all thought, my body rose and skittered to the center of the room.

I felt cold in the center of the room as a shadow fell over me, and I looked up. A giant tree was falling, and there was no area in the room where I could escape.



## It's Never Worth It

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“Will you just leave me alone!” I yelled at my mother as I slammed the door on the way out of the house. I hated school, but at least it meant that I didn’t have to be home with her.

My mother. What would be the appropriate words to describe her? Strong? Resilient? Commanding?... maybe.

How about... Overbearing? Restrictive? Inflexible? Yeah. That would be how I would describe my loving mother, who gave up everything for me.

Now, I know she loved me. She’d told me so every day since my father left. However, it was more like a comment than an actual emotion. This was no more apparent than in my school work and the sports teams I participated in.

I had to be perfect, get the best grades, be the strongest and fastest on our team, and date the prettiest girl in our school.

The problem was that...

I wasn’t any of those things. I was okay in school. I sat on the sidelines more than I played. I didn’t have a girlfriend. I was just average. However, that wasn’t good enough for my mother.

For the thousandth time, I sat in the Elder’s History class, learning about the town’s history and the elders, and wished I weren’t there. Behind and beside me were my buddies, Cal and Markus. Cal was the smart one in our group, and Markus... well... he was just fun. He was quiet and often had a somber expression. He wasn’t good in class or sports, but he knew things, and he would tell us about what some guy or girl was doing after school or what teacher had

money issues.

I tried to pay attention to the teacher, but it was hard. I just didn't care about the subject. I mean... who would? Nothing I was learning about would help me later in life. I caught Cal looking over, giving me a concerned look of... "Are you okay?" I nodded. However, the fight I had with my mother before school was still on my mind.

The class ended, and Cal stopped me near my locker.

"Hey, bud. Okay. What's going on?"

Usually, I preferred to keep things to myself, and Cal constantly annoyed me by asking personal questions. Why couldn't we be the type of friends who hung out without having to get into personal stuff? Some of the other guys said that he was "into" me, but not Cal. He was a buddy, and that was all.

"Look. Not today. Don't feel like talking about it, okay?" I said.

He just stared at me...

And stared...

"Dude. You've been like this for the past two weeks. What's going on? Is it your mom again?" he asked.

Okay... he wasn't going to let this go, and he was my friend.

I leaned with my back against my locker, and the words just poured out.

"Yeah. She's getting worse. She keeps yammering on about my grades... then how come I didn't start the last game... then how come I'm always spending time with you guys instead of studying... then when am I going to..."

"Whoa! Whoa! Hold up. "Got it," he said, holding his

hands up. “Sorry, dude. Look. We know how your mom is. My dad’s the same way. He always says he wants the best for me. If he wanted the best, why is he just a dock loader? Why doesn’t he have one of those fancy jobs, or even be a sacramancer? Those guys make good money. Nah. He just wants to take it out on me,” he said, glaring past me at the hall of kids hanging out near us.

“Hey,” he continued. “Want to come over to my place once we let out today? Markus and I are heading to the bog to see if we can get some Callow Mushrooms. My dad said that some of the guys at the docks will pay good money for ‘em.”

“That’s okay. I don’t feel like hearing my mom scream at me more ‘cause I wasn’t studying. I’ll hang out in my room and pretend to be working on things. That’s what I usually do. Thanks, though.”

“Your call. If you change your mind, let me know,” he said as he walked to his next class.

At the end of the day, I saw Markus and Cal hanging out at the front of the school. They were busy chatting with a couple of other guys, laughing, and pushing each other around. I wanted to go with them and avoid my mother for that night, but it would just make her mad if I didn’t come home after school.

This sucked.

Instead of telling them again why I couldn’t go, I just hung out near the entrance until they left.

I guess I wasn’t as hidden as I thought. Markus saw me, said something to the guys, and waved to them as they left. He kept his head down as he headed into the building and pulled me aside.

“Hey. I was talking to Cal earlier, and he mentioned that

your mom's been giving you a rough time lately. More so than usual. Look. Our parents do that too, but, man, your mom has got them all beat," he said.

He looked around and lowered his voice, "If you want, I can get you something that may help."

"Thanks, but there's nothing you can do. There's no way you can change my mom's mind."

"I'm not talking about changing her mind. I'm talking about something that can help you get great grades and be better in sports. I know that she wants you to have some serious hot girlfriend, but trust me, when you get great at sports, they'll be crawling all over you."

"What are you talking about?" I asked.

"Remember that guy in Aberdare? He was on that team we played against last Spring? The one that broke those records last year?"

"Yeah, I remember him. He beat us all by himself. My mom wouldn't stop talking about him for a month. She kept asking me why I didn't break records and why I couldn't be like him."

"Well, from what I heard, did you know he was also up for being a sacramancer apprentice? His grades were some of the best in the school, and he was hand-picked to join the mage guild when he was done with school. The word is that he left school early to do that."

"So? He's smart and athletic. Who cares? What does that have to do with me?"

Markus looked around. "You can be the same as him. From what I heard, he wasn't all that different from us. However, after the summer break, he became this perfect guy. It was all because of this plant called Dark Lotus. Something

about this plant makes you better at everything.”

“Yeah. Right”, I said. “If this plant was so miraculous, how come you haven’t taken it? How about Cal? He’s already smart, and I bet this would make him even smarter.”

“It doesn’t work that way. For some reason, it only works on certain people. Some of us know about it, but have you seen any geniuses around? No. It may or may not work for you, but it would get your mom off your back if it does.”

“I don’t know. I can’t afford much,” I said.

“Don’t worry about that. I know where I can get one. Won’t cost you anything. A buddy of mine owes me a favor, and he’s got a couple of them at this house. I think he grows them. Not sure. Either way, I’ll bring you one tomorrow.”

“Uh... thanks. I appreciate this.”

That afternoon, when I got home, my mother was waiting for me in the central living room. She didn’t comment about the argument we had before school, but, as usual, I knew she wanted to hear about my classes, see the results of any tests, and see if I had practice that day and how I did. Then she would ask about what I was planning to do that night.

I knew what she wanted to hear. She wanted to know that I would be studying that night. Every freakin’ night after school. It was the same routine.

There was no chance to relax or have fun. If I weren’t doing homework, I would have to do extra work to get ahead. Some days, it was just questions. For the last two weeks, though, it was more like badgering. I don’t know why, all of a sudden, she was this way, but I’d had enough.

Instead of answering, I walked straight into my room,

ignored her, and locked my door. I wasn't in the mood to deal with her.

Bam! Bam! Her fists pounded on the door.

“Jonathan! You open this door right now!”

Bam! Bam! Bam!

“Jonathan!”

I threw my books on my desk and lay on my bed as the pounding continued.

The Dark Lotus plant. I wondered if it would work and if it would get my mother off my back. Well, it couldn't be worse than what I'm going through now.

Silence.

She was gone.

I stared at my books, and instead of getting up and working, I pulled out a sketchbook and doodled for a while. Several hours later, I smelled Anarok stew wafting from under my door. Hungry, I carefully opened the door, expecting her to be on the other side.

She wasn't.

On the tray in front of my door was a cup of milk, the stew, a couple of pieces of bread, and a note that said, “We'll talk in the morning- Mom.”

I took the tray into my room, ate, and slept, dreaming about how great my life would be if the Dark Lotus worked on me.





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The following day, I got up early and left the house before my mother woke up. I wanted to see if Markus had brought me this miracle plant. I was pretty sure that it wouldn't work on me, but at this point, I would do anything to get my mother off my back.

This could be my only chance for a normal life. Besides, it would be nice actually to have a girlfriend. There were a couple of girls in my classes who wouldn't give me the time of day, but if I were a star athlete, that would change.

The day dragged slowly until my Elder's History class.

Markus, though, wasn't there.

I leaned over to Cal and asked, "Where's Markus? Thought he was coming today."

"He said that he had something to take care of this afternoon," Cal said. "But, he did say that you're supposed to check out your locker after class. He's left something for you."

"Really?" I couldn't contain my smile.

"You going to try it?" Cal smirked back at me.

"Try what? Don't know what you're talking about."

"Yes, you do. Markus didn't tell me what it was, but it's pretty obvious. You think you're the first one in this school to try it? Didn't work for me. Hope it helps you, though. If you're lucky, it'll get your mom off your back."

"Mr. Cal and Mr. Jonathan! Would you like to share with the class what you're discussing? Or may I continue with the lecture?" the teacher asked.

“Sorry,” I said.

We both shut up and looked ahead.

It took everything I had to stay in my seat until I heard the class chimes echo throughout the building. I jumped up, pushed everybody out of the way as I headed over to my locker.

In there was a small potted plant with dark purple petals that surrounded a tiny brown skull... and a note.

Keep the plant in a dark place and eat ONLY one leaf per day. The leaves will grow back. Do not eat more than one leaf per day!- Markus

I couldn't wait. I broke off one of the leaves and ate it immediately. I had two more classes until the end of the day, but I was curious to see if it would actually work.

Nothing happened.

Well. Guess that's it.

Back to dealing with my mother.

My heart sank as I grabbed the parchments for my next class and closed the locker.

On the way to my Dangerous Fauna class, my tongue tingled a bit, and my breathing became quicker. Saliva increased, and I tried to swallow it as quickly as possible. My stomach rumbled as a wave of nausea worked its way up my throat.

I had to get to the restroom as quickly as possible because I didn't want everybody to see me as some drooling idiot vomiting in the middle of the corridor. Some of the other students were looking at me, but only for a moment, as I sped past them in the hallway.

As quickly as it started, it ended. My breath came easily, and I could swear that the hallway seemed brighter. Everything I saw was much clearer. I noticed small details on some of the students' clothing at the end of the hallway, and I could hear what some girls were saying even though they were ten feet away.

Whenever I focused on someone, I could see a rip, a tear, or a dirt smudge on their clothing, and I could hear what they were saying. As I walked down the hallway, my pace quickened, and no matter how fast I moved, I never seemed to tire or become out of breath.

It worked! The freakin' plant worked!

In my final two classes of the day, I recalled all the information from my previous studies and quickly came up with unique solutions whenever I was asked a difficult problem. Some of the other students smirked at me as the teachers were amazed at how well I did.

At the end of the day, I grabbed the Dark Lotus plant from my locker, placed it in an enclosed box that Markus had left for it, and headed home.

"Cal! Cal!" I yelled to him on my way out.

"Tell Markus that it worked!"

Excitedly, I ran out of the building for the walk back home.

Rushing into my house, I headed towards my bedroom and put the Dark Lotus plant in the closet. Once I had dropped off my books, I headed out to the central living area.

"Mom! Mom! Are you home?"

"Jonathan? What is it? Is something the matter?" she asked as she emerged from the kitchen.

"No! Nothing at all. Look. I'm really sorry about the way

I've been acting lately. I know you want the best for me. I'll try to do better. I promise. I'm sorry. I've got some studying to do now, but I'll be out later for dinner. Okay?"

"Okay..." she said quietly, her eyes narrowed as she glared at me.

Back in my room, I took the Dark Lotus out of the box and gave it an open, secure spot on my closet shelf.

This was going to work!

I pulled out my parchments and was excited to discover that I could read them all within a matter of minutes, and I retained all of the information that I had read. In some of the chapters that we would cover in the future, I quickly understood what was going on and how to solve the problems. We hadn't covered this in class yet, but I knew the answers. This was amazing!

Over the next couple of months, classes had never been easier. My mother stopped bothering me with questions as I showed her my test scores. There were several write-ups in the town journal discussing some of my impressive plays against other teams. Every so often, a local talent scout would stop by the house to discuss my future plans with my mother and me. Even girls who would never talk to me stopped by and asked if I wanted to hang out with them.

I did feel bad that I didn't have much time to hang out with Cal or Markus, but they didn't seem to mind. When I did spend time with them, my mind always drifted off. The conversations were so boring! How could they live such uninteresting lives?

School and sports also became boring. No challenges. I found that, even though I was good, I wasn't good enough. I needed to be smarter and faster.

It was time for me to start taking more than one leaf per

day. I know that Markus said not to, but he's wrong. How would he know? The plant didn't work for him. It worked for me.

When I pulled off a second leaf for that day, the plant skull smiled and shifted. Skin grew over the face, and I could see the faint appearance of dark hair on top. Had to be my imagination.

"Jonathan? Are you in there?" I heard my mother call from the central living area.

Hmmm.... Why did my upper arm suddenly itch? As I scratched the area below my shoulder, a piece of skin came off.

What the...!!!!

The exposed area didn't hurt or burn, but... still.... What was happening?

Other parts of my body started to itch.

I tried to ignore the itch, but couldn't help myself. Every time I scratched, a piece of skin came off. The itching would stop at that location and, miraculously, there was no bleeding—just the exposed tissue and muscle.

"Jonathan? Could you come out here for a second?" My mother said again.

"What?! I'm busy!" I yelled back.

I grabbed some gauze and tape from my sports bag and wrapped up the areas where the skin had come off.

"I know, dear. Just for a moment."

"Fine! I'll be right out."

I put on a long-sleeve shirt and stared at the skull on the

plant. I could have sworn it looked a bit like me.

In the central living area, my mother was sitting on the couch with a wrapped package on her lap.

She saw the wrappings on my hand.

“Are you okay? Do we need to take you to a healer?” she asked in a worried tone.

“I’m fine!” I snapped back. When I saw her frown, I lowered my head and quickly said, “Sorry... didn’t mean to snap. This was just an accident at practice. The coach wrapped it up and said that it should be fine in a couple of days. I’m fine. Really.”

“Uh... okay. Well, this is for you,” she said, handing me the package as I sat beside her.

“I know you’ve worked hard over the last couple of months. I’m very proud of you. I knew that you were capable of great things, but you just needed to believe in yourself. Hopefully, this proves to yourself that you can do anything you want and that you’ll go very far in life.”

I opened the package, and inside was a quill pen set and several parchments. Additionally, there was an old book titled “All That Is Holy - A Sacramancer’s Guide.”

I clenched my jaw as the anger rose in me again.

“What is this garbage?” I tossed the package back to her.

“I’m sorry. I thought you would like this. It’s a handmade quill pen and special hand-crafted parchment paper. The book will help you get started after you finish school. I’ve always known that you were smart enough to join the local Sacramancer’s Guild,” she said, her eyes watering.

“I thought you’d like this. I’m so sorry,” she sobbed.

I knew that I should have apologized, but I couldn't. Local Sacramancer's Guild. What could they teach me? Old men who preyed on the locals. They weren't worth my time.

I should have taken the package and thanked her.

Instead, I got up, went back to my room, and closed the door on her.



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The itching wouldn't stop!

The following week was a nightmare. I couldn't concentrate on my schoolwork or sports, and I was also easily irritated and short-tempered with others. I avoided Cal and Markus, and on several occasions, I also avoided class altogether.

What's worse, the areas where the skin had peeled started to rot and emitted an awful smell. I ran out of gauze and had to wear bulky shirts, even though the days were hot, to cover up all the sores.

The more the skin itched, the angrier I got.

Everything fell apart one night at dinner.

"Jonathan. Did you have a chance to talk to the Sacramancer Guildmaster this week? He wanted to discuss an early application with you. He's been receiving reports on you over the last couple of months and thinks he can get you into the school for free.

"No," I said as I tried to concentrate on my dinner rather than the itches and my awful smell.

"Okay. Well, he contacted me a couple of times this week, and I told him I would speak to you about it."

"Would you just leave me alone about that guild!?! If you want it so bad, why don't you go yourself!?! I don't care about it or the grades. I was just doing this stuff so that you would get off my back!"

She lowered her head slightly, and the room darkened as if a terrible storm were about to wash us all away.

"Excuse me?!? First of all. I'm your mother. You will not

talk to me like that. Secondly, I was only looking out for your best interest. It's your life. I care about you and am happy that things are going well, but that does not mean you can treat me like you have been lately," she said in a low and, frankly, scary voice.

I screamed back.

"Everything I do is for you! My entire life has been about you! I was never good enough! Now I am, and I'm still being hassled about it!"

I pushed back the chair, got up, and, as I headed towards my room, my mother grabbed my arm. Apparently, we weren't done talking.

"What is wro...."

She stopped when, pulling on my sleeve, the gauze on my hand slipped and she saw the open rotting wound. I tried to pull away, but she held my sleeve firmly, and the pull on the sleeve exposed more open wounds on my shoulder.

"Take off your shirt now!" she said.

I didn't want to, but I recognized that look and the sound of her voice, and she wouldn't let it go.

I took off my shirt, and my chest, back, and arms were covered with open sores that oozed.

My mother is a stern woman. I thought she would faint or cry hysterically at the sores, but she didn't.

"Does it hurt?" she quietly asked.

"No. But it does itch a lot."

"Put your shirt back on. We're going to the Infirmary now."

I did as I told, and she summoned a carriage to get us there.

On the drive over, she kept saying, “Don’t worry about this. We’ll take care of this, and everything will be all right. When did it start happening? Why didn’t you tell me about this?”

I ignored her during the ride and, honestly, I was surprised she didn’t get mad when I didn’t answer her questions.

In the healer’s office, I removed my shirt, and he just stared at me. He didn’t examine me or ask any questions, but simply shook his head and asked, “Would you like to tell me where you got the plant?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. This was just a rash that I got from playing in the woods with my friends,” I said.

“Really? Just a rash?” One eyebrow arched as he stared at me.

“What plant? Are you talking about stims? He’s a good kid. He’s smart and doing great on teams now that he’s applied himself. He’s not like those other kids in his school who are into that. Aren’t you going to do something? It’s like he said. It’s a rash,” my mother told the healer.

The healer stared at me.

“Where is the Dark Lotus? Are you going to tell her or am I going to have to do it?” he said.

He knew.

I lowered my head. I was too embarrassed to face anyone at the moment.

“It’s at the house. My closet.”

“What are you talking about?” My mother asked as she held my hand.

Years of stress broke me.

“Just leave me alone!” I snapped at my mother as I pulled my hand away. “How many times have I got to tell you? Leave me alone! I’m tired of you and your questions. I just wanted to be like everyone else and hang out with my friends. You couldn’t let me do that. I had to be better than everybody. I had to be special. I didn’t want to be special! I just wanted to be like everybody else!”

The healer summoned a caretaker to his side and told her, “We’ve got another one. Could you please escort his mother to her house, retrieve the Dark Lotus plant from her son’s closet, and bring it back here?”

After my mother and the social worker left, I asked the healer, “Can you stop the itching?”

“No. I’m sorry. It’s too far gone,” he said as he left the room.

Too far gone? What did he mean?

With my shirt off, I saw the open sores expand and shift towards one another. On some of the exposed muscles, the veins looked more like plant roots than veins. The more I watched, the more the sores shifted and the roots increased in length and thickness.

I was scared and fascinated at the same time.

The healer watched me with a bored expression. I got the impression he had seen this same situation over and over.

Eventually, the caretaker, my mother, and the healer returned.

The Dark Lotus plant was placed on the table next to me.

I tried to concentrate on the plant next to me, but I had a hard time focusing on what was happening. My breathing

was slower and, yes, the skull in the center of the plant now looked exactly like me.

“As I thought,” the healer said. “You’re not the first one we’ve treated with this issue, and I’m sorry to say, you won’t be the last. Last year, we treated a young man from Aberdare. The year before, three more cases came across my desk. You’re the first case for this year.”

The healer lifted my arm, but I barely felt it move. The same thing happened when he began examining my sores. I tried to ask the healer a question, but the words didn’t come out. It was as if my mind was trapped in my body, and I couldn’t move.

“What is that!?!”, my mother screamed as the plant shifted its head several times and tried to open its mouth... as if to speak. She recoiled back towards the far end of the room and pointed at the moving face on the plant.

The healer gestured to the caretaker, who left the room and came back with a pouch and a cup of water.

“Please take this. Trust me, this will help,” the healer said to my mother.

I watched dispassionately as my caretaker opened the pouch, pulled out a pinch of black herb, and dropped it into the cup. She sat down with my mother and handed her the cup. My mother just stared at the plant as she gulped down the contents of the cup.

“The plant beside your son is called Dark Lotus. We’re trying to remove it from the school systems, but we’re unable to do so. It’s simply too big a problem, and unfortunately, it’s worsening every year. Your son is our first case for the year, but we expect to see a lot more of them,” the healer said.

“The Dark Lotus is an enhanced food plant. The students,

like your son, ingest it, and they gain abilities far above the average person. For some, they become stronger. Others become more charismatic or smarter. The abilities don't last that long due to the transition phase," he continued.

The caretaker got up as the healer sat next to my mother. He held her hand and took a deep breath.

"The body you see is no longer your son. Your son probably consumed more of the plant than he should have, and that triggered the transition phase. Happens to everyone. The plant is a living creature that has adapted a unique method for survival. It has transferred its consciousness from the plant body to your son's body and vice versa. The human body can't handle the transfer, so it rots. We need to dispose of the body. The consciousness of your son is now within the body of the Dark Lotus plant."

My mother was still in shock and just stared ahead at the plant.

As the healer got up and walked over to the table, the room became blurry, and I fell to the side.

In front of me, I stared as the healer's monstrous hands reached down and picked me up. On the table, I saw my body decay and rapidly decompose as he carried me to my mother.

"Help me," were the last words I said as she screamed and dropped my pot to the floor.





## A Life Deserved

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A dirty statue sat on a dirty table in a dirty room.

Depressed, I looked around my small cottage and resigned myself to the fact that this was my life—poor, forgotten, and, honestly, this was probably where I'll die. I have a couple of friends, not many, but they rarely invite me anywhere. They're just work friends.

Me? I'm a nobody, but this was not who I was supposed to be. This was not the life I had envisioned when I graduated.

School—so long ago. I remember thinking on the last day of class that the world was mine for the taking. I was younger, stronger, and smarter than my classmates and most of the people in my town—poor farmers, shopkeepers, or metal smiths who didn't have my gifts.

I wasn't going to be like them.

I was wrong.

I found out that the world didn't care about me. Not one bit.

I stood in the center of my one-room cottage and looked into the mirror for the thousandth time at my middle-aged reflection. My skin was dirtier than I remembered, and the old clothing did nothing to hide my ribs and my dark, mottled skin that stretched over my body like a thin piece of fabric. I wasn't dirty... no... I would never allow myself to get to that level... but I wasn't clean either.

I was worn and tattered like an old cloth.

In one corner of the room, my bed was covered with a ragged blanket, bunched-up clothing serving as a makeshift

pillow, and the mirror hung above it. Another corner held an open hearth and fire pit with dirty bowls piled around a sink basin. Next to the hearth was a small table and an old wooden chair that threatened to collapse on me at any moment.

And... on that table sat a small, ugly statue of a monster with a sword. The statue stood about 8 inches tall and had a red glass eye. An eye that stared at me as, I swore, the thing sat there and judged me and what my life had become.

Why did I buy that thing? It wasn't like I had a lot of coins to spare.

Knock.

Knock. Knock.

“Jonathan? Are you in there?” I heard the deep voice of my landlord from the other side of the door.

“Yeah. Just a minute.”

I thought about cleaning up the place before letting him in, but he already knew what it looked like. Nothing had changed since the first day, ten years ago, when I moved in. Just dirtier and messier. We both were used to it.

I opened the door slowly because I knew what he wanted. I was behind on the rent again. It wasn't much, and he'd always allowed me to pay later, but the disheartened look on his face told me this wasn't what he wanted to talk about.

“Hey. I was just going to... ,” I tried to smile as I started to say.

He raised his hand.

“I know that you are behind. I'm sorry, Jonathan. It's not about that.”

He looked down, shuffled his feet, and wrung his hands. With a heavy sigh, “Look. There’s no easy way to do this, so I will just come out and say it. I’m going to need an extra 1000 kronas, each month, for rent.”

I was shocked and held onto the door frame as tightly as possible. I tried not to show any emotion, but I failed. I was barely making ends meet, and now I had to come up with more money? There’s no way that I could do that!

“I’m really sorry,” he lifted his eyes to look at me. “The building owner has raised the rent of the cottages for everybody. You’re not the only one. She said that she needs all rent paid and the extra money by the end of the week. I’m sorry.”

“If you don’t have it,” he continued, “by the end of the week, I’m going to have to rent your cottage to someone else. It’s really out of my hands.”

Before I could say anything, he turned around and closed the door.

I threw myself down on my bed and stared at the ceiling, trying not to let the tears out.

What the heck was I going to do? I didn’t have that kind of money! My job barely paid for this cottage!

From the corner of my left eye, I saw a slight flashing of red coming from the eye of the ugly statue on my table.

What???

I sat up and looked at the statue. The right red eye twinkled, and the gash across its stomach throbbed with a dark red glow. The shop owner said I needed to have the statue, and it would grant my wishes when the time was right.

Naturally, I laughed at him, but his demeanor never

changed. “You’ll need this. Soon,” he said as he handed me the statue. “When things are better, pass it on to someone else in need. Don’t wait too long, or you may regret it.” I told him that I couldn’t pay for it, but he said, “Just one krona. That is all I ask.” I agreed and paid him.

I moved to the table and picked up the statue in my hands. It was warm to the touch—much warmer than the cottage—and I heard in my mind, “What is your desire?”

“My desire? Alright. You’re supposed to be a wishing statue. Before the end of the week, I need money to pay for my back rent and the additional 1000 kronas each month. Let’s see if that shop owner was lying to me.”

That night, I couldn’t sleep.

I kept thinking about how I would raise the money, if I could stay with friends, or if I needed to move into the local shelter. I knew I couldn’t ask my boss for a raise. He was nice but notoriously cheap.

Crack.

Crack. Scritch. Crack

What was that?

I got up and touched a light globe floating above my table. It didn’t show much light since it was almost drained, and I needed to recharge it at the local sacramancer. That was another cost I couldn’t afford at the moment.

On the table, I saw the small statue of the green monster, standing up and plunging its sword deep into the red scar on its chest... over and over again. The more the blade plunged into the chest, the larger the scar became, and the more coins poured out onto the table.

I couldn’t look away. Horrified and fascinated at the same

time, I watched the sword cut the statue's chest as the money poured out. After a while, the process stopped, and the statue sat back down, leaned against the sword, and the red glow of its eye dimmed.

I rushed over to the table and quickly counted the coins. Kronas! Lots and lots of Kronas! There was exactly enough for the past rent and the additional 1000 Kronas that were required!

It worked! It actually worked!

That morning, I couldn't stop staring at it while I got ready for work. The left eye was no longer twinkling, and the gash on its stomach had returned to its original size and color, now a dull red. It was still an ugly statue, but it got more beautiful every time I looked at it.

I took the statue and hid it behind some dirty dishes near the hearth. I couldn't leave it out in the open in case someone broke in, and I couldn't take it to work because there were thieves there.

On the walk to the tanning shop, I dropped off the money to my landlord because I didn't want to risk losing it before the end of the day. Naturally, he eyed me suspiciously but had the good sense not to ask where I got the money from. He accepted it, and I hoped I had hidden the statue well enough. I knew he would go back to my cottage and look for any reason for how I got the money. I liked him, but didn't trust him.

I barely noticed the walk to the shop. My mind wouldn't stop thinking about the ugly little statue and what had happened last night. Now that it worked once, I'm confident I could improve other aspects of my life. I dreamed about having a nicer place, better furniture, maybe even some of those fancy light balls where I just had to talk and they would turn on and off.

My life was going to be so different!

I wonder if I even need a job anymore?

I took my spot at the shop on the bench beside the other leather workers. As always, there was a pile of leather that had just been tanned but needed to be worked and smoothed out. I lifted the lid of my bench, pulled out my slicking iron, and pulled out my first piece of leather. Working back and forth, I smoothed out the inconsistencies in the leather. It was long and tedious, but I needed the work.

Or did I?

“Jonathan? Can I speak to you?” I felt the hair on the back of my neck prickling as my boss stood behind me.

I turned around and noticed that he had the same look as my landlord. What is it about everybody giving me that look? Guess it wasn’t going to be good news.

“Why don’t we talk in my office?”

Those are never words that you want to hear at work. Looked like my time here was at an end. It’s a good thing I had that ugly statue.

“Uh... yeah... sure,” I got up and followed him to the office.

In the office, he closed the door, gestured for me to sit on the bench against the wall, and pulled up his chair to face me.

“I’m really sorry that I have to tell you this, but I’m going to have to let you go. It’s nothing that you’ve done. Everybody here likes you, but business hasn’t been the best lately. I’m sure you’ve noticed that I’ve had to let others go in the last month. I was hoping to turn things around, but unfortunately, they’re getting worse. I’m sorry,” he said.

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Even though I knew what he would say, I was still surprised. “I’m one of the best leather workers you have. Haven’t I always done what you wanted? What about Tief? He’s always late and is slower than the rest.”

“I’m sorry. I know about Tief. I’d rather focus on you at the moment. You don’t have to stay the rest of the day. I’ll still pay you for today,” he said, as he handed me a pouch of coins.

“There’s a little bit extra in there ‘cause you’ve always been a good worker. If I can get things turned around, I’ll make sure to try to get you back if you are still available. I’m really sorry,” he said as we both stood up and I left his office.

Rather than saying goodbye to the few friends I had, I left the tannery. I didn’t own any of the tools, so there was nothing to take when I left. I just wanted out of there.

On the walk back to my cottage, I was too wrapped up in my thoughts to notice the people around me. Several times, I accidentally bumped into someone, muttered, “Sorry,” and then kept walking with my head down.

What was going on? Why have things gotten so unlucky for me lately? First, my landlord raised my rent and needed the back rent, and now, I’ve been let go from my job.

Back in my cottage, I immediately went to the dirty dishes and pulled out the statue. I was afraid that my landlord had found it and it was gone, but a feeling of comfort washed over me as I saw its ugly face again.

“Okay,” I said as I walked over to the table and sat down.

Still holding the statue, I said, “I want a good-paying job where I’m happy. Something that pays a lot of money so that I can buy a large cottage with a lot of rooms, a large hearth, and nice enough to make people envious. That’s

what I want.”

The statue wiggled in my hand, and the one red eye glowed. I dropped it onto the table and, as before, it stood up, plunged the sword into the long red scar on its chest, and doubled over in pain. For several minutes, it drove the sword into its stomach. Over and over again. Arching its back every time and quivering.

It then drove its left hand into its chest, pulled out an impossibly long piece of parchment covered in black, sat down, and returned to its original posture.

I tentatively picked up the parchment, hands covered in a black, dripping ichor, and read, “Answer the door.”

Knock.

Knock.

I dropped the parchment and turned to face the door.

Knock. Knock.

Wiping my hands on an old, dirty kitchen towel, I slowly opened the door and saw a short old man smiling at me.

“Hi. I’m sorry to be a bother, but I was told that I could find Jonathan here. Are you him?” He asked.

“Uh... yes. Can I help you?”

“I went to the tannery this morning, and they said you were no longer employed there. Your boss, I assume that was who he was, gave me your address. I need a tanner for several projects. I want to make sure that I have the softest leather in town, and I saw your work at your previous place of employment. It was some of the best work that I’d ever seen! May I come in?” he asked.

“Yeah. Sure. Excuse the mess. In the middle of some work

at the moment,” I said.

“No worries. No worries. I know how you brilliant types are,” he said as he stepped into my cottage.

“Now, I won’t take too much of your time. I know that you are busy. Your type is always busy. I’m prepared to pay you around 10,000 kronas a month, provided that you can start immediately. To prove that I’m serious, here’s 1000 kronas as an initial offering,” he said, handing me a pouch of clinking coins.

I didn’t hesitate!

“Absolutely! I can start tomorrow, if that works for you?”

“Tomorrow is fine. Here’s the address of the shop, and when you get there, let the head tanner know that you have arrived. He’ll set you up with your own tools, you can keep them if you want, and where you’ll work.”

He shook my hand and smiled brightly.

“I’m so glad that you accepted! This is fantastic! I’ll see you tomorrow, then,” he said as he left my cottage.





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This was fantastic! Yesterday, I needed money to stay in my cottage, and today, I got fired. However, everything worked out... all because of that little ugly statue! The shop owner did tell me that I would need it. I didn't know if the statue was causing the problem or if it was just a coincidence. However, they do say that "Trouble comes in threes." So, what else is going to happen to me? It doesn't matter. That ugly little statue was here to save me every time.

I lay down on my old bed and looked around. The shabby room wasn't good enough anymore. With the new job and the statue, I now had a way to live the life I was meant to live, not the one I had. Everything had to go. New table. New bed. New clothes... but... why stop there? Why not just buy a larger cottage in a nicer area of town? I could even get myself a carriage, like the rich people, and not have to walk everywhere.

This was the life I was meant to have!

After a quick nap, I got up and started the fire in the hearth—it was time to make dinner. As the fire blazed, the room became much smokier than usual, and as I looked around, there was a slight haze. The smoke got thicker as it flooded the room. I quickly opened the windows and poured water onto the fire. More smoke filled the room, as none was rising through the chimney.

Well, that's the third trouble... the chimney was blocked!

Fine!

Once the smoke cleared from the room, I walked over to the table, picked up the ugly statue, and said, "I want a new hearth—something fancy. I know the landlord isn't going

to fix my chimney. I also want a new cooking pot and new dishes. Wait. Instead, I want a new house.”

Nothing happened.

I grabbed the statue again and made the same wish.

Nothing.

Frustrated, I threw it against the wall and yelled, “Fine! Be that way, you stupid statue!”

The red eye glowed as it lay on the floor, and the statue stood up. Instead of plunging the sword into itself, a small hand appeared from the red gash in the stomach. Another hand appeared, and together, they pulled apart the gash, revealing a small, robed skeletal figure that crawled out. With a wet slopping sound, it fell onto the floor as if the ugly statue had just given birth to it.

The skeletal creature got to its knees, gingerly removed some of the clear ichor from its robe, and stared at me. Normally, I would have freaked out, but after what I had seen for the last couple of days, I assumed that this was normal.

“Uh... hello?” I said to the creature.

It held up its right forefinger in a gesture for me to wait and surveyed the room. Taking a deep breath, the weird little creature floated to my eye level and focused its right red eye at me.

“You are Jonathan? The one making the wishes, correct?” it asked.

“Yes. I’m grateful for everything you’ve done. I’m sorry if the wish for a new house was too large a request,” I said.

“No. Not too large. I will grant it. However, there is the matter of payment. Didn’t the last person who owned me

tell you about it?”

“Well, he said that I would need it soon and that, once things were better, I had to pass it to someone else. I was going to do that once I had the new house. Is that okay?”

“That’s fine. However, the first two wishes made your life significantly better. This third wish is not needed. I will still grant it and more, but for every wish granted, you’ll have to fulfill someone else’s wish. Do you agree?”

“How would I fulfill their wish? Would I use your magic to fulfill their wishes? I don’t understand,” I said.

The small skeletal creatures smiled and said, “Yes. Yes, you will.”

“Then, I agree,” I said.

With that, a small ball of red and grey floated above the creature’s head and spun faster and faster. The quicker it spun, the more transparent and larger it became. I tried to get away as it became large enough to touch me, but I couldn’t move. In the blink of an eye, the ball covered me and the room and was gone.

More wishes! A new house! I could have anything I wanted!

This was the life I deserved!

That next month, I’d made more wishes than I ever thought I could. There was nothing I couldn’t have. I moved into my new house and didn’t take the new job. Why would I need a job if everything could be gained by wishing?

The new house was more like a castle than a cottage. With fifty fully furnished bedrooms, a cleaning staff to take care of me and the house, and beautiful pieces of rare art in each room, I was finally satisfied that I had achieved my

life's goal. Heck! I even had a secure gem room in the basement that overflowed with coins and gems from all over the world. There was nothing that I couldn't have!

One afternoon, as I was going to make another wish, I pulled the statue from a safe location in my guarded basement and looked at it. Over the last month, in my hurry to wish for everything, the statue had changed, and I never noticed.

I placed the statue on my large dining room table, but was shocked by its appearance. The dark green skin had become clearer, and the sword appeared to be made of glass. Inside the translucent statue sat the skeletal figure that had shown up a month ago. The creature looked up at me, smiled, and returned to its immobile state.

"Remember your promise," the voice in my head said.

The small skeletal creature faded from inside the ugly statue.





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My promise. My promise was to fulfill the wishes of others. But I'm not ready. My life was better, but it could be even better than it is. I don't have everything I wanted!

No!

I'm not ready. That weird little creature was wrong. I'm not ready!

Like a childhood game I used to play, I glared at the ugly green statue, which stared back at me. The first one to blink would lose. I knew that I would fail, but I wasn't going to lose to that thing.

I had to fulfill the wishes of others. I thought more and more about that, and then an idea occurred to me.

Fine.

I took a deep breath and said, "I wish that I no longer need you to fulfill my wishes. I can do it myself."

The ugly green statue became more transparent as the skeletal figure reappeared within it.

It grinned and said, "Every time."

A bright red light burst from the statue's red eye and struck me in the chest. Falling off the chair, I felt the skin on my body burn as I screamed for the servants.

No one answered as the smell of charred meat filled the air.

Curiously, there were no flames. Just the smell of cooking meat, as my skin turned dark pink and then became translucent. Terror gripped me as I viewed my muscles

and internal organs, which were exposed, and small mites and other tiny insects ran over the organs and along the muscles. In certain areas, they would bore into an organ and disappear. At that moment, I felt more pain than I had ever felt in my entire life, and as soon as they disappeared, the pain went away.

Over and over again for what felt like an eternity. More mites and insects. More pain.

At some point, I felt the skin that covered my stomach become softer and softer, and I clutched my arms around myself in fear that the organs would burst through the skin. I could feel the organs move as more insects filled them.

As quickly as the burning started, it stopped.

So did the pain.

At that moment, my skin became opaque and turned dark pink again as wave after wave of cold washed over my body. I couldn't stop shivering and clutched my arms around me even harder. Every time I moved, small slivers of dark lines appeared as the skin cracked. I dared not call out again, for I was afraid that my mouth and jaw, now frozen, would crack and fall off.

One clump of hair wiggled its way out of my face.

My head itched.

More clumps of hair moved out of my face.

More itching.

Something was moving in my hair! I had no idea what was causing it, but I was beyond even caring. The cold had a firm hold on me as I prayed for death.

No such luck.

The movement increased across my scalp as the hair twisted, each strand threading together and weaving upwards toward the ceiling. I felt a small pair of claws dig into the top of my scalp as the hair solidified. Feathers? Was that feathers brushing against my scalp?

Caw!

Like a nightmare version of the Phoenix rising above an erupting volcano, the condensed hair took flight, and I saw a raven hovering above me as I looked up. Still attached to strands of hair on my head, it dove towards my face and forced me onto my back.

Caw!

It looked at me and said in a cold voice that sounded just like the skeletal creature that resided inside the statue, “Remember your promise.”

It dove towards me with outstretched talons, but instead of raking my face with its claws, the raven, still attached to my head by strands of hair, grabbed large clumps of hair and flew towards the ugly green statue. My hair grew impossibly long as I remained on the floor, and the raven sat beside the ugly green statue sitting on the table.

A voice in my head sounded again.

“Remember your promise,” the voice said.

The statue stood up and grabbed the raven by its throat. As the raven’s wing fluttered, the statue shoved the raven into its chest, and it was swallowed up in the same manner as a large snake consumes its prey.

My hair was now coming out of the chest of the statue, and, to my horror, it braced its feet and pulled on it!

Slowly, but surely, I was dragged towards the table and the

ugly green statue standing on it.

Ignoring the blistering cold of my body and hoping that my skin wouldn't crack wide open, I tried to grab my chair or the edge of the table. The harder the statue pulled, the more pain I felt from my hair being pulled. I couldn't stop being dragged towards it.

I screamed. I yelled. I pleaded. No response from the statue.

It just kept dragging me towards it.

As my body drew closer and closer to the statue, I noticed that it looked just like me. The armor was still there. The sword was on the table next to it. The red eye glowed, and the gash was still present, but it was me... just with a red eye and gash in my chest.

The closer I got, the more my chest hurt. One eye became blurry and, eventually, I lost vision in that eye. The other one still worked, but the statue was now red. So was the room and the table.

With tears rolling down my face, I gave up and let myself be dragged across the table. The last thing I remember was the gash on the statue opening impossibly wide and being dragged into it.

Sometime later, I don't know when, I felt a warmth flow over my body. So cold. I've been cold for a long time, and I barely remember what it felt like to be warm. I open my one red eye and see one of my servants holding me in her hand.

“Hi. I heard that you grant wishes. Is that true? If so, I would love to be able to take my son on a trip so that he can visit his father.”

“As you wish,” I said.

ugly green statue standing on it.

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"Hi. I heard that you grant wishes. Is that true? If so, I would love to be able to take my son on a trip so that he can visit his father."

"As you wish," I said.

I stood up, took the sword in my right hand, and plunged it into my stomach

ugly green statue standing on it.

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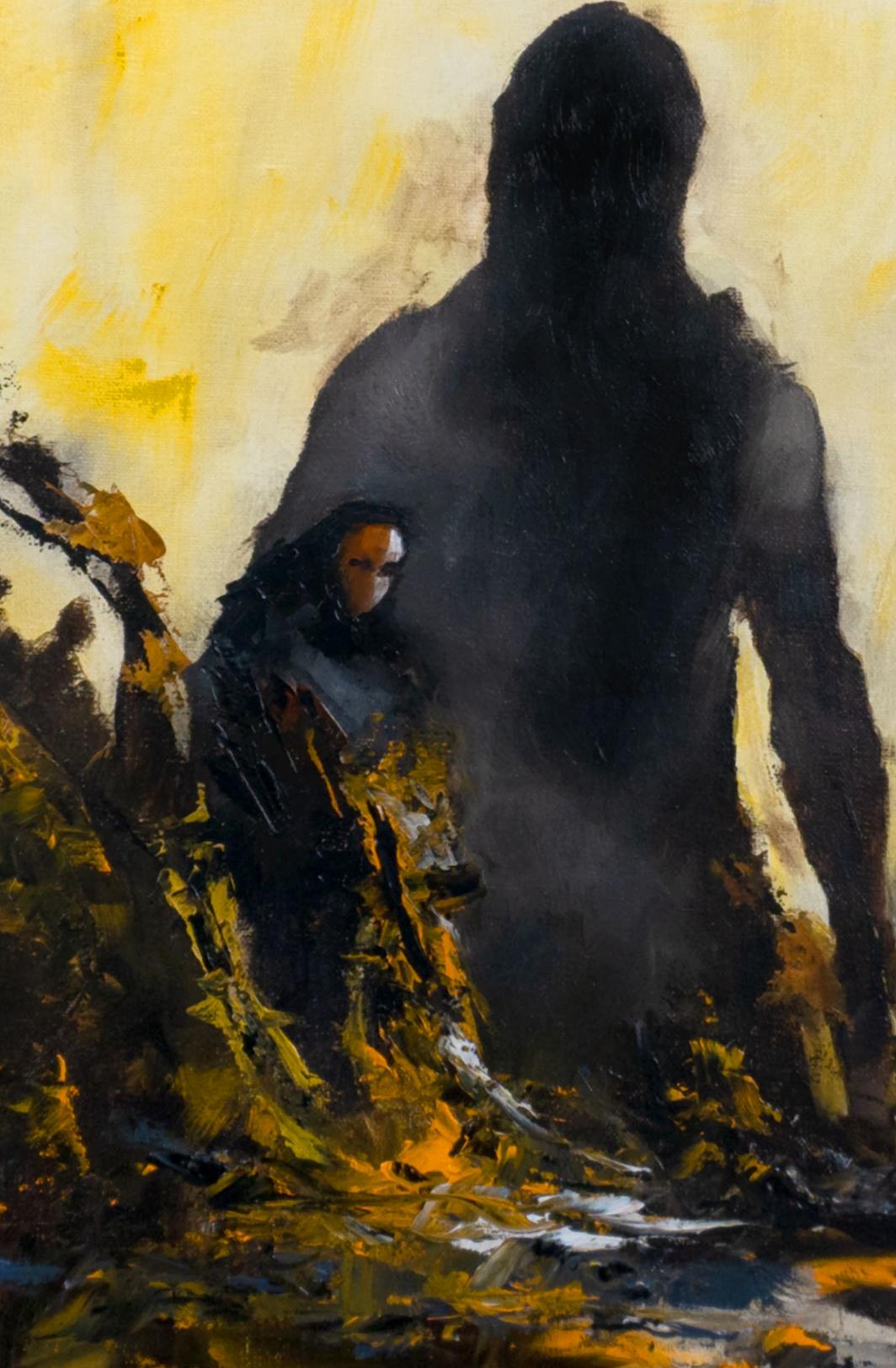
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can visit his father.”

“As you wish,” I said.

I stood up, took the sword in my right hand, and plunged it into my stomach.



## No Recourse

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Cough.

Cough.

OK. I admit it.

I was jealous.

Every town seemed to have one nowadays—a lottery. Something thought up by rich people to make themselves better. In my small village, the monthly lottery was a way for ten lucky winners to be fully healed by the local sacramancer. Those in charge said that everybody had an equal chance to win.

Yeah. Right.

I felt sick to my stomach as I looked at those ten people standing in the village center. They didn't deserve the special treatment. It was poor people like me who should be standing in the circles and being healed. We're the ones most in need.

How is it that the ones who always won the lottery were the same ones who could afford to go to a sacramance? I swore that I recognized some of the same people who received healing last year. Occasionally, you would see a poor person among them, but that was pretty rare.

Cough.

The oozing sores on my arms and the scabs on my chest itched every time I shifted under my heavy cloak. I didn't want to wear it, but I learned from experience that others tended to notice and shy away from me.

Today, I needed anonymity.

As with the others, I watched in fascination as the local sacramancer stood among the ten lottery winners, all standing in a circle in the central square. Each winner stood on a colored circle, but it appeared that the older ones stood on darker-colored circles than the younger ones. In the center of the ring formed by the ten circles, an image of a scowling face within a crescent moon and a sword was embedded in the cobblestones.

The sacramancer, dressed in simple purple robes, dropped to his knees and placed a bowl of gel on the scowling image on the ground. Within the wooden bowl, a multicolored gel sloshed above the edge, looking as though it were trying to crawl out but was met by an invisible force. Tall, thin tendrils appeared over the bowl's edge but receded when they could not extend beyond it.

Cough.

Several people stood away from me or glared at me as I clutched my chest.

He dipped his left hand into the bowl and watched part of the gel flow onto it. Rising to his feet, the sacramancer approached each participant, touching the forefinger of his left hand to their forehead to transfer a small amount of the gel to them. As the gel slowly worked across their forehead, the participant's eyes glazed over and took on the appearance of a white glowing pearl.

“Blessed be those who receive the gift of life from Lord Mazram!” The sacramancer stated loudly every time a lottery winner's eyes glazed over. The crowd cheered each time this happened.

Once all the winners were immobilized, the sacramancer returned to the bowl of gel and, from his robe, pulled out a ShadowMyths card, softly reciting a phrase. I couldn't hear it, but everybody in town knew it...

Naloth Neek Sect Shibach

Payment shall be made. Payment shall be given.

Tok Seth Noch

As the card glowed, the gel bubbled, and the tendrils that were restrained before met no resistance. Like multi-colored undulating ropes of flesh, they flowed over the edge of the bowl and wormed their way over to each person standing on a colored circle. The thicker tendrils moved towards the darker circles, while the thinner ones moved towards the lighter colors.

The crowd collectively gasped and cheered as the tendrils snaked around the legs of each member standing on a circle and crawled up their bodies. In a matter of seconds, the tendrils covered the lower halves of their body and transformed into rock.

Crack!

Crack!

Now that each participant was immobile and resembled a small mountain with a body emerging from the top, smaller rocks extracted themselves from the base and flowed over the exposed body. Soon, their entire body would be encased in the rock, and after a day, the rock would flake off, and the person underneath would be fully healed.

It wasn't fair!

I should be on one of the circles!

This was the slow part of the process. After having seen so many of these things, I knew that this part would take all night. It was like congealed blood flowing over an open wound, and it was very dull to watch.

However, today, I would wait to the end.

I had no choice.

Cough.

The open sores itched more under my cloak.

Hours later, as the sun reached the horizon, I stood there with three other men. I assumed that we all had the same idea... take the bowl. It still contained some gel, not a lot, but enough to help each one of us. It never occurred to me that there would be others like me; others who wanted to be healed in this manner. By looking at the rags that we all wore, it was obvious that none of us could afford a healer.

This was our only hope.

On cue, we all looked at one another and the bowl, and I knew we all had the same thought... race to be the first to reach the bowl before the others. Fortunately, I was prepared. I'm always prepared.

I drew open my cloak to show them a body covered by broken armor, open sores, and a large curved sword made of bone and metal. The sword, my only companion throughout the wars, had tasted the blood of more humans and monsters than I could ever count. It stood by me throughout all of my trials and was my savior for so many years.

I glared coldly at the other men as I slowly walked towards the bowl, my sword scraping against the ground. Seeing that I hadn't lifted the weapon, one man thought I was too weak and that everything was for show.

He was wrong.

He smiled as he drew a smaller sword from behind his back and rushed forward. Without lifting my sword, I watched him rush me with his sword overhead. I had experienced the same scene over and over in my time serving to protect

this town, and I found that most of my city opponents were amateurs who thought that having a weapon made them tough.

This particularly stupid amateur with his sword above his head—how would he defend himself against an attack?—learned a final lesson that day.

I let him get within range and, rotating the sword in my hand so that the sharp end of the blade faced upwards, I brought the sword in an upward arc and watched the blade cut a large vertical gash in the amateur's stomach and chest.

He fell at my feet as I stepped to the side.

“Anyone else? Might as well get it over now,” I said to the two remaining men.

Both of them quickly shook their head and didn't move.

I placed my blade on the corpse in front of me and, as always, all of the blood from the man flowed into it. The sword turned dark red for a minute or two, then resumed its normal appearance, a bone-white color.

I saw the two other men stare at my sword, absorbing the blood, as I went over to retrieve the bowl. I knew they wouldn't touch the sword. No one ever did.

Unfortunately, I couldn't lift the bowl.

I retrieved my sword and tried to pry it off the ground, but nothing happened. No matter how I tried to pull on the bowl or kick it, it always remained firmly attached to the ground. The stone-encased participants all stared in my direction, their pearl-white eyes seeming to laugh at me. Magic must have held it in place. The only choice was to place my exposed skin into the bowl and let the gel crawl onto my body.

I hadn't planned for that. I had hoped to take it home, try a little bit at a time, see what happened, and then determine my best course of action. I knew, honestly, that I was just afraid. I wanted it, but in my heart, I hadn't committed to the act of succumbing to the gel.

Just as in battle, things change, and you have to go with your gut instincts.

I removed the glove from my right hand and placed my hand in the bowl.

As the gel slowly flowed onto my hand and up my arm, I felt a slight tingling as the hand went numb.





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Cough. Cough. Cough.

My body wracked spasmodically as the cough echoed in the central square.

With the gel now entirely gone from the bowl and crawling up my hand and lower arm, I turned and ran to my home as fast as I could. The alleys would be dangerous at this time of the night, but I knew that a lot of the city predators recognized my ragged cloak and would stay away.

That didn't mean that I made myself obvious. There's confidence and then there's stupidity. My goal was to get home as quickly as possible with the least amount of trouble, so I could wait for the gel to take effect. I was glad that the process was slow. I should be able to make it home before I become encased in a cocoon made of stone.

Every so often, someone would stop and look at me, but they turned away quickly. The sight of an old man in torn clothing, coughing and clutching something under their cloak, was not uncommon. Most people ignored it and went on with their business. If asked later, they had seen nothing out of the ordinary, which was true.

I saw my hovel at the end of a cross-street that opened up into two alleys where I knew that many of the forgotten lived in makeshift piles of old boards and discarded refuse. They didn't bother anyone, and I didn't bother them.

However, even though I needed to get into my home as quickly as I could, I still followed my routine before entering. I slowly approached the opening of each alleyway to ensure that no one was watching. The only time I ever came out or entered was in the darkness, and the last time I was here was early this morning before the sun came up.

Cough.

Cough.

After I scanned the alleys, I checked the door to my hovel. Since my right hand was not usable at the moment, I awkwardly drew out my sword with my left hand and placed it against the door frame. Everybody was always protecting doors with magic, but no one ever thought about the door frame. The frame didn't change color, indicating that no spell had been placed on my door and that no one had tried to force entry.

One quick glance back and with the sword leaning against the frame, I opened it and smelled the damp, musty smell of old mold and clothing. Home. It wasn't the prettiest of places, but it was mine, and that was enough.

Grabbing my sword, I closed the door behind me, secure that everything was going to be okay. Besides, in the time that it took me to reach my home, the gel had fully covered my right hand and forearm.

With my left hand, it took a moment, but I was able to light some candles in the room. I had no money for the fancy light balls that all of those rich people had. I just found worn-down nubs of candles while digging through a garbage dump.

Ripping off my clothing, I hurriedly took off my cloak, armor, and as many bandages as I could. I knew that some had been covered by the gel, but didn't think that was a problem. After all, the lottery winners weren't required to stand naked as the gel covered them.

I just wanted to be as free as I could, as the gel covered me.

Taking off the bandages was incredibly painful, and, as I realized after I did it, I probably didn't need to do it. I would learn later on that sticking my hand in the bowl full

of gel was my first mistake. I would make one much worse later on.

Staring at my old, decayed body in the large, broken mirror, I was reminded of why people avoided me—years of war and fighting had taken their toll on me. With my broken armor on the floor and the bandages piled on top of it, I got a good look at my broken body and how far I had fallen since the end of my military service.

All I saw were exposed ribs, open sores, and ripped tissue that reminded me of lost battles and personal failures. In the low candlelight of the room, my bleached, white skin that hadn't seen the sun in years hung limply on my thin frame. These were the hallmark features that defined who I was now — open sores oozing greenish black pus that left their mark on the bandages, now piled on the armor lying at my feet.

This town owed me. It owed me a lot.

Cough.

Cough.

As the gel moved up past my bicep and towards my right shoulder, the tingling persisted. The ever-present pain in my sword arm that had defined my life for the last seven years, though, was gone! The itching and painful throbbing of the joints were a thing of the past! The gel was working!

Cough.

I wondered...

Impulsively, I slowly opened my mouth and, hesitantly, touched my tongue with my gel-covered index finger. The finger tasted slightly salty as a small part of the gel flowed across the tongue and worked its way down my throat.

As with the right arm, my throat tingled as the gel flowed down to my lungs. Hacking furiously, the cough became even worse as I fell to my hands and knees. Heaving, I tried to take in a breath but couldn't. I was going to die in the stupidest possible way. All because I got greedy.

Just as my vision blurred from a lack of air, the soreness in my throat dissipated, my breathing became easier, and I was able to stand again. Standing, I bent over with my hands on my knees and, miraculously, the cough was gone. The gel had made its way to my lungs.

I was going to be okay!

Seconds later, I knew, though, I had spoken too soon. My right arm and lungs were covered in the multi-colored gel, but as it went to cover my chest, it stopped.

There wasn't enough!

It wasn't fair! I needed more.

Ignoring the bandages and armor, I quickly grabbed my cloak and sword and ran out the door to head back to the center of town. I had taken all of the gel from the bowl, but maybe...just maybe, I could get more that was flowing on the people in the town's center.

At the town's center, most of the gel had solidified over all of the participants but one. On that one, a large woman with a scar that ran across her face, the gel moved slowly over her face towards her left eye.

That was the one!

I rushed over to place my exposed hand on the gel moving up her face, and... it ignored me! It just moved around my fingers and flowed more towards her left eye. Ignoring the fact that I was shoving my hand in someone's face, I pushed harder against the gel, but it only flowed around

my fingers.

No! No! No!

That wasn't fair!

I tried to shove my right hand with the still-moving gel on the moving organism on her face, hoping it would attract the other gel to join it. I was right. It did, but not in the way I had intended. The gel on my right hand began to flow off and onto her face.

No!

I quickly pulled my hand, but enough gel had moved off my hand that the gel on my chest moved back towards my arm, allowing the hand to be completely covered.

I walked away from the circle of participants and sat against a decayed wall. As I sat there, I knew I was lost. The gel began the process of hardening, but it wasn't enough. Was I okay with the amount of repair that had been done?

No! I deserved more!

The town owed me!

But... I didn't know what to do. I could wait for the next time the lottery happened, but that wouldn't be for another month. As a reminder, I felt a wetness cover my chest, and the black ooze from my open sores trickled down my body. I should have wrapped up the bandages, but I was sure that this was going to work.

I had no other choice but to return and... wait! The sacramancer! Perhaps I could assist him in completing the process. I know that he would know who I was. During my tenure in the town's service, I was well-known to many of the commanding officers and the town council. He would know exactly who I was.

I was sure that he would help!

This was mistake number two.

of gel was my first mistake. I would make one much worse later on.

Staring at my old, decayed body in the large, broken mirror, I was reminded of why people avoided me—years of war and fighting had taken their toll on me. With my broken armor on the floor and the bandages piled on top of it, I got a good look at my broken body and how far I had fallen since the end of my military service.

All I saw were exposed ribs, open sores, and ripped tissue that reminded me of lost battles and personal failures. In the low candlelight of the room, my bleached, white skin that hadn't seen the sun in years hung limply on my thin frame. These were the hallmark features that defined who I was now — open sores oozing greenish black pus that left their mark on the bandages, now piled on the armor lying at my feet.

This town owed me. It owed me a lot.





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The second, and final, mistake—I knocked on the door to the sacramancer’s citadel.

With a slow moaning sound that echoed the life leaving my chest, the door opened, and a tall, thin man, taller than my short 5-foot height, which was even more so since I spent most of my days bent over in pain, dressed in an immaculate brown tunic and breeches stepped out from the darkness behind the door.

He didn’t say a word. Just stared at me. Curious considering the late hour of the night.

“Uh... hi... I’m here... to...,” I started out saying nervously.

“The garden. This way, please,” he said.

“But I’m here to see...,” I tried again.

“Yes. To see the master. The garden. He is waiting for you,” the tall man gestured towards the wall to the left of me. It was a blank wall, so I had no idea what he was gesturing at. He was waiting for me? Was I supposed to scale it? In my younger days, it would have been easy. Nowadays, I couldn’t do it if my life depended on it, especially now with the gel immobilizing my right arm.

As the tall man walked me to the wall, he drew a card with an image of a portal and a raven on top of it. Muttering something too low for me to hear, he placed the card against the wall, and the stone around the wall screamed as part of it melted into the card. I thought I saw faces in the melting stone, but wasn’t sure. It was late, and I was too tired and frantic to think clearly.

He gestured towards the opening, and as I stepped through it, more faces appeared, melting together to close it behind me. Although it was the middle of the night, the garden looked as if it were any sunny day in town. The grass was dark green, and an enormous tree containing skulls stood in the middle of it.

No one else was around.

Now, I'd seen my share of weird things in my life, but this ranked among the top of them. The wall that had stepped through showed faces flowing in and out of the surface, as if people were drowning, and every so often, they were able to reach the surface. Curiosity got the better of me as I walked over to the wall and tried to touch the faces to see if it was an illusion or real.

I never made it that far.

Hiss!

What?

Hiss!

I turned to see where the sound came from.

It was the tree in the center of the garden.

Hiss!

It sat on the branch and watched as I turned to face it. The largest vulture that I'd ever seen. Behind it, the tree was full of dirty, old skulls, with some still retaining skin and hair, while most didn't. Almost all of them were missing their lower jaws, and from the eye sockets and the openings of their external nares, a colored, thick, mucus-like ball dripped onto the ground.

Each time a ball hit the ground, it shimmered for a second and then transformed into a small man or woman. Some

of them looked at me before running towards a small door in the side of the building on the left side of the garden.

My arm tingled, and when I looked at it, I thought I saw the faces of the same type of men and women trying to move on my arm. Small hands appeared from the gel on my right arm as the people on my arm tried to push against my skin. Each time they failed, they would disappear back into the gel on my arm, making room for another one to take its place.

Cough.

Cough.

The coughing returned as my lungs itched, and I felt something scratching inside my chest. I doubled over and fell to my hands and knees. Then I saw it... in front of me on the ground... a pair of talons that stood next to my hands. Naturally, it was the vulture and, apparently, I would probably be its next meal.

Cough.

“Catharsis. Return to your post,” I heard a strong, deep voice in the distance. With a flap of its wings, the vulture was gone. Then I felt a pair of thin hands grab my arms and pull me to my feet.

Staring at the sacramancer from the square, he touched a ShadowMyths card to my chest. The card sank into my chest, and when I tried to raise my hands to push him away, I couldn't... my arms were frozen. I couldn't even step back because, at my feet, numerous small blue colored men held them in place.

“I'll be right back. Let's get you all healed up,” he said. He turned around and walked back into the house. Turning my head, I saw Catharsis stare at me, but I didn't care. I wasn't sure what the sacramancer wanted in return for healing me,

but I was happy to pay it. This wasn't the first time I had been required to provide service that I didn't know about. It probably wasn't the last time, either.

"Guess you won't be eating me for dinner, eh, Cartharsis?" I smirked at the vulture.

From the entryway to the citadel, the sacramancer returned with a bowl of multi-colored gel. I was going to be healed! It was going to really happen this time!

As in the village center, he placed the bowl on the ground, recited the magical words while holding the ShadowMyths card, and, as before, the multi-colored tendrils in the bowl flowed over to my frozen position and solidified into rock. This was the same thing that happened to the lottery winners, but much faster.

The only part of the ritual that was different was that he didn't place a piece of gel on my forehead.

"Thought that you could take the gel without my knowledge, eh, Jonathan? Happens every month. I knew you would show up sooner or later. One of you always shows up at my citadel, most of the time it's you soldiers that are the ones who show up, and asking for aid to finish the ritual. Every month," the sacramancer said with a malicious smile.

Why didn't he put the gel on my forehead?

"By now, you think that everything is going to be fine. However, you're wondering why your eyes aren't glazed over? Well..." he smiled, "I need you to remember what happened. Until the end of your days, I want you to remember that you shouldn't steal from those better than you. You are a tool. You always were, and you always will be. Now that the town is done with you, you are now in the service of me... as long as you still have a mind."

As a thousand suns flared behind my eyes, I felt my brain

catch on fire. If it wasn't for the solid rock holding me up and the cold stare of the sacramancer, I thought I would pass out. I couldn't run. I couldn't move. All I could do was cry and scream.

As quickly as the pain came on, it left me. My eyes still hurt, but I felt... stronger? Younger? What happened? The rock, formed from the solidified gel, flaked off and crumbled at my feet.

I was remade!

Even in my younger days, I was never as strong or healthy as I am now.

He did it!

As I went to hug him and offer my gratitude, Catharsis swooped down and pulled me off my feet. He carried me to the top of the tree of skulls and dropped me into it.

What!?!

The leaves cushioned me, and many of the uppermost thick branches twisted around my torso and held me in place as all of the skulls turned to face me. The thinner branches wound around my arms and legs to prevent me from thrashing about, and after several minutes, I was firmly held in place as the skulls resumed their position, facing downwards.

“Why do you think there are never any guards watching the village center after I've left the ritual? Why do you think I leave the ritual? Do you think that I'm stupid enough to come and let anyone take the gel from the bowl?” the sacramancer called up to me, stuck in the tree.

“No,” he continued. “This is your gift to the town. Every month, someone gives themselves up for the town. Jonathan. The town and I thank you!”

He laughed and walked away.

I tried to pull myself away from the branches and leaves, as I felt my skin burn. I looked down and saw it shrivel under the leaves, and the branches tightened around my torso even more.

Something rose from my stomach!

At first, a small drop of colored gel flowed out of my mouth from the edges. Then more came out of my nose. A sharp pain erupted in my eyes as I briefly saw my tears take on the shape of thick, colored gel. I tried to scream, but the more I opened my mouth, the more gel flowed out of it.

Looking down, I saw the colored gel hit the ground and transform into little men and women that ran towards the citadel.





## An Exchange of Gifts

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“My lord. It’s time,” Nikolai said to the pool of black mucus that filled the worn fountain.

I watched the other four acolytes with their worried looks who stood behind him... like little children scared of their shadows. Not me, though. I wasn’t like them, and I wasn’t afraid of what was to come. I stood off to the side because Nikolai wasn’t the only one who could complete this mission... no matter what he and the others thought.

I glared at the others and, unconsciously, let out a snort. Those closest to me venomously stared back and shuffled a bit away from me. I should have been the one to call our Lord, Vashali, but the rest of the group chose Nikolai to address him just because they liked him more.

What a ridiculous idea!

I was the most accomplished of our group, but for others, popularity was their only measure of greatness. I was the one who excelled at the studies of our enemies, the Pack. I was the one who knew what the perfect gift would be for them. I was the one who was brave enough to make the trek.

But no. They didn’t like me because they knew that they fell short of what needed to be done, and I didn’t have a problem telling them so.

“Jonathan. Why don’t you leave us alone? You’re not welcome here. Go back to your studies,” they would always say when I tried to correct their chants when using the ShadowMyths cards or working on potions. They were mentally and physically too weak ever to make it past the acolyte stage. They were children who would fail the trials.

Not me, though.

The fountain's cracked and worn edges showed its age long before I was ripped from my family and brought to this unholy place. My parents, if you could call them that, traded me when I was just seven years old for a loaf of bread and a pouch of coins. They never even said goodbye or looked back as I cried for them to take me home.

Over the last ten years, though, I've come to realize that I didn't need them. They would have just held me back. I didn't need anyone.

We stood around the fountain and watched the thick, oily surface undulate as something moved close to its surface. The dark pool—which was made of the darkest material I had ever seen—had hundreds of thin tentacles rising out of it, and at the end of each tentacle, a small hairless child's face looked around and then disappeared back into the blackness from which it came. Some of the faces smiled at me, and that told me everything I knew—I was destined to be one of the leaders in this church.

The outer edge of the circular room was marked by the shadows of black cats, which were cast against the stone walls and flowed in and out of one another. The room echoed with light scratching sounds that came from the wall, and every so often, one would stop, stare at me, and smile. I knew that the others couldn't see it because, honestly, they were too stupid to notice.

Nervously, clothed in our black robes, the four other senior acolytes and I, all seventeen years old, stared at the pool. It was time for the Exchange of Gifts, and we all wondered who would be the blessed one to bring the gift to the Arbiter.

“My lord. It's time,” Nikolai repeated once more.

All the faces that had risen from the pool looked at Nikolai and then at one another. Some smiled, sneered, or laughed as they sank back into the pool. At the point where the black liquid met the walls of the fountain, faces appeared looking upward. Their mouths opened, and black liquid gushed out to form a large, flat bridge above the pool. Even the shadows of cats on the walls stopped moving and faded away.

Within the pool, a long, thick shape moved under the surface and worked its way to a side of the bridge. Sliding out of the blackness, a sinuous snake-like thing wound itself around the surface until it reached the top of the bridge, dripping onto it.

Once the thing was on top of the bridge, it flowed and shaped into Vashali, who resembled the largest cat I had ever seen. I always thought he looked very much like an alley cat near my house that I used to feed scraps to every morning. My mom hated that cat. She said I shouldn't be wasting food on it, but I didn't care. He was my friend, and I didn't have a lot of them. Besides, she— and my father!— sold me! I was right not to waste my time on what they thought.

“Who will bring the gift to the Arbiter?” Vashali asked.

Nikolai stepped up towards the edge of the pool, knelt before Vashali, and said, “We have chosen that I will, my lord.”

“So be it,” Vashali said.

In my mind, I heard Vashali say, “Are you sure? Are you strong enough?”

“Yes,” I mentally responded, “search my mind. You know that I'm better than those idiots. I guarantee that I will succeed.”

“Yes,” I heard Vashali say in my mind, “Yes. You are perfect for the task.”

At that moment, Vashali leaned over the bridge, its body tensed and sides heaving, as its jaw widened, and low guttural hacking escaped its throat. After a few wet coughs echoed throughout the room, a small, smooth black ball fell out and dropped toward the mucus-like black pool below it.

As the ball fell, it stopped just short of entering the pool and floated in mid-air. A pair of dark purple eyestalks emerged from the pool and rubbed against the orb, leaving a thin layer of mucus on every part they touched. Once completed, they faced towards Vashali and burst, leaving small fragments attached to the stalks to sink back into the pool.

“Nikolai. Rise. Chosen one. Accept the gift to be given to the Arbiter,” Vashali said.

Nikolai rose, turned, and smiled briefly to the rest of us and stood in front of the fountain with his hands outstretched. All of our eyes focused on the black ball that floated toward him.

This wasn't fair! I'm the Chosen One! Me!

“Now!” I heard Vashali scream in my head.

I lunged forward and pushed two acolytes out of my way and shoved Nikolai to the ground. As the floating ball slowly moved in his direction, I reached out and grabbed it with my left hand. Immediately, I felt the searing of the flesh and tried to drop it, but my hand no longer responded to my commands!

Screaming, I fell to my knees and felt the hard stone beneath me. As the cooked flesh filled the room, the other acolytes, even Nikolai, stepped back and watched as the

skin blackened and fell off. All that was left of my left hand was a skeletal palm and fingers that clutched the ball.

“You have been Chosen,” Vashali said, out loud, to me.

“No!”

“He’s not the one!”

“It’s supposed to be Nikolai! Not him!”

The rest of the acolytes yelled in unison.

“No. He is to be the Gift Giver,” said Nikolai. “Vashali said that it was to be this way.”

He knew? Nikolai knew that I was supposed to be the one?

Drawing a card from his black robe, Nikolai whispered to the card, and, in front of us, a black obsidian portal that looked like a nest appeared. On the other side of the portal, I saw a darkening sky and more priests in red robes.

“Bring him along,” Nikolai said.

The other acolytes picked me up and carried me through the portal.



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I stood there, barely, and looked at what remained of my left hand. The pain was gone, and slowly, I realized that I could move the bones and, with that thought, I screamed and dropped the ball.

As soon as the ball fell from my hand, it floated back up and into it again. No matter how many times I tried to throw it away or let go of it, the black obsidian nightmare returned to my clutching, bone-hand.

“You knew this, didn’t you!” I said to Nikolai.

“Yes. Of course, I knew this. Vashali and I agreed that this was the best solution. You wanted to be the Chosen One. You just didn’t know what it meant. I thought that you would be smarter than that. Glad that I was wrong about you,” Nikolai said, laughing.

I thought about the way the faces laughed at me when they sank into the pool, and Vashali’s comment about “You are perfect for the task.” My body shook with fear at what was to come. I wanted to strike Nikolai down and bash in the heads of the other acolytes that grinned at me—those big, stupid smiles on their big, stupid faces.

As the strength of my body returned, I saw, beyond my small circle of acolytes, a group of red-robed priests. The faces of the priests were cloaked by their hoods, but it was unmistakable that they were not human. Tall and thin, they glided towards us in a single line, slow and awkward. Every so often, a hand would appear and, similar to mine, it was not made of flesh and blood but of black and white bone.

Nikolai approached the lead in line, kneeled with his head lowered, and said, “In celebration of the Exchange of Gifts, Vashali, our great lord, has offered a messenger to

bring the Gift for the Pack.”

“Bring the offering so that the Arbiter may judge its worthiness,” the lead priest said as he touched Nikolai’s head with his bony, clawed hand.

Nikolai stood up and gestured for the other acolytes to bring me forth. I stood in front of the lead priest as Nikolai and the other acolytes stepped away. Still holding the cursed black ball, the sky grew darker, and white mists flowed from the bottom of each of the red priests’ cloaks. Cold air washed over me as the wind grew stronger.

“You are the Gift Giver?” The lead priest asked.

“I am the Chosen One,” I said.

“Are you the Gift Giver?” He asked again.

“Yes! I’m the Gift Giver!” I said again. Didn’t they understand me? What was wrong with them? Were they as dense as the acolytes?

“Then it is decided,” the lead priest said as the other priests drew back their hoods, and, underneath, each one had the face of an octopus. Chanting lowly to themselves, the priests removed my black robe and place a red one over me. They then brought the black robe over to Nikolai, bowed, and whispered something to him. The other acolytes must have heard what he said because they stared in horror at me.

I didn’t like that look and I had a bad feeling that wanting to be the Chosen was a serious mistake. I thought about taking off the robe but before doing so, the red priests had surrounded me and linked hands. There was nowhere to run.

The wind had grown stronger and the priests chanted malevolent phrases that I couldn’t hear over the wind. I

tried to see where Nikolai and my group was but the mists had thickened. All that was present were the red priests and I in the center.

In clockwise pattern, each priest loudly called out a word that I couldn't make out because of the wind but, after the word was pronounced, he dissolved in a brownish white mist and the one next to it grew taller and thicker in frame. When it got to the final priest, rather than dissolving, his robe turned dark green and the hood formed into a large frog-like monster.

Suddenly the wind died down and the mists disappeared. Behind me, Nikolai and the rest of my group stared in fascination at the Arbiter.

"I am Arbiter. You are Chosen. Present Gift," it said.

I step forward and, in my bone clawed hand, I showed him the black ball given to me by Vashali.

"Uh... this is the gift..." I said. I didn't know what to do or if there was some ritual words that should be said. Even though I had thoroughly researched about this ritual, what I had seen so far, had never been mentioned in any of the parchments.

He stared intently at the ball.

"Gift is good. Chosen is good. Accepted," he said with a deep voice that felt like he was talking underwater.

"Hold," he said and my body froze in place. He then brought his left arm up to his mouth and... bit off a small chunk of the forearm. Green ooze dripped from his mouth and the open wound and the piece of meat in his mouth wiggled as the wound on his arm closed.

Placing the chunk of skin and meat on the black ball in my outstretched hand, the ball moved and a black tentacle

reached out from inside it and grabbed the flesh. More tentacles appeared and dragged the tissue to the balls surface and then it vanished within the ball. The ball became slightly clearer and I could see a small octopoid-like creature moving within it.

“Now you,” the Arbiter looked at me.

“Me? You want me to take a chunk of my skin and feed it to that thing?”

“Yes.”

“Sorry. Can’t move. How am I supposed to do that?”

“You don’t,” said the massive frog-like creature in front of me. “They will,” he said as he gestured to Nikolai and the acolytes.

I’d never seen anyone so happy or move as fast as that group did when they pulled out their knives and ran over to me. Their smile could be seen in the darkest of nights.

“Hold! It is my duty!” Nikolai said to the others. Their disappointment was very apparent.

“Just a little?” One of the acolytes called out.

“No! If you are so eager, cut your own forearm,” Nikolai said.

Embarrassed, the acolyte look down and faded to the back of the group.

Nikolai slid up the sleeve on my right arm and said with a wicked smile, “This is what it means to be Chosen. You’re getting everything you deserve.” The wicked edge of the knife glinted in the sunlight as he sliced off a thin piece of skin and meat from my forearm. The blood from open wound dripped onto the ground and was immediately swallowed up by hordes of spiders that had gathered

around me.

As he placed a piece of my forearm onto the black ball, more tentacles emerged, grabbed the tissue and then retreated back from where they came. Nikolai returned to the group as the ball cracked open and out spilled a small pink octopoid creature.

The Arbiter reached over, cradled the little monster in its arms and kissed the top of its forehead. The small tentacles were flailing around in my direction but he held it firmly against himself.

Aloud, he said

Balar Mot Malcifal

Life is Given. Life is Taken. Peace is Accepted.

Tok Seth Noch

Firmly grasping the head of the small octopoid in one hand, he used the other hand to rip open my robe and exposed my bare chest. The octopoid was shoved at my chest and the tentacles firmly grasped my arms and flowed over my chest. Some of the tentacles pinned my arms to my sides. Some of them lengthened and wrapped themselves fully around me.

I fell over onto my back and, looking at the sky, I tried to scream but couldn't. Like the rest of my body, my mouth was frozen and no words came out. All I could do was stare and watch as the octopoid grew larger and larger until it was almost half my size.

From its eye sockets, four thin tentacles came out and wiggled their ends towards the ground I laid on... two on each side. Once they touched the ground, they grew larger and thicker and I felt myself rise from the earth.

“Gift is ready,” said the Arbiter.

“Gift is ready,” said Nikolai.

Nikolai walked over to where I was laying on the ground entombed by the octopoid monster.

“Rise,” he said.

The monster rose on the four thick tentacles and walked towards the top of the mountain with Nikolai in the lead and the other acolytes following behind us.





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Did they think this was a simple walk up the side of the mountain? Listen to those idiots! Laughing and trying to touch the octopoid legs that carried me along. Didn't they know what was going on? This was a special day for those of our order. If things didn't go well, war will be all we'll know for the next hundred years.

"That's enough!" Nikolai yelled at the acolytes behind me. "This is a solemn ceremony. If you can't respect what is going on, I would suggest that you return to Vashali and tell him why you have returned." The acolytes all shut up, but from my vantage point, I could still see their stupid smiles.

I tried to concentrate on my role in the ceremony, but too many things had happened too quickly for me to understand what was going on. Now that the pain was gone and I was being, I guess you can say, "carried" up the mountain, I thought about what would happen next.

According to the ancient parchments, once the Arbiter had accepted the gift, the bearer of the gift was brought to the mountain to meet the Pack. From there, the text was a little fuzzy, but it indicated that a great reward was presented to the Pack, and the Pack would forever love the Chosen One.

Does that mean that I would be a liaison between the Pack and Vashali? That would be a place of honor that I deserved. With my knowledge and understanding of magic and the old ways, I was sure that both sides would vie for my attention and hold me in great esteem. This was probably a much higher station than just being one of the elders in the church. Maybe... just maybe... I would even be one of the red priests who assisted the Arbiter. After all, they did give me their red robe.

At the top of the mountain, two obelisks stood across from one another at the edge of an enormous stone circle. Glowing black carvings of cats were featured on the stone pavement on which the nearest obelisk stood, and, on the distant obelisk, glowing red carvings of dogs were etched onto the pavement in front of it. Beyond the far obelisk, nothing could be seen but a cloud of bright red dots moving in the darkness.

In front of the obelisk marked for dogs stood a small boy dressed in a blood red tunic and green briefs. Beside him, a small white dog stood as still as if it were a statue. Its eyes glowed with the same red color as the runes below its feet.

“You’re late,” the boy said in a high-pitched voice, looking at the clocks on the structure behind him. He chanted softly to himself, and as the minutes passed, his face twisted and elongated to resemble the dog sitting next to him. His shoulders hunched as he walked towards our group.

“Is the gift ready?” He asked.

“Yes. The Arbiter has accepted the gift of Vashali, and we present it to you, Maulith, on this day of Exchange of Gifts,” Nikolai said to the dog-faced boy.

Maulith sniffed the air several times and shuffled in my direction. After he sniffed over several parts of the octopoid and my chest, arms, and legs, he returned to Nikolai and said, “He is acceptable. Let’s begin. Prepare for the transformation.”

Nikolai walked over to me and placed a ShadowMyths card on the octopoid head sitting on my chest. “I would say that I will miss your presence in the church, but,” he smirked, “that’s a lie. I’m glad that you are no longer with us. I’m going to enjoy watching what happens to you very much.”

The card glowed sickly green and melted into the head of

the octopoid, and once the card disappeared into the soft tissue, the four large tentacles moved me to the nearest obelisk and walked up its side. From there, the tentacles wrapped around the obelisk, and I was firmly held in place, looking at Maulith, the small dog next to him, and the other altar.

Maulith approached me, snarled, and, from his pocket, pulled out a small wad of white cotton stuffing. As he touched the stuffing to the octopoid's head, the white fluff flowed over all of the tentacles and the main octopoid body. The tentacles straightened out, and I felt my arms and legs spread to match them. Without the tentacles holding me against the obelisk, my body slid down to the base, and I was now face to face with the small dog sitting next to Maulith.

I tried to get up, but my arms and legs wouldn't respond. They became stiffer as the stuffing covered them and the tentacles until I couldn't distinguish what parts made up the octopoid and what parts made up my body. My body had fused with the octopoid creature and stuffing.

As the stuffing dissolved on my skin, I quickly realized that the octopoid and I were one now! I tried to scream, but nothing came out. I no longer had lungs to scream with!

Maulith and the small dog grew larger and more ominous-looking. All I could focus on was the white dog's canines and drool splashing on the stones in front of me. I soon realized that they hadn't grown... I had shrunk!

The formerly small white dog rushed over, picked me up by my leg, shook me, and happily bounced away toward the darkness beyond the dog obelisk.

Behind me, I heard, "The toy is accepted. The pact is secure for another hundred years, and peace will continue between the dogs and cats."

Ahead of me, I heard... lots and lots of barking and, then I saw it... a large pack of dogs wagging their tails in the darkness.





## We All Need Friends

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I loved to watch her play with dead things.

I didn't know why, but it was comforting. She sorted the animal carcasses on the ground in front of her and picked through the ones she liked the most... or, as she said, the ones who needed her the most.

Now, Lilith wasn't like any other girl that I'd ever known. She was kind to me and didn't talk about how weird I smelled or even comment on how I never seemed to blink. I didn't find it strange not to blink, but apparently, that was just too weird for the other kids in our school. But this was grade school. All kids were weird. I suppose I was just a bit more unusual than most.

You could say she was my only friend. Unfortunately, you would be right.

Now, this love for the dead things? Lilith kept it very hidden from those in our class, but I guess she trusted me enough to show her true love... and she did love dead things.

There she was. At the cliff's edge, she selected the next dead animal for release and, from another pile next to her, which colored balloon she wanted to use. Gently, she kissed the rotting face of a dead chipmunk and placed it gently on the ground as she blew up a red balloon. Once the balloon was almost inflated, she picked up the carcass, took a bite from its decayed flesh, ate it, and blew again into the balloon. With this final breath, the dead chipmunk disappeared, and she released the balloon.

I was always fascinated when I saw her do this. In the past, I would interrupt her a couple of times because I didn't understand how the balloon flew away. "It's their souls that

are making it fly, silly,” she responded with a giggle.

I loved the way she laughed. Something about it made me happy. Being with her was about the only thing that made me happy.

“Lilith?” I heard a voice call in the distance.

“Lilith? Where are you?” The voice got louder.

It was her mom!

Crap!

“Go!” Lilith shouted at me. She knew her mom didn’t like me because of all of the weird stories she heard about me from the other parents. Lilith’s mom tried to make sure that Lilith was seen as a normal kid, and it just wouldn’t do if she hung out with what she described as “odd ones.”

I sprinted up to the woods just at the edge of the cliff and climbed up a large tree so that I could still see what was happening. This had happened before, and, honestly, I really enjoyed watching Lilith defend me to her mom.

“Oh! There you are!” Her mom said as she came up the path that led to the cliff’s edge. Aghast, she stared at the organized pile of dead animals in front of Lilith.

“What are you doing?!” I told you not to do this. We’ve talked about this. You’ve got to stop killing the animals. Did that Jonathan put you up to it? He did, didn’t he!?” She said to Lilith as she came up closer to the pile of rotting animals.

“No! He didn’t do anything! Why do you always have to blame him? These animals were already dead. I’m not killing them. I just held them and they would slump over in my arms,” Lilith said.

Her mother stared at her as the anger left her face.

In an exasperated voice, she said, “Look. If you’re hungry and need to eat something, your father has some carcasses of some of the locals in town who have recently passed. You can have some of their organs. But you can’t keep killing the animals and eating them. Some of the townspeople, especially your friends’ parents, are talking about their missing pets.”

“But, I’m not hungry,” Lilith said in a frustrated, slightly whiny voice. “I’m setting them free. I promise. I’m not killing them. I hold them, and they fall asleep in my arms. Then, I let their souls live in the balloon and, for the first time in their lives, they can fly. See what it is like up there.”

“I know, dear, but the people in town are talking, and some of them are blaming Jonathan or you because he’s too weird. I know he’s your friend. Don’t you want to protect your friend? You don’t want others to be mad at him, do you?”

“No,” Lilith lowered her head as she replied. “I don’t. He doesn’t have a lot of friends, and I like him. I have fun around him.”

“Yes, I know, dear. I know.”

Her mom took her hand and said, “Let’s go back to the house. I’ll come and clean up these carcasses later. Right now, you’re dad wants to have lunch, and I think he has something for you.”

“He does?” Lilith got all excited and clapped her hands. “What is it? Are they some new knives? Maybe a fresh corpse? Someone we know?”

Her mom sighed deeply and said, “No! Stop talking like that! I’ll let him show you when you get back to the house. You really are your father’s daughter,” she laughed, as they held hands and left.

I saw her rush down the path to the house and look back. Presumably, she looked like she was waiting for her mom to catch up, but I knew that she was secretly saying goodbye to me. I waved back to her and, as usual, she didn't wave back. Couldn't let her mom know I was up in the tree.

Her mom glanced back also. She knew I was there. Before, whenever I spoke with her, she would sometimes make a face, and I always felt like she knew some dark secret about me. Maybe it was about my parents. The weird look always disappeared as quickly as it had crossed her face.

Once I could no longer see them, I climbed down and crept over to the pile of animal bodies. Many of them were in such a state of decay that only their bones, bits and pieces of skin and fur were left. The ones with more meat left on them were infested with white maggots, and they moved in a way that you would think they could sit up and then walk away.

I shuddered and stepped away from those animals.

I hated maggots! They looked like small white grains of rice that would crawl all over and eat me like the dead animals in front of me.

Away from the maggots, two squirrel carcasses looked like they had enough meat but were not infested with those vile insects. I scooped them up, placed them in my pocket, and headed back into the woods towards home.

Down a familiar path, I walked and enjoyed the relative quietness of everything around me. The only sounds that accompanied me were the soft crunch of dead leaves on the path and, every so often, a bird called out in the distance. It was rare for the brush to move, or for me to see any small animals. Now that I thought about it, I didn't ever remember seeing any animals around my cottage... day or night.

Guess they didn't like strangers in their woods.

In the distance, I saw the old small cottage I called home. I didn't remember when I first came here or where my parents were. I just remembered lying on the dirt floor, hungry, when I heard the soft and beautiful voice of Lilith calling me.

The kids at school all said that my parents had run away because I was too creepy and didn't blink. For the longest time, they called me "ghoulie," but that didn't last because I think that Lilith had something to do with them leaving me alone. The rest of the kids wouldn't say bad things around me when she was nearby. So, she probably had something to do with that.

One day, when I asked Lilith how she knew where to find me in the woods, she just said that her dad told her where I was. He was the one who built the cabin for me. I don't know why, but I was grateful. It was good to have a place where I could be by myself, eat as much of the dead animals as I wanted, and not worry about rain or other people bothering me.



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Time passed, but things never got better. I figured that high school would be better, and the other kids would be more accepting of me. I was wrong. It was just the opposite, and I was lonelier than ever.

Lilith, though, had it harder because... well... the mask. Just before high school, she stopped by my cottage wearing the mask. Her shoulders slumped, and there was an overall feeling of listlessness to her. She wasn't the happy-go-lucky friend that I had known for years.

"Lilith? Are you okay?" I asked. I didn't want to ask about the mask directly. I knew she would tell me about it when she was ready.

She didn't say a word. Just shook her head. I thought I heard her whimper underneath the mask, but I couldn't tell. Honestly, though, I couldn't help myself. I never had much self-control, and this was one of those times.

"The mask? Did something happen?" I asked.

She nodded.

"Can you take it off?"

She shook her head.

"Okay. Did you want to play a game or play with some dead animals?"

She shook her head and handed me a note.

It read, "She was there for you when you were younger. Be there for her now - Thomas."

Why would her father send me a note to be there for Lilith?

She was a strong person. Well, not now, of course, but I knew her. She would be back to her usual self in no time. I didn't know why she had to wear the mask, but I was sure that she was strong enough to deal with the other kids.

I was wrong.

Once we started high school, the taunts and looks from the other kids got to her. She stopped standing up for herself, and almost everybody in the school, students and teachers, avoided her. At first, several kids tried to take off her mask, but each time, when they were just about to grab it, they stopped. It wasn't the sad look that I now always saw in Lilith's eyes. It was something... malevolent. Over time, they stopped, and just like me, she was ignored.

One day, though, I saw what was underneath the mask, and it horrified me. On our way to art class, Lilith was holding a beautiful taxidermied possum that she had dressed and positioned as if it were a ballerina dancing on a glass stage. It was beautiful, and my painting of my cottage looked shabby in comparison to her masterpiece.

One of the older kids thought it was funny to trip Lilith, and as she fell, the possum broke and the glass stage shattered in the hallway. The loud crash drew the attention of the other students and, initially, some laughed, but that laughter turned to screams because, in that moment, her mask fell off and skittered across the floor.

Under her mask, a pile of... ugh... I really hate to say this... maggots wriggled in and out of her nose, mouth, and open sores on her skin. I could see the tears down her partially skeletal face as she rushed over to grab her mask and put it back on. She looked at the other kids, but by this time, the one who tripped her and many of the others had screamed and run away.

Down the hallway, the art teacher ran towards us as quickly

as he could, pushing those who were running in the other direction. The maggots still bothered me, but she was my friend. I stood there and hugged her as she cried in my arms.

“I’m here for you. I will always be here for you,” I told her.

Her body shook more and more as she hugged me tighter.

“Are you both okay?” The teacher asked.

“... yes... an older boy tripped her and she broke her project for your class,” I said. Lilith’s crying had lessened to soft whimpers as she hugged me. She wouldn’t let go or look at the teacher.

“Don’t worry about the project. Let’s get her to the healer’s office. We’ll contact her father to pick her up. Do you know who did this?” he asked.

“No. Sorry. I’ve seen him around, but I don’t know him,” I’d lied. I knew who he was. I was sure that he was afraid of dead things. They all were. He and some of the other kids in our school would pay. I never did anything, though. It never seemed to be the right time.

The next day, to my surprise, nothing happened. No one in the school treated us any differently than they did before. It was as if no one remembered that her mask had fallen off or the maggots and her half-rotten face. I did notice, though, that many of the kids who were mean to us avoided us and made sure they kept their distance.

Lilith and I grew closer during this time, and I spent a lot more time at her house because she rarely went out anymore. At home, she now walked around without her mask, and I got used to the maggots... sort of. We played our games with the animal carcasses and tried to act like normal teenagers. We also tried not to, well, you know, eat as many dead animals anymore. It was hard for me, but

Lilith was able to keep me from doing it.

To be honest, though, every so often the temptation was too much and I snacked on one or two when I went home.

Dinner at her house became more common, though. Her parents ate what others considered normal food, and Lilith and I would eat some pieces from fresh corpses her father provided. Her mother no longer minded me being around her, and I found that I spent more time at her house than I did at my own. Sleepovers were my favorite. Her father even set up a room for me so that I could spend more time with Lilith outside of school.

During all this time, though, she never took off her mask when I was around. That was okay. She was my friend, and I was happy to spend as much time with her as possible.

Several months later, Lilith and I were in class, and I could tell she wasn't feeling well. I looked at her questioningly and mouthed, "Are you okay?" She just nodded and put her head on the desk. Several minutes later, she started to cough. Not much. Like the cough you get when there is a tickle in your throat. Annoying and mildly disruptive. Several of the students gave her nasty looks, but the teacher ignored her.

The coughing got louder and louder, and soon, she clutched her stomach. By this time, everybody in class was looking at her, and the teacher stopped the class to ask, "Lilith? Are you okay? Why don't you see the healer?"

Lilith started to get up out of her chair and then fell over, pulling her desk on top of her. I rushed over and moved the desk out of the way as she cried and clutched at her stomach. Her mask shifted, and only a portion of her face was covered as maggots flowed onto the ground around her. The face was more decayed than usual, but it was hard to tell since all I saw were the tears in her eyes as she cried.

“Jonathan... help... get my dad... help...,” she said weakly, crying.

The students and teacher screamed and lined the walls. Not one would come near us when I cried out, “Get help! Get the healer!” No one moved. They just watched us and did... nothing other than scream or hide their faces.

Fine! It was up to me.

I picked her up and headed out of the class to the healer’s station.

“You’ve got to help her! Something is wrong with Lilith! Get her father!” I yelled at the stunned healer. I was in a panic because she had the same look on her face that the teacher and other students had.

She stepped back and... just stared.

“Get her father! He’ll know what to do!” I yelled at the healer.

My yelling must have brought her to her senses. She reached into her desk, picked up a deck of ShadowMyths cards, grabbed a card that looked like a green-robed figure holding a heart in its left hand, and slowly said to the glowing card, “Thomas Magdar”.

“Yes?” I heard Lilith’s father’s voice in the room.

“Thomas! It’s me, Jonathan! Lilith is sick. You have to...”

“I’ll be right there!” Her father quickly said.

For several long minutes, Lilith and I sat in the Healer’s office. The useless healer wouldn’t come near us. She just stared with a stupid look on her face. Lilith was still clutching her stomach, but no longer crying. I left her mask off because I knew that was more comfortable that way. I didn’t care that it unnerved the healer. Lilith was my friend.

The door burst open, and Thomas rushed in with a heavy, dark grey blanket. “I’m here, baby,” he said to Lilith as he wrapped her in the blanket and grabbed her mask and put it back on her. Picking her up, I saw that his eyes were red and moist. What was going on? This had to be a lot more serious than I thought.

“Jonathan. Come on. You’ll need to come with us as well. I’ll need your help,” he said to me.

That was okay. It wasn’t like I wanted to go back to class now. Not with Lilith feeling like she was. The seriousness of her father wasn’t something I expected. Something was definitely wrong.

“Okay,” I said as we walked out of the room and got into his carriage.





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“Where are we going? This isn’t the way to your house,” I asked Lilith’s father on the drive. I was in the back of the carriage with Lilith’s head on my lap, and even though she was wrapped in the heavy blanket, she shivered and clutched her stomach even tighter.

“No. We’re not going home,” he said.

The rest of the ride was quiet, and I knew why... we had pulled into an old cemetery at the edge of town. The graveyard wasn’t your typical one you would see in town. The ground was covered with an orange moss, and black fungus covered many of the headstones. A low fog in the distance gave the entire area an eerie, macabre feel, and between us and the headstones stood an old iron gate. On top of the gate, sat the largest raven I had ever seen.

Caw!

Caw!

It shouted down to us.

“Jacob,” Lilith’s father called out, “It’s just us. We come to bring her home.”

The bird looked at me and, for some unknown reason, I shuddered. I felt like the bird was judging me, and he wasn’t happy about what he saw.

“He’s with me. It’s okay.”

On that, the raven spread its wings and flew off towards the fog just past the headstones. The gate creaked open as Jacob left.

Past the gate, Thomas carried Lilith towards the center

of the graveyard. There were no paths to walk on, but he appeared to know where he was going. In his arms, Lilith cried, and I was terrified about what was happening to her, but her father just kept walking. Tears ran down his face, and his body shook every so often.

Following closely behind, we stopped at a small unmarked headstone surrounded by several dozen other small ones, covered with black moss. Most of the words were obscured, but I did make out the word... Lilith.

What!?!

He laid her down in front of the headstone and unwrapped her from the blanket. The fog in the distance flowed towards us like a river of thick blood as Lilith rolled on the ground, clutching her stomach.

“You have to help her! What are you doing?” I asked her dad. I grew more frightened as I watched her roll around on the soft, orange moss in front of, supposedly, her headstone.

“I’m sorry, Jonathan,” he said. “There’s nothing I can do anymore. It’s her time.”

“Her time? No! It’s not! She’s my friend! Why aren’t you helping her?”

He stared at me with his bloodshot and moist eyes.

Behind us, I caught a glimpse of Lilith’s mother walking towards us. When she got to where we were standing, she grabbed Thomas’ hand.

“It’s time, isn’t it?” She asked him.

“Yes. It’s time.”

Why aren’t they doing anything? Why aren’t they helping her instead of just watching her roll around on the ground?

She's their daughter! She's my friend! I was so confused and frightened.

In front of, the screaming had stopped as Lilith's belly got really large and... burst open! Black ooze and thousands of larvae flowed out of the cavernous opening and poured over the rest of her body. The larvae moved off of her and quickly burrowed into the soft moss below her, disappearing.

I screamed and backed up away from the corpse that used to be my best friend, but I fell against one of the other smaller headstones. It read... "Jonathan."

Lilith's parents calmly walked over towards me, and her dad knelt and held my hand. My unblinking eyes stared at him in terror.

"Yes. It's true. Lilith died a long time ago. When she was a little girl, I dug her up and used magic to bring her back to life. It wasn't perfect, but it was good enough for us. We've been feeding her parts of dead people from town for years to keep her alive. That was the only thing she could eat," he said.

"Unfortunately," he continued, "the dead parts inside of her finally ate away her insides, and she couldn't remain whole anymore. I'm sorry."

What? Wait! Wait! No! She was my best friend.

Lilith's mother stood behind Thomas, put her hand on his shoulder, looked at me, and said, "Thank you for being her friend."

Thomas stood up, held her hand, and she said, "Are you planning on doing this again? Or create any more friends for her? Please. It's time to let her go."

"No. This was the last time. No more Lilith. No more

friends.”

I felt their stare as my stomach got larger and larger.