

The Reflecting Eye

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*The way a crow
Shook down on me
The dust of snow
From a hemlock tree*

*Has given my heart
A change of mood
And saved some part
Of a day I had rued.*

- Robert Frost

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Chapter 1 - Monteport

Along the coastline, a grayed lighthouse rose as a lone outpost. A mist gathered obscuring the view. Verity wiped the fogging glass with the edge of her sleeve, but the old bus—line seventy-four, the daily connection from the southern, more inland suburbs—had already rumbled past. The heading was north on Avtandil Road, straight to the heart of Monteport.

Verity was alone on the bus aside from the driver, a portly and squinty eyed man lost in his own thoughts as he stared at the road ahead. Line seventy-four, from the schedules, always made a stop at the station in the center of Monteport at noon. She wiped the window again but saw only the line of the land and the sea.

There was a large mirror at the front of the bus where the driver was supposed to look up to check on his passengers. But since Verity was the only passenger, he never looked up. Verity looked though, and since she sat on the second row behind the driver's seat, she had a view of a pale faced woman with short, badly cut hair. She touched the ends of those dark choppy locks that barely reached her chin. It had been worth it to raze the hair that had once draped down her back. He never appreciated it, and it would have been pointless to keep it.

In another instinctive gesture, she touched her wrists which were covered by bandages and turned to look back out the window.

From the land, strange shapes sprouted from the ground. She squinted and thought she could define them as the alternating squat and elongated blobs of buildings. These blobs grew larger and more distinct. These buildings passed by like old, worn out people with rusted railings and tattered shutters. Dribbles of snow clung to the eaves like perpetual dandruff.

The low grinding of the bus engine that had long since receded to the background was shut off and the sudden silence was as sharp as a bell.

"Monteport," announced the driver.

Verity got up and felt her spine stretch and pull from sitting for too long. She buttoned her body length black coat and slung an old duffle bag over her shoulder. The first thing she saw as she stepped off the bus was the small transport terminal tucked in beside the city post office and a denuded tree with one crow sitting on the tip of a branch. The bird looked down at her and made not one sound.

She stepped away from the bus and felt the icy snow slip under her boots.

"Verity, over here!"

She looked to the right of her and saw a man, white-haired and intensely faced, dressed in a gray overcoat and black scarf. He was smiling. In response, she felt her own lips moving upward.

"Uncle Matthias. I thought I was going to meet you at the apartment."

"Change of plans, my dear. I checked the schedules and thought, why not? Everything arrived as planned. I had most of your things moved into the rooms. What happened to your hair?"

"I cut it. It's too much of a hassle to deal with long hair."

Matthias slanted her a look but decided not to pursue the subject. "I'll be leaving tomorrow. I'll be leaving the car with you, though. Kind of awkward to have that shipped overseas, eh?"

"And what about your things?"

“I had them already packed and sent.”

Verity tucked her hands into her coat pocket as she followed her uncle across the city square which was framed by the main centers: the city hall to the south, the city library to the east, the local college to the west, and the great hulking monolith of cathedral to the north. Matthias’s small tan two-seater, soon to be hers, was parked in front of the library. As they neared the car, she could see that there was five minutes left on the parking meter.

“I feel like I’m kicking you out of your own house,” she said.

“Nonsense. I’m practically going away on a permanent vacation. It wouldn’t make sense to keep an apartment here if I wasn’t going to live in it. I think it’s good timing that you decided to take it off my hands when your new job took you here.”

“Yes, but still...” she trailed off as the sound of a low resonant bell broke the cold air. This sound for midday spewed from the bell tower of the cathedral.

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## Chapter 2 – A Home

Matthias maneuvered the car past the college, a collection of columns and windows which stared out in defiance of the cold weather. Few students were about. The ones that were clustered near one of the side entrances in heavy coats and backpacks. From the college stretched a road disappearing into a dense grove of residential buildings. Verity almost missed seeing the sign which said, “West Main Street.”

“I thought Avtandil Road was the main street,” she said.

“It passes through the city,” her uncle agreed, “But I believe it was a smaller road back in the early days of the city. And there’s the problem of the direction too. It goes northwest. This one goes from east to west.”

“And the houses look newer here.”

“Yes, it does, doesn’t it? The Old Quarter is back in the other direction; you probably saw some of it when you took the bus up here. It’s somewhat historical, I suppose, but the residents of that district don’t want to change or renovate. Unfortunately, the city officials can’t make them change—a couple of influential people are from there. I’d like to think that over here is the better neighborhood.”

Respectable houses in respectable siennas and maroons lined the street like matrons queuing up in a grocery store. Matthias turned again, right, and the sign below “Main Street” said “Finsen.” A faint familiarity stirred in her mind. Had that been what she had written on the envelopes that she had mailed to her uncle?

They stopped at a cul-de-sac which had been terminated by what looked like a series of tiny two story houses that had been squished together. A few cars were parked on the curb and the lacy curtains at the window of one of the house, but otherwise the complex of condo-apartments appeared to be empty.

“Where’s everybody?”

“The people around here aren’t too chatty, I’m afraid. They usually keep to themselves most of the time.” He grinned. “The motto around here is if you don’t bother me, than I won’t bother you. Works quite well, most of the time.”

“Most of the time?”

“Well, you can’t call them up if you’ve accidentally locked yourself out.”

The apartment was the one at the very right of the row. There were a few steps leading up to the front door—this was sheltered overhead and rimmed with a wrought-iron railing that trailed off in curling, decorative flourishes. There was a plain doorknocker of dark brass, but Matthias did not touch that. Instead, he unlocked the door with a key that he promptly dropped into her own hands and pushed the door open, revealing a tiny foyer and a living room. Brown cardboard boxes spilled from the living room back into the foyer. Matthias flipped the switch near the door. In the light, she could see that the foyer was wallpapered in some sort of light green floral print.

“Somehow, I didn’t think you would pick this.”

Her uncle waved a dismissive hand. “It came with the apartment. I didn’t bother changing it. It’s not like a received visitors every day. Sorry about the mess. I could have organized the stuff you sent in a better manner, but well, they just arrived the other day and I had some other errands to run.”

“That’s all right. I’m going to make a bigger mess when I unpack.”

He nodded. “The city picks up the trash every Wednesday. You can just leave all the extra boxes

out on the curb and they'll take it away. Well, I'll leave you to it. I'll be back in the kitchen warming up dinner. You can drop your things in one of the bedrooms upstairs."

The stairs came down into the foyer in a sweep of mahogany. She trailed her fingers over the smooth wood as she ascended, Matthias trudged the other direction to the kitchen. Darkness was above, but she easily found the switch and saw that she was on a small landing. The first and second doors were already open, revealing a bathroom and a bedroom which she assumed her uncle was temporarily using because an open suitcase, half-filled, was sitting on the floor and a raincoat was draped over a chair. She opened the last door. Her bed was already here, assembled, but plastic still covered it. The familiar wardrobe and desk were pushed against the wall. She left the light off as she walked over to the window that was actually a window seat.

Dropping her duffle bag onto the floor, she looked out. This room faced the road. Finsen disappeared into the horizon which was marred by the spires of the cathedral back in the center of the city.

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Chapter 3 – Rothburne

"I have a stash of Monteport maps on the shelf over there," said Matthias as he pulled a re-warmed roast from the oven and began cutting it into slices.

Verity had wandered back downstairs and to the back of the house where there was a dining room-kitchen combo. The back door overlooked a tiny shared back yard. The next door neighbor had planted a rosebush beside his door, but in the dimming winter afternoon, it looked more like the twisting snakes of a medusa's tresses. The dining area itself was simple, a battered table with wood of questionable origin. There were four chairs and they were all mismatched. A shelf sat on the corner. The maps were on top. The first one showed all the roads on Monteport that spread out from the center like the spokes on a spider's web.

"Are you sure you want to leave this furniture here?" She tapped the table as her uncle brought out the dishes.

"I've already sent the important stuff over to my new location," he said, amused. "I figured you could use this stuff. I also left the majority of my books in the study—I've read all of them already and I also figured it would be nice to get an entire new set of books. Try some new stuff in my retirement years and all of that."

As they sat down to eat, he glanced pointedly at her bandaged wrists which were now exposed since she took off her coat.

"What happened?"

She gave him a shuttered look. "Nothing. It was just an accident."

"Verity..."

"I don't want to talk about it."

Her uncle sighed. "You're going to be working at the Rothburne Institute, right? An acquaintance of mine says that a Doctor Miram Greene is pretty good. You might want to look him up."

"A general practitioner? I didn't know general practitioners worked up there."

"I think he originally worked as one although he has specialized with working with psychiatry patients."

"I don't think I need a shrink."

Matthias shrugged. "Anyways, I thought the Rothburne Institute was an independent entity that was founded by somebody named, well, Rothburne. How did you get transferred here?"

"The system of hospitals back south recently acquired the Rothburne Institute. I worked in administration which was completely separate from the whole hospital setting, but I guess the higher ups decided that it would be a good idea to send me here to help the staff at Rothburne organize their archives in accordance to the rest of the system."

"Why send you? To be honest, I was rather surprised that you took me up on my offer for this apartment. I thought you were rather content where you were. Isn't your boyfriend still down there?"

She prided herself on keeping a relatively straight face. "We weren't compatible. I was the only one in the department who didn't have a family tying me down there and anyways, I'm eager to see new places."

"Monteport isn't exactly new."

“It’s different.”

After dinner, her uncle bid her a good night. He was going to catch the earliest cab out to the airport. He told her not to worry about him, that he would write or call her, and that she should get her sleep since she had traveled so much herself that day.

Verity took the plastic covering off of her bed and laid out the clothes that she had brought with her in her duffle bag. She took a small pouch of toiletries, a towel, and a flannel nightgown and headed into the bathroom where she locked herself inside. She stared for a moment at the mirror above the sink. The pale faced woman stared back at her.

Slowly, she unwrapped the bandages. Underneath, the skin was slightly lighter than the surrounding hand and arm. Faint white marks crisscrossed on the inside of her wrist. She closed her eyes and remembered him—sunny, charismatic, and at times evasive. During the entire six months that they had been together, he had never asked her to spend the night. And then she had discovered that reason for his vagueness when she had dropped by at his office as a surprise, only to find him standing at the edge of his desk, his “administrative assistant” on her knees, her mouth...

Every thing had become fuzzy and she had staggered back home feeling empty as if a void had taken over her stomach and lungs. Even now, she felt that same void threatening to overcome her. She opened the toiletry bag and took out a small sharp hand knife.

It took only a second after the touch of the blade for the blood to well up. It stung. At least now, she could actually feel something instead of that nothingness that threatened to turn her to stone. Verity turned on the faucet. And the water turned red.

The next morning, she discovered that Matthias was already gone. He had left a hastily handwritten note on the dining table with a farewell and information on his new address. The refrigerator, she discovered, contained exactly a half-empty milk carton, one egg, and a jar of mayonnaise. In a cupboard, there were two cans of soup and a box of cereal that was almost empty. She poured out the rest of the cereal and some milk, ate quickly, and grabbed her coat. As an afterthought, she took a map. She was going to the Rothburne Institute.

She scraped the frost from the windshields and sat in her uncle’s car, now hers, waiting for the engine and the heat to get going. She looked at the map, noting that the Rothburne Institute was not far from Avtandil Road. It was just before the square and the college, across from the local hospital. She drove down Finsen to Main Street and spotted the college. At the square, where Main Street intersected with Avtandil Road, she took a left. The Rothburne Institute was on a small hill of its own surrounded by small, squat evergreen shrubs.

The institute was a manor of granite. In the early history of the city, it had been the home of a wealthy aristocrat from overseas named Rothburne. Only later had that aristocrat’s descendants moved elsewhere and decided to donate the massive estate to the city. Monteport had decided to turn it into a sanitarium.

Verity parked the car in a lot at the base of the hill and climbed up to the front. The door was unpolished and roughly carved. She pulled it open with some effort and stepped inside, into a warm, brightly lit atrium—pristine and white. Several couches, armchairs, and a coffee table stacked with magazines were located at the end of the room near several corridors branching off into the rest of the institute. Near the door was a welcoming station.

A woman with platinum blonde hair frozen in a large wave over her forehead by stiff hair spray and bright red lipstick looked up as Verity approached. “Good morning. Do you have an appointment?”

“I’m Verity Tage. I’m the new archivist.”

The woman smiled. “Ah. Welcome to Rothburne!” She waved a brunette with glasses over. “We were actually expecting you tomorrow, but this is excellent as well. I’m Georgette Lane.”

“Patrice Blakely.”

Verity dutifully shook their hands and smiled. “Good to meet you.”

“Patrice, could you take the desk for a moment as I show Verity around?” said Georgette.

Patrice nodded. “Sure.”

Georgette walked around the station and waved toward the corridors. “The archive for all of Rothburne’s records are downstairs. Bob and Quinn has been in charge of those for the past ten years. I’m sure they’ll show you all the ropes. The administration and some of the doctors’ offices are located on this floor and all the patient rooms are on the floors above. But most of the time, you wouldn’t even notice that this is a hospital at all.”

“How busy does it get during the year?”

“Oh, it’s pretty stable during the winter, but most of our patients are admitted during the fall, believe it or not. Perhaps in the colder months when everyone is staying inside they realize that they don’t really want to be around their ailing relatives all the time.” Georgette shrugged. “But who knows. That’s just my guess.”

As they passed the waiting area, a man sitting on one of the chairs looked up and locked his gaze to Verity. For that moment, she felt something sharp, as if someone had poked her skin with a pin. His hair was dark and longish, curling past his ear. His jaw was strongly angled and clean-shaven, and his skin appeared as smooth as a woman’s after she has applied face cream. Although at the distance, she could not tell the color of his eyes, his look was intense as if he were some dark judge.

He looked familiar as if she had glimpsed a picture of him somewhere years ago in a newspaper or the back of a book.

But Georgette was still chatting and she turned back to her temporary tour guide, his face disappearing from her vision, as they headed into one of the corridors and then to a stairwell that led down.

At the base of the stairs was a door that led into a wide room. The front was occupied with a few lower shelves holding medical references and three tables with chairs for visitors who wanted to do research. On one side was a panel of glass which showed three small offices, one which was not occupied, and a conference room. The other side of the room was filled with rows of large shelves containing records, books, and documents. Georgette waved to the two people in the offices who moved out into the main part of the room.

“Well, I’ll leave you to it,” the blonde told her. “If you want any help about the rest of Rothburne, just call me up.”

As Georgette left, Verity briefly surveyed these two other Rothburne employees. The shorter man was round about the middle, the stomach spilling over his belt. He wore a plaid shirt and corduroy pants and he was balding. He squinted at her and then pulled out a pair of chunky glasses from his breast pocket to get a better look. The taller man was willowy slim, his long graying hair tied to the nape of his neck. He wore all black—black turtleneck, black pants, black shoes. He pulled out a case from his back pocket, opened it, and deposited some wire-frame glasses on his nose.

She held out her hand. “Hello. I’m Verity.”

“Ah, the new archivist,” said the taller man.

“Not what I was expecting,” grumped the shorter man.

The taller man shot the shorter man an exasperated look. “I’m Quinn. This is Bob.” She shook their hands. “You can take the empty office. It used to be Alan’s, but he retired a couple months ago.”

“He got tired with dealing with all the crazies around this place,” muttered Bob.

“Crazies?” Verity echoed.

“Now, now, we wouldn’t want to scare Verity off prematurely. There’s nothing to be worried about,” said Quinn. “Some of the patients like to visit the archives, that’s all. Some of them just have the quaint notions that some of the stories about Montepoort are true and they come down here to do their research. No harm done.”

Bob shrugged, but gave a weary smile. “Quinn’s very sympathetic and patient.”

Verity nodded, not quite sure how to reply to that. Instead, she said, “If you wouldn’t mind, I’d like it very much if you showed me around so I can familiarize myself with how you do things.”

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#### Chapter 4 – Conversations

At the end of the day, the three archivists went on their separate ways as they each took to their own cars. A block over, Verity spotted a grocery store. As she picked up the necessities for the next week and wheeled her shopping cart to one of the two open lanes, she overheard two women talking. One was a chubby woman in her fifties with curling red hair that was obviously dyed. The other had a hawk-like nose and a perpetual frown. Her frizzled and graying hair was tucked underneath a brown yarn hat.

“Two of them this time,” the chubby woman clucked. “I tell you, Maggie, it’s a shame.”

“You always think it’s a shame Ada,” said the thinner one. “The same thing happens every year.”

Ada only shook her head. “But it was two kids from the college. They were bicycling back to their dorms, just as the newspaper said, and then, they just disappeared. Their parents are going to be

frantic.”

“Very little chance in finding them, if you ask me,” Maggie replied. “You know, some of the police are actually beginning to believe those stories.”

“The stories about those people?” Ada’s voice trembled slightly.

The other woman frowned even harder. “I think they’re just getting too superstitious, you know? If any of those people ever existed, they would be long dead by now. There are a lot of bad people in the world, you know, and it’s rather ridiculous of you to equate a random kidnapper or murderer to some make-believe bogeymen.”

“You’re probably right,” she said reluctantly. “You know, sometimes a person can get carried away with their imagination, especially in these times when it gets dark early.”

“Very inconvenient. In the summertime, I could get here around eight at night, and the sky would still be bright.”

“Yes. So do you have your iron crow up yet?”

Maggie nodded. “Right on the door. One never knows who’ll come knocking.”

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“What’s an iron crow?”

Verity, Quinn, and Bob were heading back downstairs after lunch in the institute cafeteria. Bob unlocked the door to the archives.

“Just a little end of the year tradition for most natives,” replied Quinn. “It can be an iron amulet or a wire-frame sculpture. It doesn’t really have to be metal or iron for that matter, but it does have to be in the shape of a bird. Here, the nameless one is called Aunat the crow. The iron crow is sort of a lucky charm for the coming year.”

“Back south, they call the nameless one Gohaven the cat,” said Verity. “There is a similar tradition, but for good luck many people owned real cats instead.”

“Do you have a cat then?” asked Bob.

“No. I’m not particularly superstitious. Or religious.”

She was starting at the older files and working her way up. At the moment, she had a stack of patient documentation from fifty years ago. They were alphabetized which made it slightly easier, but nonetheless, that didn’t negate the need for having everything entered into the central computer database in a particular format by hand.

On the third folder, she flipped it open only to linger at a section that said “Transcription: Session One.”

Dr. Urich: You must know that as the protector of the city, Aunat would never harm his own citizens.

Bost: Look, Doc, Aunat has nothing to do with this. This is something other, can’t you understand? Something beyond Aunat, something that existed before. There is probably no time for this...thing...that took my wife. It’s here and yet not here at the same time. I don’t know, I can’t quite explain it. But if you know, you just know.

Dr. Urich: The police are still looking for your wife. She’s probably still all right.

Bost: She’s not all right! How many times do I have to tell you? Some kidnapper probably took her away initially, but the other took her away altogether.

Dr. Urich: What other? Another kidnapper?

Bost: It’s not natural saying what the other is.

What was the other? Verity entered the patient name and file number into the computer. Perhaps Bob and Quinn could fill her in. The next folder held another "session", but this time, Dr. Urich was talking to a different patient.

Megyeri: I saw it.

Dr. Urich: Saw what?

Megyeri: It. It's hard to describe.

Dr. Urich: Start from the beginning, then.

Megyeri: I was heading down to the cellar to get some wine for the coming Feasting Day.

Dr. Urich: Your cellar?

Megyeri: No. I was at my cousin's house. He's on Lisdon, if you know where that is.

Dr. Urich: In the Old Quarter, I believe.

Megyeri: Yes. And you know all the cellars over there are connected at that level. They were built three hundred years ago during the Revolution. There are some rumors that there are more tunnels even deeper built far in the past, but before that day, I didn't think there was anything to them.

Dr. Urich: What do you mean? There have been some excavators who have found some deeper tunnels and remains of what looked like what used to be ancient Monteport.

Megyeri: No, these tunnels were supposed to be older than that. When I went down to the cellar to get the wine, I heard something coming from the back of the cellar. I thought it was some rats so I took a pole with me to maybe get rid of some before coming back with some traps. But when I got to the end of the cellar, I saw a door on the floor. I opened that and saw some steps leading downward. I figured my cousin has been stashing some wine down there as well so I went down.

Dr. Urich: The fact that it might be from the Revolution never crossed your mind?

Megyeri: Of course it crossed my mind. But the thing is, if you had been listening to me, is that this wasn't from the Revolution. There was a long tunnel down there and I must have walked a block or two before I saw some light coming from the wall. I looked through the hole and found that on the other side of the tunnel was a large cavern. People were there.

Dr. Urich: An underground cult.

Megyeri: These people make underground cults look like nurseries. It was a large cavern where a crowd of robed figures were surrounding a platform. These people were chanting, low, in a weird alien language that doesn't sound like it was meant for the human mouth. They were trying to summon something. I was watching, mesmerized until smoke

began rising from that platform, and it appeared. Dear Aunat, it was terrible.

Dr. Urich: Could you describe it?

Megyeri: I'd rather not, Dr. Urich. It wasn't meant for human eyes. Or any eyes at all. I only came here because I've been having trouble sleeping. Can't you just prescribe some sedative and just call it a day?

Verity glimpsed at similar reports the rest of the day until she was aware that something was different. She glanced at the time on her computer. It was only fifteen minutes until closing time. She looked up from her office and saw that a dark figure had entered the archives. It was too tall to be Bob and too broad in the shoulder to be Quinn. She saved her work and got up to walk out of the office. On her way out, she glanced back at the glassed over offices.

Quinn was busy staring at his computer and talking on the phone at the same time. Bob was staring at her, mouthing something, and frantically pointing at the wall that he shared with Quinn. Verity shook her head. She didn't need them to help her as she herself assisted a visitor.

"May I help you?" she asked the dark figure who was busy reading the titles of the books on the shelf.

The figure straightened up, he was taller than her by a couple of inches, and looked at her. It was the man she had seen at the waiting area on her first day. His gaze had the same intensity which prickled her skin—not exactly in a fear or nervous response—and this time she was close enough to him to see that his eyes were light brown-greenish and they seemed to darken with every second that they were fixed on her.

"I don't really need any help," he said, "although if you want to help, you're welcome to."

"Excuse me?"

"Nathaniel Gammell." He held out a hand which she shook. The skin to skin contact intensified that feeling that she knew him from somewhere before even though the name was not familiar to her. "I often come down to the archives to do some research."

"Verity Tage. Pleased to meet you." I think, she added mentally. "I'll keep in mind that you're a regular. I just started working here."

"I know. I saw you on your first day."

"So you're one of the doctors doing some research for a patient?"

He chuckled. "No, I'm not a doctor. I'm one of their patients."

Again, she felt his eyes weighing her, judging her. Was he one of the crazies that Bob had muttered about?

"I'm not sick, if that's what you're thinking," he continued. "I'm seeing Dr. Miram Greene."

"He's into psychiatry, isn't he?"

"My sister says I need therapy." He shrugged. "I don't think I need therapy, but I just indulge her. I'm not paying for the visits and Dr. Greene will indulge her since he's getting the money."

"That's a rather mercenary view."

"Verity?" Quinn called out. She turned and saw that her co-workers were already at the door, coats on their back. Bob was giving her a worried glance. "We're heading out. You don't mind locking up after you help Nathan on his 'research' do you?"

"No of course not," she replied. "Good night."

The men waved and pushed open the door, leaving her alone with the self-proclaimed therapy patient.

He pulled out a book and headed to the photocopier at the other end of the room. "I hate being called 'Nathan.' That's what my sister calls me. And Dr. Greene. It makes me feel like a stupid kid with a cutesy shortened name."

"Well, what do you want to be called?"

"Just Gammell. Or Nathaniel, but most people think that is too long." He flipped the book open and popped a few coins into the machine. The copier made its customary sounds and two pieces of paper were regurgitated at the other end. He handed her the book and then took the copies, folded them in half, and tucked them into his coat.

“Is there anything you need?” She shelved the book and walked back into her office to turn her computer off and to get her coat.

“No. That’s all for today, at least.” He stood right outside the office, his eyes never leaving her. “Have you been to Miranda’s yet?”

“No. What’s that?” She turned off the office light.

“A restaurant right outside the business district on Seadoch. Not far from here. I’m heading there for dinner. I was wondering if you’d like to join me.”

Her hand rested on the doorknob to her office just as she closed it. Did she want to have dinner with a crazy? Or more importantly, did she want to have dinner with a man? The previous one had taken away almost every feeling except for the sting of metal on flesh. But try as she might, she couldn’t summon the face of her ex to focus. Gammell was silent, waiting for her answer, and that in itself was enough to make her mind muddled, confused.

“All right,” she found herself saying. It was just dinner, wasn’t it? She was new here and hadn’t the opportunity yet to explore Montepoort’s business and market districts.

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Chapter 5 – Miranda

It was late and dark, and although there were many street lights along Seadoch, it was difficult to make out anything definitively. But there were few other cars on the road and Verity easily followed the small dark compact car that belonged to Gammell. They passed through the business and market districts which were dark except for the few lit signs on stores that were open late. He turned left into a smaller street, into what looked like a residential area stacked with apartment buildings four to five stories high. He parked at the side of the street and Verity followed suit. There were no parking meters.

When she got out of the car, he was already walking toward her. He angled his head toward the nearest building. “Miranda’s on the fourth floor. There’s no elevator, but at least climbing all those stairs will help work up an appetite.”

She gave him a disbelieving glance, but on the dark street, he probably couldn’t see her expression anyway. So she said, “These look like apartment buildings.”

“Yes.” He had already stepped past her to head to the side door. He opened it and indicated for her to enter first. “Miranda runs her restaurant out of her home. It’s invitation only and not really legal.”

“What do you mean, invitation only and not legal?”

Inside was a door that said “1A”. Dirt-suffed stairs with a plain iron railing twisted upward started a few feet from that door. The door opened and a short man with an extremely long moustache stepped out. He hugged his large green parka closer to himself as he glared at Verity and Gammell.

“Damn Miranda,” the man announced. Then he disappeared through the door leading outside.

Gammell ignored him and began climbing the stairs. Verity followed.

“It’s invitation only in that Miranda has to know you before you can come eat at her place,” Gammell said. “An associate of mine knew her and brought me along. And now I’m bringing you along so you can meet Miranda too. Her restaurant isn’t legal because it hasn’t been certified or inspected by the city authorities who issue restaurant licenses.”

“That doesn’t sound too promising,” she remarked.

“Trust me, even though you have to let Miranda serve whatever she pleases, it’s always good.”

They reached the top of the stairwell. There were two doors. He knocked on the one that said “4B”. Then he reached into his coat to pull out a wallet. His fingers took out a twenty.

“What’s that for?”

“The entrance fee and dinner is ten per head,” he replied, seemingly unconcerned.

Verity blinked and then seized his arm. “I’ll pay my own entrance fee.”

He looked down at her. She stared back, not willing to be cowed. He was the first one to break when his mouth quirked upward. “If you insist.” He replaced the twenty with a ten.

As she took out a crumpled bill from her own coat, the door to apartment 4B opened letting the aroma of rich spices permeate the air. She felt her own stomach growl in anticipation. In the doorway stood a large, heavily muscled man with skin the color of polished dark oak. He was wearing a tight white t-shirt and black leather pants. He was bald and when he saw Gammell, he grinned, showing gold.

“You’re back,” the bouncer said.

“Of course I’m back. This is Verity. Verity, this is Abdul. Miranda’s brother-in-law.”

“Hello,” said Verity.

Abdul only nodded. “You never brought any lady friends with you before.”

“She’s the new archivist at the Rothburne Institute.”

“Helping you with your research, eh?”

“I don’t really need the help.”

“I see.”

Verity felt like throttling the both of them at the unspoken words they were exchanging. Instead, she said, “I could have very well decided not to have come.”

The bouncer laughed at what could have been an insult. “I like her. There’s already some people here, hopefully that won’t cramp your style.”

They handed Abdul the money and he waved them inside and indicated a makeshift table near the living room window. The rest of the living room had been turned into a makeshift dining room. An ugly green sofa and a coffee table with doilies were pushed to the side to allow for five small plastic tables to be scattered about. Each table was surrounded by two or three folding chairs. One of the tables was already occupied with three young men, probably college-aged as backpacks clustered at their feet.

“Very homey,” Verity observed.

“People come here for the food, not the atmosphere,” Gammell replied.

She sat down on the folding chair at the table. She ignored the window with its view of apartment rooftops. She took in a deep breath of the aromatic air and shucked her coat. “Are you trying to befriend me through my stomach?”

“Am I succeeding?”

“Maybe.” She saw his gaze resting on her wrists. For a moment, she wished she hadn’t been so needy to feel something. To feel anything.

“What happened?”

“Nothing.”

His gaze rose to her face, but seeing the stubborn look, he decided to bide his time. “The previous archivist, Alan, used to work in your office.”

“Yes, Quinn and Bob told me. They said he retired.”

“Alan was only forty years old.”

“Forty?”

“He couldn’t take working for the Rothburne Institute anymore.”

“Perhaps he wasn’t cut out to be an archivist.”

“It wasn’t that. He was letting the stories get to him. He quit before the doctors could get suspicious.”

Before she could ask what those stories were, an amply endowed woman in a tiny paisley dress, eyes heavy with mascara and mousse colored hair piled on top of her head flounced by the table and brazenly kissed Gammell on the mouth. Verity gaped at the outrageous behavior.

“Darling, you came back to me,” the woman cooed.

“Your food couldn’t keep me away.”

“It’s always the food.” She threw up her hands in exasperation. “Maybe I should take up dancing to get any decent men around here.”

“I’d say you’ll be successful at it.”

She laughed. “Maybe pole dancing. Or better yet, lap dancing.” She turned to Verity. “Who do we have here?”

“Verity.” She held out her hand.

The woman shook it and smiled. “I’m Miranda. Welcome to my home. Dinner will be ready in a few minutes. Do you like cod?”

“Yes,” she replied cautiously.

“Good. Because I’m trying a new recipe and if you like cod, you wouldn’t care even if I botched it up.”

“You never botch things, Miranda,” said Gammell.

“Flatterer,” she said amused. “Anyways, it’s an interesting choice you have for a guest, Gammell. Bad hair, but if she likes cod, she’s all right with me.”

As the woman whisked herself into the back where the kitchen was presumably located, Verity

said, "She wasn't what I was expecting."

"What were you expecting?"

"I wasn't expecting anything, but if I were, she wasn't it."

"That's one way of putting it. She's one of a kind."

"Does she always kiss her long time customers?"

"Only the good looking ones to get her husband jealous."

She snorted. "Well, I don't see him around anywhere."

"He's actually behind you. He just took over Abdul's shift." She was about to turn around when he said again, "But don't look."

"Why not? Because he isn't there?"

"No, because it'll be too obvious. You'll see him when we leave."

"Or maybe because I won't because he doesn't exist?"

"Stubborn, aren't you?"

She turned around anyway. A man in a navy jacket and matching pants sat on a chair next to the door. He looked like one of the models for men's clothing magazines. He waved at her. Hesitatingly, she waved back and then turned back to Gammell who was smirking. She shook her head.

"Okay, so you weren't lying."

"I try not to do that if I can help it."

"So what about those stories?"

"Hm?" His gaze seemed to drop back to her hands which laid on the table. She placed them back on her lap.

"The stories. The ones you said Alan didn't like."

"Alan didn't like a lot of things. He probably didn't like cod either."

"Cod?"

"Yes cod!" Miranda was back and she plopped two plates of simmering fish and vegetables in front of them. Abdul was behind her bearing glasses of sparkling yellow liquid.

"Sorry, I'm driving," said Verity.

Abdul winked. "I know. It's actually grape juice."

"Why don't you try some?" urged their hostess.

Verity cut off a piece of the fish, ready to complement Miranda on her marvelous cooking no matter how it tasted. The cod was flaky and melted on her tongue in a subtle creamy flavor which she could not quite place. Eagerly, she took another bite vaguely registering that three people were staring at her as she ate.

"Excellent," Verity sighed.

Miranda gave a satisfied shout and impulsively kissed her on the cheek. "What a darling!" Verity blinked once, disconcerted for a moment, and then went back to eating. Then Miranda turned to glare at Gammell. "Aren't you going to try it? Or are you going to watch her eat all night?"

"I can do both can't I?" But to appease her, he took a bite out of his own plate and nodded in approval. Miranda then flashed him a smile and then disappeared back into the kitchen. Abdul wandered off to see how the three college kids at the next table over were doing.

Halfway through her plate, Verity finally took a sip of the juice. "I could kiss you for bringing me to this place. Miranda deserves to head her own five-star restaurant, not to just cook in her own home."

Gammell suddenly stopped eating to take a drink himself. He was watching her with darkening eyes. "Ah."

Realizing what she had said, she tried to cover up by taking another bite of the fish before saying, "You were talking about Alan."

"Alan. Yes, he didn't like cod, so I suppose he's missing out on this superb dinner, but then again, I never brought him here for dinner either. I never figured him for one to appreciate fine dining. And of course, he hated the stories which were actually real."

"You were about to tell me the stories."

"You must have run across them by now, especially from your work. The doctors at Rothburne dismiss them as tales about bogeymen who kidnap people to their own dark realms."

"And you think the bogeymen are real?"

"There are no such things as bogeymen, otherwise, the therapy I'm getting now would be worthwhile. But I do think there is a grain of truth in those stories, that there is some other, something beyond this world that somehow connects to this one."

“And how can you be sure?”

“That’s the research I’ve been doing in the institute archives.”

“But all those stories are from psychiatric patients.”

“Do you think everyone is crazy?”

Maybe you are, she thought, but she didn’t say that aloud. “How can you believe in myths if you don’t have proof?”

“I’m hoping to find proof.”

Verity didn’t say anything. Instead, she just ate another piece of fish.

“You don’t believe me.” He sounded resigned. “No one believes me. I’m trying to be logical and they do is to send me to the shrink. Anyways, Alan didn’t like those stories because he was beginning to think that there was some truth in them too, unlike Quinn who thinks I deserve sympathy and Bob who thinks I just should be locked up. Alan was the only archivist that I could talk to. Unfortunately, he quit and moved out of town before I could ask him to help me catalogue my antiques.”

“You collect antiques?”

“A little. But my day job is that of antiques dealer. I’ve been hoping to get an archivist as an assistant since only an archivist would only understand how I do things. Besides another antiques dealer, of course, but I’m always wary of the others in my profession. They’re always trying to get another acquisition.”

“You’re looking for an assistant?”

“Just part time, rather sporadic. Almost no heavy lifting. Occasionally accompanying me on trips to scout out some potential pieces and to meet with some clients.” He gave her a somewhat odd, pleading look. “I haven’t advertised in a newspaper. I guess, I’m somewhat paranoid that one of my competitors might use it to his advantage.”

“You’re asking me if I could be your assistant?” She felt mostly relieved that he was only propositioning her for a job. There was another part of her telling her that her would-be employer wasn’t quite right in the head. And then there was that third part telling her that she was somewhat disappointed. She didn’t want to dwell on why she might be disappointed. “What makes you think I’d be a good assistant?”

“You’re an archivist yourself which is the majority of the requirement. And I find you easier to talk to. In fact, I sensed that when I first saw you.”

“Hunches can often be wrong.”

“I don’t think I’m wrong about you. I don’t think you’re like Alan who ran away from what scared him.”

She looked down at her bandaged wrists. “Actually, I’m not so different from Alan. I do run away when I’m scared.” She looked up at him.

He regarded her solemnly. “Perhaps you have before, but I don’t think you will now.”

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Chapter 6 – The Doctor and the Patient

The corridor of doctors’ offices was entirely white except for the black plaques beside each door. A patient in a white gown and white shoes shuffled along in a slow two-step. He was an old man, his hair white wisps, his face a mass of wrinkles and two faded blue eyes fixed at some point beyond. Verity had an armful of case reports that Dr. Miram Greene had requested. He was supposed to be in Room 156, but as far as she could tell, none of the rooms were numbered. So she was peering at every plaque, wondering if there was a pattern to the offices. So far, she determined that it was not alphabetical.

The patient neared her and appeared to be oblivious to her until he abruptly stopped beside her. His gaze was still somewhere, far off. “Looking for someone?”

“Yes. Dr. Greene’s office.”

He swung his gaze to her and they were remarkably lucid. “An appointment?”

“No. I have some documents he requested from the archives.”

His expression suddenly turned confiding. “If you are not religious, don’t tell him that.” Then his eyes focused away from her. “You won’t find him by reading all those plaques. His office is at the very end of the hall. That’s because he has the most patients.”

As the old man ambled off to the other end of the corridor, Verity stared after him, frowning.

Shouldn't someone be watching over him? Resolved to find a nurse right after she dropped off the documents, she took off toward the back end of the corridor where the old man had said was Dr. Greene's office. As she neared the last door, she noticed that this office had no plaque. She knocked and heard a muffled "Enter."

Inside, a man in a white lab jacket sat at a large wooden desk apparently writing up a report. His blondish-gray hair was thinning—one could already discern a bare patch on top of his head. He appeared to be in his fifties and fit. He looked like the type who would go running or biking in the morning and then went to the gym in the evening to lift weights.

"Dr. Greene?"

"Yes?"

"I have the case reports that you have requested."

He finally looked up. His eyes were blue and his face, ruggedly handsome, but she didn't like his stare. It wasn't like Gammell's stare which gave her an oddly familiar recollection. Greene's stare was a bit dirty, as if he were imagining her in some obscene pose, naked. She hastily dumped the folders onto his desk and retreated to the door, uneasy that she was alone with him.

"You're new, aren't you?"

"I just got transferred here from the main administrative branch to do work at the archives."

"Ah, that would explain it. Have you looked at the case files?"

Of course she had looked at the case files. The first thing she noticed that they were all of disturbed patients with one singular delusion. One of those files, in fact, was one of Dr. Urich's sessions with the patient called Bost. She particularly remembered one passage:

Dr. Urich: And these "suspicious people", why did you think they were? Why don't you think other people, say, your next door neighbor, are suspicious?

Bost: My next door neighbor knows nothing. He doesn't even know how to lie. Now some people, like those upstanding citizens you call lawyers and doctors (no offense to you, Dr. Urich), they're very suspicious. Especially the really popular ones with the fake smiles. It's a gut feeling.

Dr. Urich: How do you know that your gut feeling isn't wrong?

Bost: Sometimes it's wrong, but only in the cases where that feeling is weak. But when you feel your heart beating faster or your throat closing up or your stomach churning, you'd better pay attention.

"No," Verity lied. "I just got the folders as requested."

"That's too bad," Greene said. "It would have been interesting to know what an archivist's opinion on these cases were. Thank you, Ms..."

"Tage." Verity hated that she was forced to give her name. She curtly nodded then, not even saying "You're welcome" and backed all the way up into the corridor. He was still looking at her when she closed the door.

She quickly walked down the hallway and paused when she saw that the old man had stopped in front of a window to look outside. She looked too and saw that a flock of crows were resting on the snow.

"So did he ask you about religion?" the old man said, his eyes still to the window.

"No, I was only there to drop off some documents," she told him again. "And shouldn't you be in your room? I could go get a nurse to help you."

"That, won't be necessary, I'm one of the better ones." He finally turned to her, his rheumy eyes smiling, seemingly coherent. "Come then, I'd like to walk with you to the recreation room. It's upstairs."

"The recreation room?"

"That's where all the better ones are. By the way, I'm Aeneas. Besides being one of the better ones, I'm also one of the luckier ones. My doctor is Dr. Friedman."

"I'm Verity."

"Ah, Truth. You must be very honest."

“I can lie.”

“Everyone lies.” They turned at the end of the corridor which led back into the entrance atrium. Georgette and Patrice mouthed a hello as they passed into another corridor and took a flight of stairs up. “A pair of clown-faced dummies if I ever saw,” he muttered.

Unsure if he was referring to the ladies at the welcoming station or something in his imagination, Verity said, “So is Dr. Friedman a good doctor?”

“He’s not so good as he is someone other than Greene. Greene may have many patients and they may all say he’s the best in the world, but I’ve seen all of his patients wilt over time. It’s as if he manages to sap all their energy. I wouldn’t have Greene touch me if he were the last doctor on earth.”

“I guess I can sort of see that.”

“Do you?” Aeneus said, suddenly sly. “Greene is extremely charismatic. Especially with the women. I bet he’s bedded more than half of the nurses in this institution already. I figure he’s got something, you know. That’s why I protect myself, see?” He turned up the sleeve of his hospital gown revealing a lining of what looked like aluminum foil. “Nothing can get through this.”

“Are you sure that works?”

“I’ve been here for ten years and they haven’t come near me yet. I’ll tell you what; you were lucky he let you go so fast. Either he had something else more important to do or he didn’t like you. Maybe it’s your hair. Your hairdresser didn’t do such a good job with a straight line, did he?”

“I cut it myself.”

The old man shook his head. “Bad job you did of it, my dear.”

“I know. I didn’t want it to be pretty.”

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Chapter 7 – Crate

The second floor opened up into a wide living space. The walls were white, but the floor was carpeted in a light beige. One side of the room was paneled with floor to ceiling windows overlooking the barren hill and a view of the nearby square with its domineering cathedral. A man in a wheelchair sat at the window reading a book.

Tables, chairs, and sofas were scattered throughout the rest of the recreation room. Two older men were at one of the tables concentrating on chess. A gray-haired woman sat on one of the couches knitting and humming a strange little ditty.

“There’s usually a couple more people here,” said Aeneus. “More lively. But of course, they don’t know what I know.”

“Know what?” asked Verity.

The old man’s eyes slitted. “Lots of things. Maybe I’ll tell you in time. But not here, not now. You’ve read some of the things down in the archive, haven’t you?”

“Well, I just started working there.”

“But you have read some things, right? Some things about the patients.”

“I’m still trying to catalogue the files from fifty years ago. I don’t think I’m allowed to read the records of current patients. Isn’t that a breach of confidentiality or something?”

“The kinds of patients who roam these halls haven’t changed in fifty years.”

“What do you mean by that?” said Verity even though she knew why he said that.

Aeneus only shook his head. “Perhaps I’ll tell you more when we visit next time.” His eyes were already focusing elsewhere. “Thank you for accompanying me back up here. You probably have some work to do in the archives. Oh, and go to a real hairdresser.”

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Verity entered the archives and noticed that Bob and Quinn were out of their offices. Quinn dumped a discolored wooden crate on the table as Bob stood nearby watching with his arms across his chest.

“What’s that?”

“A crate,” said Quinn.

“She knows it’s a crate,” said Bob. “We got it from the sub-basement.” At the incline of his head,

Verity's gaze fell on an open door that she had previously assumed was a custodial closet. Instead, the interior was dark with the faint outlines of stairs leading downward. "Musty old place," Bob continued. "It's not renovated like the rest of the institute, unfortunately."

Quinn pried the top open and coughed violently as a cloud of dust spewed out. "I believe the oldest records are down there. I figured, hey, since we're cataloguing everything for the new system, we might as well do these too."

Bob rolled his eyes. "Like we don't have enough work already?"

"So how far back do you think it goes?" Verity asked. "The records, I mean."

"Rothburne Institute was founded about a hundred and fifty years ago," said Bob. "Before that, this was the Rothburne Manor. Everything was moved out before it was converted into a health center. So I'd say maximum a hundred and fifty years."

"Not everything was moved out," said Quinn. He held up an ancient mirror; its reflective surface had been rubbed away or corroded until only the dull backing was left. The frame, however, appeared to be made of brass shaped in strange and unfamiliar swirling patterns. "Here's a book too."

The book had a black cover with no title. Quinn flipped it open. The yellowing pages were all empty.

"Do you think we should keep this stuff?" Quinn asked.

"Nah. I say we can just trash it," said Bob. "It doesn't look valuable. And there doesn't appear to be any identifying marks. I bet the Rothburnes who moved out forgot about this rubbish."

Verity picked up the old mirror and felt a something sharp course up her arm as if she had been suddenly shocked with static electricity. She turned the mirror over and examined the darkened back. She didn't see anything unusual, but when she passed her fingers over the surface, she felt bumps as if some writing had been etched underneath.

"If you guys don't mind, I'll like to take this with me," said Verity.

Bob took the book and handed it to her. "Take this too. Maybe a blank journal will be of use to you."

Quinn was rummaging inside the crate again. "Doorknobs."

"What?" said Bob.

"Doorknobs," he repeated. Quinn took out another brass object, this one round at one end, the other somewhat flat and looked likely to fit into the hole of a door if one really stretched the imagination. "You want these too Verity? You could start an antique doorknob collection."

Verity shrugged. "All right. Maybe I should take up a new hobby."

Bob made some sort of exasperated sound at the back of his throat. "All the other boxes down there probably have the same junk. I say we go through them when we're finished working on the important references."

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Chapter 8 – The Lighthouse

Driving the opposite direction from line seventy-four, Avtandil stretched from Monteport to the edge of the coastline and continued to skirt the border between sea and land by so many yards. But it was dark already at four-thirty in the afternoon and there was hardly any distinction between the land, the sea, or even the sky. It was only a swath of dark, cold velvet with only the pinpricks from the headlights of cars.

Verity was driving to an address just outside of Monteport. Gammell had given her the address right before they parted at Miranda's.

"If you do decide to help me," he had told her, "come by around five."

She could have gone straight home after work, but somehow, that little piece of paper with the address to the gray lighthouse beckoned to her. She tried giving herself a multitude of excuses. Gammell was probably crazy with all his talk about other worlds. Or at least highly delusional. The address was away from the relative safety of the city. And how well did she know Gammell anyway? Not well at all considering they had just met.

But then there had been that frisson of awareness every time he looked at her. What had that been about? It was as if his eyes were a blade, not just touching the insides of her wrists, but everywhere, along her arms, her back, the insides of her legs. Was he the hint of the escape from the real reason that she

had come to Monteport?

She shoved those self-examining thoughts aside. She came to Monteport because of a job. She was visiting Gammell because of a job. All right, she probably didn't need the extra money, but she was curious about the antiques trade. And she was good at cataloguing. Because Gammell was strangely compelling had nothing to do with it.

The lighthouse had been a steady pulsing star even from the city. As she neared, it grew larger and what supported that light that guided sailors loomed like a silent sentinel in black. There was a tiny road branching off from Avtandil and winding to the lighthouse. At the end of the road, she noticed that Gammell's black compact car was parked in the grass. She parked beside his vehicle and got out of the car. She could hear the surf, a low relentless roar.

The entrance to the lighthouse was as dark as the exterior. If there had been no light at all, she would have seen nothing. It would have simply been a strange column in the middle of the coastline. She knocked and waited. Amid the static noise of the surf, she heard the shrieks and cries of birds.

The door opened and light and warmth from the interior spilled outward, warming her cheeks. Gammell stood in the doorway, temporarily surrounded by a halo of light. He was wearing a plaid shirt with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows, top two buttons undone. His jeans looked like they were splattered with paint and his hair was mussed as if he had just come back from a brisk walk in windy weather. His gaze, however, was the same.

"Hi." Glancing into the interior, Verity saw that his living room was scattered with newspapers as if he were working on a delicate project which had the potential to leave something permanent on his floor. "Am I coming at a bad time?"

"No. Come in Verity."

Once inside the threshold, she discovered that the newspapers weren't in such a haphazard condition. They were surrounding a tiny chest of drawers which had been propped up by a square iron stand. Beside the chest were several bottles of chemicals, some brushes and rags, and a tool that looked like a scraper.

For an antiques dealer, Gammell's living room was remarkably modern. In the lighthouse with limited space, he had managed to fit in a couch and a large cabinet fronted with glass. Close to where the living room met another room that looked like the kitchen and the winding stair to the upper levels of the lighthouse was a large desk with a computer.

As if reading her mind, he said, "I have a lot more antiques than just this curio cabinet but I've put them into storage." He walked over to the chest of drawers sat down and proceeded to dump some of the chemicals into one of the rags. "You can put your coat on the couch. You can sit anywhere you like."

She did put her coat onto the couch, but she chose to sit on the floor, across from him, observing him in his work. "I didn't expect this to be your home. I thought this was going to be some sort of a showroom. This wasn't just some ploy to lure me here."

"If it was a ploy, I succeeded, didn't I?" He began rubbing the side of the chest slowly. "I used to run a store that sold antiques, but there's not much of a free market there—three or four antique stores were already in existence in the Old Quarter when I came on the scene. Mine had been in the market district, not too far away, but people going to the market district aren't going to buy antiques. So I turned consultant. More lucrative."

"If you're a consultant, what do I have to do?"

"When it comes to records, I'm somewhat disorganized. I have all the receipts and paperwork from my stint as a dealer. And of course the paperwork from my consulting jobs. But I also want a computerized database so lookup will be easier."

"Do you already have cataloguing software installed on your computer?"

"Sorry, no. I don't know very much about computers. That's why I want an assistant—to help me with all of that."

"I guess I'll set one up for you then." She watched him carefully go over the front of the drawers with the rag. "Are you removing the old varnish and putting a new coating on?"

"By Aunat, no." He briefly looked up at her, irritated. "If you take the original varnish off this piece, the value will decline. I just want to get rid of the dust that's accumulated."

"Oh."

"This curio cabinet is two hundred years old. It's rather ingenious. After I finish, I can show you that it opens up with a false bottom in two of the drawers. There are drawers underneath those false bottoms. And in the bottom drawer, there's a drawer within the drawer under the false bottom. It was

probably rife with secrets when it was originally in use. Two hundred years ago, the head of the Rothburne family gave this cabinet to his soon-to-be wife as an engagement present. It was passed down through the years from mother to daughter.”

“How did you get it? Did you buy it at an auction or through a client of yours?”

“I acquired it from my sister. She has no use for antique things.”

“How did your sister get it?”

“She’s the direct descendant of that Rothburne line. But she hates family history. She says there are too many half-cocked relatives in our family already, including myself. So she married some tycoon down south and moved out of Monteport as soon as she could. She keeps on telling me that I should do the same if it were not for the top psychiatrists that now reside at the institute.”

“You’re a Rothburne?” said Verity, somewhat surprised. “I thought your whole family moved away after you donated the manor to the institute.”

“No, the family scattered. The rest of the family moved south to get away from the Monteport winters. The direct descendants stayed here. I’m the only one left and I’m not even in Monteport proper.”

“It’s sad that your family fortunes have declined.”

He glanced at her oddly. “Some would say that it was inevitable.”

“Inevitable?”

“The second Rothburne to live in Monteport was said to have dabbled in occult and magic. It was his own fault that he brought misfortune onto his own family. When I was a boy, I heard stories about this, all differing—some saying that he had been an ambitious and greedy magician, others saying that he was a bumbling and cowardly man who stumbled onto misfortune by accident. But the one thing that all these stories agree on is that the way to undo this misfortune is to repair the damage that he had done.”

“It’s like a family curse. Have you tried finding more about it?” asked Verity.

“My ancestor may have done something to make someone annoyed with him, but I don’t think it’s a curse. Just misfortune he brought upon himself. I’m doing all right myself so I’m not worried about the ramifications of my own family history. How about you? I think there are old strange skeletons in everyone’s closet.”

Verity hesitated. The only skeletons were in her own closet. But for some reason, she felt she shouldn’t be compelled to blurt it all out, to let it go.

The phone beside the computer suddenly rang.

“I’ll get it,” said Gammell.

She let out a breath, relieved that the decision was taken out of her own hands.

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Chapter 9 – An Article

As Gammell was talking on the phone, presumably to a client considering his end of the conversation, Verity noticed something on the floor. Rather, it was an article on one of the newspapers spread out to protect the floor from the chemicals that were being used on the curio cabinet.

Three More Disappear

Three young men who were students at Monteport College disappeared last night as they headed to the Old Quarter to see a friend. Fellow students had seen them about six in the evening as they headed out to dinner in the business district. The popular matron, Miranda Duvall, last saw them at nine when the three young men went to the Old Quarter in another friend’s car. Duvall, well known for her first rate cuisine only for intimate friends and acquaintances, remarked that the young men were regular visitors and that she did not worry when they left her house. The young men were to meet Thaddeus Colbrin, a dealer in affordable furniture for college students as well as in antiques, but Colbrin never saw them.

This marks the fourth, fifth, and sixth disappearance this season.

Gertrude Rutherford, a first year student at Montepoort College disappeared fifteen days ago on her way to soccer practice. Leslie Peters and Bert Fellows, also first year students at Montepoort College disappeared eight days ago as they headed home by bicycle. The names of the three young men have not been released pending notification of their parents.

“What are you reading?”

She looked up. He had just finished the phone call. “It’s an article on a couple of college kids who are missing. I can’t help think that we were one of the last ones who saw them?”

“Why do you say that?”

“They were last seen at Miranda’s last night.”

“Ah. I believe I read that article this morning. A pity, but unfortunately no one can do anything about it.”

“What do you mean? Isn’t the police scouring the city for them?”

“The kids disappear every year, unfortunately. And the police can’t do anything about it. It’s as if they vanished without a trace. In fact, I believe they have vanished without a trace. The fanatics who worship the other probably kidnapped them and offered them in sacrifice in hopes of opening here into there.”

“Ah.” She didn’t want to say any more to provoke him in going about his spiel about others and things best not mentioned, but he continued, warming up to the subject.

“The curious thing is that the kidnappings, or the disappearances since there is no proof that actual people are involved in this, always happen around this time of the year. Now why is that?”

Verity just shrugged.

“I think it has to do with the fact that this other thing can only breach from there to here when the time is right. It’s the end of the year and the unnamed days draw near. Isn’t it curious that Aunat, generally called the Unnamed One to differentiate between the god and his incarnations, doesn’t even protect us on the unnamed days?”

“It’s just superstition,” said Verity. “The unnamed days are like any other days. They’re just five extra days at the end of the calendar because they couldn’t fit in evenly into a month.”

Gammell ignored her logic, “I’ll tell you what those unnamed days are. They’re left over from the days before, when the other was here in the minds of men and not the Unnamed One and his organized religion.”

“You know what you’re saying is blasphemy,” said Verity mildly. “You’re lucky I’m your only audience.”

“Of course I know that. I would have kept my mouth shut if you were my sister or my doctor or even one of the other archivists.”

“Why is that?”

He held out his hand to help her up. “Maybe because I have this hope that you will believe me?”

She put her hand in his. His hand was large and rough which was a contrast from his angular and moody face. It made her own look slim, delicate. “Fat chance of that happening,” she replied.

Gammell’s eyes darkened and he pulled her up just a little too hard. She stumbled onto her feet and nearly crashed into him. She was inches away from him. She stared back at him and felt his breath fanning her cheek. The standstill of wills felt as weighty, almost painful. What was she feeling when she saw his eyes dip to his hand still clasping hers?

“You’re such a skeptic,” he said.

“You’re angry.”

“No.”

“You’re annoyed with me the since I don’t follow your conspiracy theories.”

“No. You have no idea what I’m feeling.” He suddenly let go of her hand and stepped back. “One of my clients called. He has a job for me.”

“Then I should get going. I’ll get a copy of the cataloguing program and help install it on your computer. You can show me your paperwork later.” She strolled to the couch to get her coat.

“I want you to come with me.” He turned and walked to the kitchen to wash his hands. He came back to the living room with his own coat.

“But I don’t know anything about antiques dealing.”

“Consider it on the job training. You are my assistant, are you not?”

She cracked a smile. “Okay boss.”

“You should smile more often. Sometimes I wonder if you’re trying to audition for a tragic play.”

He opened the door.

“Well, maybe I am. What about your curio cabinet?”

“It can keep as it is at the moment. We’ll take my car since we’ll be back here soon. I don’t expect this particular appointment to be long.”

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Chapter 10 – Pelorus

Gammell took the small streets into the market district that wound through small shops selling shoes, tiny bakeries, and boutiques displaying the most recent wear for the coming Feasting Day. Like the snow, the costumes were white. Verity mused about getting a new dress for the holiday. She had ignored the holiday like every other day, but that had been before her move to Monteport. Down south, the holiday was marked by tedious speeches and empty rituals at the local places of worship. She wondered if it was the same in Monteport and thought, perhaps she should attend the Feasting Day activities this year, just to say she had done it once.

Dorsum Road was the boundary between the market district and the Old Quarter. It was a stark contrast. On the west side of the street were the shops and restaurants. A few of these businesses were also on the east side of the street, but the buildings primarily lining that side were three story apartments with facades of light yet crumbling colors that looked washed out in the dim evening. These apartments had windows lined with plant holders filled with snow instead of flowers and iron railing twisted in old-fashioned swirls and flourishes. Some of the second and third stories had doors opening out onto a tiny balcony instead of a window. But all of these doors were closed.

It was as if Dorsum was an imaginary river separating two distinct cities on either bank. One was mercenary and modern. The other stood facing it as if it was stuck in a time warp reliving constantly, two hundred years before.

On a little dark alley on the side of the Old District, Gammell parked his car. They got out and Verity followed him across the empty street to the market district side. Immediately ahead was a small restaurant with a flickering neon sign proclaiming “open”. Beside it, a pawn shop with a guitar, a dummy in a gaudy pink dress, and a set of worn silver spoons in the front window sagged tiredly in its grimy brick front. The window itself was conveniently painted with the words “Pawn Shop” in dark brown. And on the other side of the restaurant was a boot store with identical leather boots with two inch heels lining up in display. Unerringly, Gammell headed to the pawn store.

A bell hanging from the corner of the door which was plastered with posters of music idols clanged loudly in the still air. Verity stepped inside after Gammell and wrinkled her nose. The pawn shop smelled strongly of musky incense and oranges.

The pawn shop interior, which was slightly lighter than outside, was crammed with junk in no discernable order. Desperate people had given up ugly knick-knacks, silverware, and old records for money. All of these were stacked willy-nilly on the aisle shelves. In the corner nearest to the door was an ugly bronze vase half of Verity’s height and twice as big around. A variety of umbrellas, canes, and walking sticks were stuffed in it. A counter rimmed the perimeter of the shop. The counter itself was glass and here was the jewelry—rings, earrings, broaches, necklaces, bracelets. There were also stones by themselves, bejeweled tiaras and mirrors, and tiny crystal sculptures of mythical creatures. Along the walls were shelves of books, old and new.

The shop, however, appeared abandoned. Gammell tapped a desk bell on the counter once.

“I’m coming, I’m coming,” said a crackling voice. An old man stepped out from the door that led to the back rooms of the shop. He was a prune-faced creature, bald except for the tufts of white hair above his ears. He peered owlishly at the two people from behind his wire-frame glasses and tucked his hands into the pockets of his worn red vest. A small brown creature with a slim body sat on the old man’s shoulder. With an inquiring nose and beady eyes, the mongoose cocked its head at the two visitors.

“Gammell.” The old man smiled, revealing bad teeth. “Right on time.” His eyes then swiveled toward Verity. “Who’s that?”

“My new assistant, Verity. Verity, this is Pelorus.”

Verity nodded in acknowledgement.

The old man shook his head. "Gammell, you're an idiot. If I were you, I would have hired one of those men with enough muscle to haul a bed up a flight of stairs."

"I know how to work computers," said Verity.

"Ho, the technical type, are you?" said Pelorus. "You won't appreciate anything until you do everything by hand!"

"Do you do everything by hand?" she inquired curiously.

"You bet I do."

Gammell chuckled. "His organization is worse than mine. You should see his accounting books. They're not even books. Just bits of paper and notes scribbled on napkins stuffed in a box without a lid."

"Bah," the old man scoffed. "It's not like I ever go back and read all that stuff anyway." The mongoose bobbed its head up and down and swiped at the old man's ear. Pelorus took out a tangerine from his pocket and handed it to the creature. The mongoose took the fruit in its paws and began eating it, peel and all. "The desk I told you about is in the back."

As Pelorus and his pet disappeared into the interior, Gammell and Verity walked around the counter. The smell of oranges seemed to get stronger as they entered a stock room stuffed with antique chairs with torn upholstery, a couple of stag heads and a bear head stuffed and mounted high on the wall, and a narrow cot that looked like it had been last slept in the previous century. Pelorus was standing next to a desk that he had shoved near the back. The mongoose was perched on the top, finishing his treat. After the last bite, the creature scampered off to investigate the rest of the junk in the room.

"I just got it this morning," he said. "The owners used to live in Lisdon. They had moved into an already furnished house about six months ago, but for personal reasons, have decided to move back south. Can't blame them. Lisdon is a little strange."

"Lisdon isn't the greatest neighborhood," said Gammell.

"Huh. Well, I want you to take a look at it. I figured it was made about a century ago, but I can't tell for sure if it was made by Bilemot or Palisa. Those two kept copying each other; it's a wonder anyone can keep them straight."

Gammell approached the desk and squinted. He touched the top and ran his fingers along the edge, then tapped the desk from underneath. Verity was puzzled as he proceeded to examine the edges again. The desk itself looked more like a battered table, a simple square with four legs. Surely it wasn't so hard to find out who made it? She was about to suggest turning the table over and looking for the manufacturer's mark when Gammell straightened up and pulled the desk top completely off revealing a shallow interior.

"Well I'll be," said Pelorus impressed.

"Curious," said Gammell almost to himself. "The desk itself is definitely a Palisa. Notice the edges of the top? Very sharply defined. The top of a Bilemot is slightly rounder and softer. But neither Bilemot or Palisa ever hollowed out a desk. This seems almost new."

"What do you mean?" asked the old man.

"The interior looks rough." He put his hand inside. "Feels rough too. Whoever owned this before had been hiding something in here although whatever was here was taken when the owner abandoned the table."

"I was hoping to sell this off at a high profit whether it was a Bilemot or Palisa," Pelorus grumbled. "But at least I got it for dirt cheap from the previous owners. They didn't care what I paid for it. They just wanted to get out of town."

"It's still salvageable," said Gammell. He placed the top back on the desk. "You can probably sell it just for the uniqueness that it's a hollowed out desk."

"Ha!" Pelorus shuffled past them. "We'll soon see about that. Anyways, I had also called you over for something else." He looked at Verity. "But I didn't know you'll be tagging along. Are you trustworthy?"

"Have you ever heard about employee loyalty?" she replied.

"Loyalty is overrated. With the right amount of money, anyone can be turned to the other side."

Verity shrugged. "That's true."

"Whatever you're going to say, you can say it in front of her," said Gammell. "I trust her."

"First woman who hasn't run away after you told her about your conspiracy theories about the bogeymen, eh?" the old man cackled. "You must be as bonkers as he is."

"I'm perfectly sane, thank you very much."

“I’ll be the judge of that,” declared Pelorus. “Now where did I put that...ah yes!” He had rummaged through a pile of papers stacked on top of one of the old chairs and pulled out what looked like a photocopy of a document that had been printed badly in the first place. “This is a copy of a copy of Samuel Verne’s will.”

“Who’s Samuel Verne?” asked Gammell.

“The dead man isn’t important,” said Pelorus. “The will is. Part of it is of course partitioning various parts of his estate to his beneficiaries.” The old man’s gaze turned crafty. “Most of it’s been parceled out, but I was thinking about getting a cut out of these profits.”

“Profits?” said Verity. “That’s not profit. That’s like grave robbing.”

“There’s nothing bad about grave robbing,” Pelorus scoffed. “The dead don’t care about their stuff any more. Anyways, there are rumors that some of Verne’s things have mysteriously disappeared. I think they’ve been dispersed into the underground trade.”

“You’re going into illegal goods?” said Gammell. “I thought you swore off the underground trade after that debacle with those undercover police.”

“That was three months ago. They probably forgot all about it now. So I have a job for you, Gammell, as well as for your prissy assistant. Two heads are always better than one, eh? Anyways, there are rumors going around that there was a mirror in Verne’s collection of antiques that suddenly disappeared. It’s an unusual mirror with an unusual design for its frame. The designer is unknown. The reflecting surface is supposed to be titanium—whoever thought making a mirror out of titanium was a good idea is anybody’s guess.”

“And you want us to acquire this mirror for you?” said Gammell.

“Yes.”

“I can’t imagine an odd titanium mirror bringing any profit. You have anyone in mind that you’re selling it too?”

Pelorus’s gaze darkened. “I don’t have a potential buyer in mind at the moment. But I have heard that Colbrin was after it.”

Colbrin, thought Verity. Where had she heard that name before?

Gammell sighed wearily. “Are you still trying to one-up your rival?”

“That old geezer should stick to selling desk lamps and pencil cases to those college students,”

Pelorus fumed. “The business was never the same when he moved into the antiques trade. You of all people should know.”

“I do know,” said Gammell. “I just got smart and moved on to a different niche.”

The old man waved his hand. “Well, you’re young and crazy. Old folk like myself like where we are just fine. But we get mighty cranky when someone moves onto our turf.”

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Chapter 11 – Moon Nest

“I can’t believe you just accepted the job, just like that,” said Verity as she and Gammell stepped out of the pawn shop. The door clanged shut behind them. “You didn’t even ask him any questions about the people who inherited this Samuel Verne’s estate. You didn’t ask about the circumstances of when the will was read or who Verne’s relatives were or who were the executors. Who did Samuel Verne know? Where is his estate? And who exactly is Samuel Verne?”

“Why didn’t you ask all those questions when we were back in there?” he asked, amused.

“I don’t know. You were in charge? You’re the boss.”

“All right. But next time, if you’re dying to ask a question, just speak up.”

“Sometimes I feel ridiculous asking stupid questions.”

“Well, if it makes you feel any better, Pelorus probably doesn’t know the answer to any of those questions. His primary concern is about beating his rival, not finding out crucial bits of information. Anyways, how about dinner?”

“Sure. Where?”

“Next door.”

“Is it any good?”

“I don’t know. Haven’t been there before. Come on, it’ll be an adventure.”

The restaurant with the neon sign looked a bit shady to Verity. Inside was dim, an intimate setting of marble and dark wood. The entrance was graced with a waist-high statue of a crow carved in ebony, its wings spread as if it were to take flight. Out of the crow's beak spewed water into a tiny pool that had a pump to recycle the water back up the statue. Beside the statue was the counter with a cash register and a woman wearing a long dark dress that hugged her body closely. She wore no makeup except for the heavy kohl around her eyes.

"Two?" the woman inquired.

Gammell nodded. "Yes."

She took two red menus from the counter and led the way into the restaurant. There were a few other patrons at the restaurant, but in shadowy light, they were nothing but other pieces of backdrop. The hostess stopped at a table hugging the wall. The seats on either side were long and blocked off the view from the tables in front and behind.

As they sat down and the hostess dropped the menus in front of them, she said, "I'll be back in a few minutes to take your order."

Verity opened her menu. "Monteport New Fusion? What's that?"

"It could be anything. So what are you going to choose? Derelict's Fillet, Aunat's Tail Vein, or Sun Dew Leaf?"

"They all sound like ingredients in a witch's brew. And I'm not so sure that they'll taste as great either."

"Can it be that bad?"

"Possibly." She looked over her menu at him. His eyes were on her. "I'm going to try the Moon Nest."

"You sound so serious."

"I am," she replied. "At this point, I'm hungry enough to eat a moldy brick. So what are you getting?"

"I'll try the Mine Under Snow."

"You're crazy."

"Tell me something I don't know."

She laughed. "You're a crazy with a sense of humor."

He smiled. "Is that better than just a plain crazy?"

"I'll have to think about that."

"Well, don't think too hard."

The hostess came back to get their orders and to place two frosted cups of steaming tea in front of them. Fifteen minutes later, the hostess was back with their meals. "Enjoy," she told them, her mouth tipped slightly upward in a smile.

"This isn't so bad," said Verity. She had a plate filled with fried noodles interlaced with thin strips of beef and carrots. The entire concoction had been shaped into a lopsided nest which held pale dollops of water chestnuts. She placed a forkful of noodles into her mouth, chewed and swallowed.

"Pretty good, although I would have to say that Miranda is hands down still the best."

"Speak for yourself, if this is what I think it is..." Gammell stared down at what looked like a heap of white rice, "I think I got gipped."

"Well, you did order the Mine Under Snow. Maybe there's something under all that rice."

With a fork, he stabbed downward into the heap of rice and pulled out what looked like a green bean and a mushroom. "Well. They certainly are quite creative with their names."

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Chapter 12 – In Defense

"I'm going to find out more about this Samuel Verne," said Gammell. "I'll also look into the underground market. I have a few acquaintances that are good sources of gossip."

"You don't dabble in the underground market yourself, do you?" asked Verity.

"Of course not. It's too easy to get caught. Besides, it's not such a good idea to get yourself known in such circles. It carries a certain risk."

"Risk? Like backstabbing and cheating?"

"Well there is that. But there are some worse things. Like disappearing suddenly if you know the

wrong information. The police don't look that hard at those disappearances if they even come to their attention. They think that if you've done illegal activities, you probably got what was coming to you anyway."

"That doesn't sound too reassuring—that no one cares that you're dead and that your murderer is on the loose."

"I don't think these underground disappearances are due to some murderer. Sometimes one is just taken by one of those people and offered up as a sacrifice to something from elsewhere."

She raised an eyebrow. She shouldn't be surprised any more when he lapsed onto this strange topic. "How do you know all of this? You sound like you made it all up."

"I did not make it up," he replied defensively. "This is part of my research, remember? I pieced it together from all the evidence I've gathered so far."

"I'd like to see all this evidence."

"Sorry. I burned it all after I studied them. Everything is up here," he tapped his head. "If I let any of the evidence lying around, someone, those particular people probably, would get it. And they'll know that I know."

"Then tell me all this evidence," she challenged. "Give me the references."

"Demanding, aren't you?" His mouth quirked upward. "All right then, I'll tell you. But not here where there are ears. Perhaps when we get back."

Gammell paid for dinner. Verity, of course, had objected, but he had argued that the dinner was part of her salary as his assistant. She stopped protesting after that, but she had the suspicion that it was only a flimsy excuse to take her out.

"Are you always suspicious that someone might overhear you?" she said as they exited the restaurant. "Why are you afraid of that and not that I might blab what you tell me to one of your rivals?"

"I told you before that I trusted you."

"You don't know me very well."

He glanced down at her wrists, still bandaged. She reflexively hid them in the pockets of her coats. "I think you know that I know you well enough."

"And what about the reverse?"

But she never got to hear his answer. Gammell had suddenly toppled onto the pavement as if he were a sack of potatoes being thrown into the produce truck. A cry was partially out of her mouth when she glanced back just in time to see a dark figure swinging a long metal bar as if it were a club. She ducked.

The figure missed. Dimly, she noticed that this was a man in a ratty woolen coat, a dark scarf to obscure his face, and badly scuffed shoes. She thought to shout for help when the man swung again.

She ducked too late and he clipped her arm. Pain radiated to her shoulder, but she had no time to think. The rogue had thrown himself on her and she was suddenly grappling with this smelly thing pawing at her, searching for something. The metal bar dropped onto the ground with a clang as the man needed two hands to subdue his struggling victim.

"Verity?" Gammell cried out weakly.

Her mind clicked abruptly and she felt hot anger course into her face. She was not going to let this idiot get to her. She got one of her arms free, but the metal bar was too far away. Instead, she reached downward, between the man's legs, and twisted hard.

The man shrieked so loudly in a high-pitched voice that Verity thought her eardrums would burst. He rolled off her and limped off, clutching his wounded pride. Breathing hard, she picked herself up and went over to Gammell. He was sitting up, his head in his hands.

"Gammell? Are you okay? I think I should take you to the hospital to make sure you didn't get a concussion."

"No." His voice sounded thready, but it was adamant. "The bastard gave me a good whack on my head, but I'll be fine after I sit down somewhere for a while. Did he hurt you?"

"I fine. But he may be worrying about the viability of his future children for a while."

He leaned heavily on her when she helped him up. His winced as they took a step forward to cross the street. "I really need to sit down soon."

"We're almost there," Verity told him. "You're in no condition to drive, though. Give me your keys."

He reached into his pocket and placed the car keys into her free palm. She opened the door to the passenger side and made sure he was sitting properly when she took the driver's side. Once they were both

inside the relative safety of the car, she started up the engine and eased it out of the alley.

“We’re going to the hospital.”

“No,” he repeated. “I’ll be all right. I told you that.”

“Why? I may have worked at hospital archives reading case studies, but I don’t know anything about how to triage a patient. If you were to lapse into a coma, I wouldn’t know what to do with you except to take you to the hospital.”

“I’m fine.” His voice was getting stronger which made her suspect that he was right, but she had control of the car at the moment. “I don’t want any of the doctors touching me.”

“Doctors are supposed to touch their patients.”

“But they’ll be asking about my case history. They’ll find out soon enough that I regularly go to the Rothburne Institute to see Dr. Miram Greene.”

“I don’t think that part of your health will affect their initial examination.”

“The hell it will. The bastard hit my head. They’re going to want to do tests to see if I’m even more cracked than I am even though I’m not crazy in the first place.”

She took the car down Dorsum and then down all the way to the intersection of Main Street. “I’m going to the hospital whether you like it or not. If it’s any consolation to you, I’ll stay with you until their done examining you.”

He sighed in defeat. “All right. Now let’s see if that bastard managed to take anything.” He stuck his hands in his pocket and pulled out his wallet, a paperclip, some change, and a crumpled piece of paper.

“After we visit the hospital,” Verity continued, “We’re going to the police station to file a report.”

“At this point, I’m not going to even argue with you even though I could point out that even though an attack on Dorsum Road is interesting, it’s nothing new to the police. Did you see what he looked like?”

“He covered his face with a scarf.”

“The police are never going to find him then. And considering we both got through it with relatively few scratches, they’re probably never going to look at our case. They have other more pressing things to investigate.”

“You’re being rather chatty after being hit on the head.”

“That’s because I told you I was fine.” He looked through his wallet. “It doesn’t look like he robbed me. What’s this?” He unfolded the crumpled paper and squinted at it in the dark car. “There’s a message on it.”

“Don’t strain yourself reading it.”

“It says, ‘It’s gone.’ Now what does that mean?”

“It’ll probably come to you when you finally remember why you wrote that note to yourself.”

“It’s not my handwriting though.” He turned the paper over. “It looks like it got written on the back of a business card of some sort from the Verne Storehouse. The address is in the old business district. You don’t suppose someone is trying to warn us off of the job, do you?”

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## Chapter 13 – The Other Promise

At around noon, Verity saved her work on her computer. The voices on the other side of her office wall were getting louder and louder until she could hear occasional distinct words. She had planned to eat lunch in her office while she finished cataloguing the latest pile of reports for the new system, but then again, she didn’t want to hear arguing either. It dangerously made her think of other things, like going into the bathroom and taking off the bandages on her wrists.

She took out her bagged lunch from one of her desk drawers and crept out into the main room of the archives. Peeking at the glassed offices, she saw Bob in Quinn’s office. A stack of reports laid ignored on the desk. Instead, the two men were gesturing wildly, faces red. She heard something like, “I can’t believe you slept with my wife,” coming out of Bob’s mouth. They didn’t notice Verity as she fled to the stairwell.

Out on the first floor, the reception area was being manned by an older volunteer. Georgette and Patrice had told her the previous day when they had waylaid her on her way to work to tell her about their big plans for Feasting Day. Verity had only nodded as they rambled about decorations and invitations and costumes and problems they were having with the catering service for their party. They had given her an



invitation saying they they were throwing the party for maybe about fifty people before the service at the cathedral. Verity had only nodded again when they told her that they were taking the day off to make all the preparations.

The institute cafeteria was also on the first floor at the end of the corridor branching the opposite direction of the doctors' offices. As she headed in that direction, she noticed that an old man was shuffling her. It was Aeneus with his foil-lined gown.

"Lunch?" Aeneus inquired. "Aren't you going to eat that in your office?"

"It's a bit distracting there at the moment."

"Eh? Why's that?"

"Quinn and Bob are arguing about personal matters."

"Figures," the old man grumbled. "Everything's personal."

"Have you had lunch yet?" asked Verity.

"I was heading to the cafeteria myself. I just show them my patient card and I get my meals." He pulled out an identification card he pulled out of his gown. It looked a lot like the white identification card Verity had which was for employees. Aeneus's card, however, was green.

The cafeteria itself was a long sterile room painted in a soothing peach. The tables and chairs were ordered in a neat grid array. From the line at the cafeteria, Aeneus ordered what the staff was serving for the day: rice, mild curry, a couple pieces of broccoli, and a banana.

"Aunat save us," the old man complained as they sat at one of the side tables. "They should hire a new cook."

Verity took out her own sandwich. "You're right although I'm not sure a new cook will really solve that problem. Hospital food isn't the greatest."

Aeneus took a few bites of his rice and curry before gulping down some juice. "This may feed the body, but not the soul. I'm looking forward to Fasting Day when the chaplain comes down and gives us a sermon about Aunat's Promise. It gets me through those depressing Unnamed Days."

"You said before that you were going to tell me what you know."

The old man squinted at her, then over her shoulder. The cafeteria was remarkably empty except for a cafeteria worker wiping down the counter and a fat bewhiskered custodian reading a newspaper during his break. They were both on the other side of the room.

"I guess it's all right to say it at the moment," Aeneus concluded. "Things this year has been stranger than usual. I hate to say this, but this year's end lull is going to be quite, how shall we say, treacherous. I'm going to keep myself in my room on the Unnamed Days. I've accumulated enough foil to wallpaper my room. They're not going to get me."

"Oh," said Verity, finding herself somewhat speechless.

"What some people don't realize," the old man continued, "is that there is another part of Aunat's Promise or whoever's Promise depending in which city you are in and in what incarnation the unnamed one decides to take. The point is, this unsaid and unstudied part of the promise warns us that the Unnamed Days are extremely dangerous. It is when Aunat is not even here. Only with the new year is the unnamed one resurrected to protect us from whatever it is that is out there."

"I just thought it was superstition that the Unnamed Days were bad luck and that the fact that we get a break from work at the end of the year is just a holdover from the superstitious past."

"Oh no." His voice lowered to a whisper. Verity had to lean in slightly to hear him. His eyes glittered in determination. "Of course, the stories about Aunat's resurrection is contrived. The fact, in the unsaid part of the Promise, is that Aunat is in hiding. There are other things out there—things that are even more powerful than the unnamed one."

"How come I've never heard of this particular story before?"

"You're not a native," said Aeneus patiently. "And not every city is as weak as Monteport."

"Weak?"

"Monteport and perhaps in a few other places in the world are only thin barriers connecting here from there. When the time is right and if other forces are in alignment, those barriers can be broken. There will be here and others will be able to reach into here."

"What others?"

"It's not right or normal or even safe to discuss what the others are."

"Will you tell me if we were the only ones in the room?"

"No, not even then, because even if we were alone, we're not really alone."

She was puzzled. "You mean because people have bugged your room with recording devices?"

“It’s not the recording devices that I’m worried about. But luckily, as I still have hope, that this year’s Unnamed Days will pass as uneventful as all the others, that we will be safe yet for another year.”

They finished up their lunch as Aeneus told her about how as a young man, he had been a scholar at Montepoort College studying old religious documents. He had been brilliant, he told her with pride. If she bothered to look, he had scores of papers and books published on the subject. It was only when he tried advocating the other side of Aunat’s Promise and been diagnosed with a chronic ailment (“Something about my nervous constitution,” he said dismissively) that his relatives committed him to the Rothburne Institute.

“I’ll walk you back to your room,” Verity said as they got up from the lunch table. There were now two cafeteria workers, both of them refilling the trays of food on the counter. A line of five institute workers was at the cash register. The custodian was gone.

“That’s very kind of you,” Aeneus said. “A lot better than my ridiculous relatives who never visit or call. Actually, I only have one relative hereabouts. My no good nephew Kenny. He says he’s always busy with his accounting business.”

They were about to exit the cafeteria doors when a familiar figure almost collided with them. It was Dr. Miram Greene.

“Well, hello.” He was smiling widely, his eyes pinned on Verity. “How are you doing today, Ms. Tage?”

“I’m doing fine,” she replied stiffly.

“You must be very busy since I’ve only seen the other archivists when I’ve requested the case files.”

She said nothing. She had handed all of his requests to either Quinn or Bob with the excuse that she was trying to repair a database bug.

“You need a break,” Greene said, oblivious to her silence. “Tell you what, I’ll buy you lunch and you can have a little break.”

He was about to put his hand on her elbow to guide her into the cafeteria when Aeneus, who had been ignored, spluttered, “Don’t you dare touch her, you lecher.”

“That’s pretty strong words.” Greene frowned at the old man who was pulling out a band of aluminum foil to put it about his forehead as a headband. “What’s your name?”

“My name is of no importance,” said Aeneus.

“Well then, how about lunch?”

“She already had lunch,” the old man said before Verity could reply similarly.

“I wasn’t talking to you.” The doctor was tapping his hand along his pocket, visibly annoyed. When he glanced at Verity, he smiled again, perhaps a little too brightly. “Well, if you’re not free for lunch, then how about dinner?”

“I already have plans for dinner,” Verity found herself saying.

“Well, how about dinner sometime later this week?”

“Sorry, doctor, but I’m not available.”

“I don’t see a ring,” Greene persisted.

“It’s not official yet.”

“Who’s the lucky man?”

Verity looked at her watch. “I’m sorry doctor,” she said, not even registering what the time was. “But I’m late for a meeting with the other archivists. Database issues and all of that.” She turned tail and escaped out of the cafeteria with Aeneus not far behind.

“Whew, that was a close one,” Aeneus remarked. “Even your bad hair didn’t stop him this time. Tell you what, with all the foil I have in reserve, I probably will have some left over after lining my room. You can have it to protect yourself.”

“Thanks, Aeneus, but I don’t think foil will do a thing if someone is determined enough.”

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Chapter 14 – Whispers

When Verity arrived back at the archives, feeling numb from Greene’s attempted pass and wondering if her brain was already wrapped up in Aeneus’s aluminum foil, she dimly registered Bob putting on his coat and heading out.

“Where are you going?” said Verity.

His plump face squeezed together as if he had tasted something sour. “Emergency. I’m not sure if I’ll be back.”

“Emergency?” she replied mechanically. “Is someone hurt?”

“Someone might be,” Bob said cryptically. Then he left without so much of a good-bye.

She looked up. Quinn was in his office staring at his computer, seemingly working and oblivious to the world. There was a small washroom in the archives. Verity went in and locked the door.

In the harsh light, she stared at the familiar pale woman in the mirror above the wash basin. She didn’t appear very haggard and her badly chopped off hair was slowly growing out, but her mouth remained a firm unyielding line. She looked down at her hands. She didn’t really like her hands. She had always thought that the fingers were slightly shorter than they should be and not as slender. Her fingers were ringless.

She wanted to feel anger, a spark, and echo, anything. She wanted to feel that brief heat that came when she was actively fighting off the attacker outside the restaurant on Dorsum Road. Not bothering to even look at her bandaged wrists let alone unwrapping them, she took out the small pen knife that she often carried with her. Unsheathing it, she placed the gleaming blade, flat side on her right palm. It felt cool like a shard of ice. She pressed downward slightly and from the tip came one drop of bright red blood.

She could hardly feel the sting, but an image suddenly materialized in her mind. It was Gammell, his sharp gaze trained on her, silently asking what she was doing.

“It’s none of your business,” she whispered harshly in the empty washroom. She took the blade away from her hand and turned on the faucet. “None of your damned business.”

She washed her hands and wiped the blade down before putting it back into her pocket. She flushed the toilet, just for good measure and washed her hands again. She then unlocked the wash room door and stepped out to find that Quinn was now out of his office. He was placing a pile of books on one of the reading tables. Quinn turned to look at her.

“Are you all right?” he asked. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“I lost some sleep last night,” she said. “My next door neighbors like to play loud music.” In reality, her next door neighbors didn’t play any music at all. She had spent the previous night waiting at the hospital for a doctor to examine Gammell to see that he didn’t have a concussion. The doctor who ended up seeing them pronounced Gammell fit but had spied the bandages on her wrist. In the end, it was Gammell who had saved Verity from the doctor’s questions.

“Too bad. You might want to look at soundproofing your walls.”

“I’ll look into that. You don’t look so well yourself.”

“You must have heard the argument I had with Bob.”

“Only a little. I went to the cafeteria to have lunch.”

“He thinks I slept with his wife.” Quinn started sorting the books into piles. “I think he left to either confront his wife or walk off his anger.”

“Uh huh.”

“His accusation isn’t true,” he continued. “I haven’t met his wife. I don’t even know what she looks like. I wouldn’t know his wife if I passed her on the street. I’m guessing his marital problems just spilled over and he had to take it out on me.”

“That doesn’t sound sensible to let your private life into your work.”

“Love isn’t supposed to be sensible.” He took up one of the smaller piles of books and started across the room to the shelves.

Verity went back into her office and sat down at her computer and caught sight of the old mirror that Quinn dug up from the sub-basement the other day. It was sitting on the edge of her desk, a dark, tarnished lump. She had forgotten about it until now. The strange antique whispered quietly to her. There was writing on the back side of the thing—she was sure of it. Later, she promised herself.

She turned back to the pile of documents that she was cataloguing and turned to the next one. The words swam in her eyes. Was it just her mind, or was the whispering from the mirror getting louder? Was she slowly going insane? Soon she would be blabbering about old telepathic mirrors just as Gammell ranted constantly about the others and Aeneus’s constant recommendations about clothes lining with aluminum foil. She adamantly ignored it and tried concentrating on the files.

The imagined whispering became louder and louder until it became a roar. Verity wanted to shut her ears, to stuff them with cotton, to throw that object out of the office.

“Verity?”

Quinn's voice suddenly startled her from her reverie. The whispering also miraculously stopped.
"Yes?"

"It's time to close up. Are you staying late today?"

"Oh, no. I'm glad you reminded me. Time seemed to have gotten away from me." She saved her work and shut the computer down. Almost absent-mindedly, she tucked the old mirror into her coat pocket. The both of them locked up the archives and as they ventured out into the parking lot, Verity buttoned her coat closer to her neck. It was frigidly cold. And it was snowing.

"I'm taking the day off tomorrow," Quinn told her, his voice muffled against his scarf. "I was originally going to take the day off to do some Feasting Day preparations, but with Bob, well, maybe it's for the best. If Bob doesn't come back tomorrow, will you be all right by yourself?"

"I'll be all right. Everything has been slowing down at the institute the last couple of days. It's not like a store."

"No, it's not like a store."

Verity was about to turn to her car when Quinn started speaking again. She could feel the tips of her fingers getting colder.

"Do you sometimes wonder if things aren't quite right?"

"What do you mean?"

"This whole holiday season. Every time it starts up, I get this uneasy feeling that something is going wrong. Maybe it's just Bob's problems affecting me, but it happens every year."

"Some say it's the weather," said Verity. "The winter makes some people depressed."

"I don't feel depressed. I feel edgy. This year, I think it'll be better if I just stay home during the Unnamed Days and not go out."

"You're probably stressed out. Don't work too hard, Quinn, and get plenty of sleep. Good night."

"Good night. Don't work too hard yourself either."

Verity turned on her car and sat there for a few minutes. The whispering had come back. She finally drove back home, her teeth on edge, her ears ringing. With each moment, the whispering became even more distinct. It was like listening to a foreign language.

Finally inside her apartment which she had finished organizing from her move the day before, she rummaged in the bottom cabinets of her kitchen and pulled out a bottle of rubbing alcohol, some oil polish she used for the metal furnishings that her uncle left behind, and a worn rag. She took out the old mirror with no reflecting surface and laid it face down on the dining table. After taking off her coat and draping over a chair, she poured a bit of the rubbing alcohol onto the back of the mirror and began rubbing.

In a few minutes, the tarnish began to vanish revealing the brass underneath. She then started using a little polish and the mirror frame began to gleam. It was then that the whispering stopped for good.

She could finally make out the etched writing on the back. The foreign letters curved at strange, oblique angles. It was of no writing that she had ever encountered before, but the very letters seemed ominous in their cryptic-ness. Verity wondered if she even wanted to know what it meant.

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## Chapter 15 – Guardian

Bob had called in saying he wasn't going to make it to work. And since Quinn had already taken the day off, Verity had been left alone with the work. None of the doctors had requested any case files that day so it made things easier. Verity just concentrated on the reports that she was filing.

She was still doing the older files but a different batch. These reports were all on cases of chronic lung conditions. There were patients with emphysema, bronchitis, bronchiectasis, alpha 1-antitrypsin deficiency, COPD (or chronic obstructive pulmonary disease), people who just need oxygen therapy. There were also asthma cases (mild and severe), interstitial lung disease, and a variety of respiratory infections. The descriptions in all cases were dry and clinical although it was easy to imagine the patients hacking and hawing, coughing up sputum of all different colors, and breathing harshly as if someone were about to suffocate them. But she was used to these and the files seem to fly by during the day until she hit a folder in the middle of one of the piles. It had been misplaced.

The folder was of one of Dr. Urich's patients, Megyeri. Verity seemed to recall that Megyeri was the one who found a cult secretly meeting under his cousin's cellar. This session was similar to the one she read before. Megyeri had witnessed another cult meeting. But it was the lines at the end of the session that

really caught her eye.

Megyeri: I have a favor to ask of you, Dr. Urich. I was wondering if we could cancel next week's appointment. I'll be back the week after, of course.

Dr. Urich: Did you have something scheduled beforehand? Is it a religious service scheduled after Fasting Day?

Megyeri: To tell you the truth, it's nothing like that. I'm not that much a religious man myself. I'll rather stay home that day. I have a feeling that the end of the year won't be the best time to come out.

Dr. Urich: What do you mean? The end of the year is like any other time of the year.

Megyeri: No it's not. Haven't you heard of the stories surrounding the Unnamed Days?

Dr. Urich: Yes, but I don't see...

Megyeri: That's when all the cult members will have whatever other power they are conjuring up—it'll be at its height. I don't want to be up and about it whatever thing they are worshipping is lumbering about.

Dr. Urich: You told me yourself you don't know what the cult is doing let alone some obscure rituals that could be anything at all. And this is not good for your treatment. If you stay at home next week, that will be giving into your paranoia and we will be losing whatever progress we have gained so far.

Megyeri: I know, doctor, but I don't think just one week will hurt.

Dr. Urich: Just one week can.

Megyeri: I really don't want to go out of the house next week, especially during the Unnamed Days.

Dr. Urich: Tell you what, why don't I come out to see you? Nothing will happen to me, I'm sure of it, and you'll see that too.

Megyeri: Dr. Urich, that's not going to solve anything. I like you. You try to be so earnest about curing the superstition out of people like us. But the fact is, all that superstition is true. It must have had some basis in fact long ago. And I'm not discounting it. So if you know what's good for you, you'd be staying home too.

“You look busy.”

Gammell was standing right outside her office, his winter coat unbuttoned revealing a dark shirt and a pair of jeans. He was holding a reference book and a stack of photocopies. Verity briefly wondered if there were files on Gammell with transcriptions with his doctor visits. She wondered if the conversations were like the ones with Dr. Urich's delusional patients. She looked at her watch.

“I'm always busy,” she replied. She closed down her office and took the reference book out of his hand and put it on a cart of books to be shelved. “But your timely arrival reminded me that it is time to close down the archives.”

“Lucky me that I just finished doing my research for the day.”

“Did you find what you needed?”

“I had a hunch that Verne had something with the institute.”

“You couldn’t have possibly found his file if he did have a file here. Patient records are strictly confidential.”

“I know that. I was looking further back. Samuel Verne, from what some of my associates tell me, is a rather well-known entrepreneur in the Old Quarter. He came from one of those old families that have been in Monteport for generations—and dare I say it—even longer than my own. There were also rumors about some of his odd relatives.”

“Oh?” Verity locked up the archive door after turning out the light. They climbed the stairwell to the first floor. “And you thought you could find some mention of his odd relatives in the institute archives?”

“Yes, there’s that, but as you said before, I can’t get to confidential patient files. But I did recall that the Vernes had very peculiar physical abnormalities. So I was looking up some medical terminology and descriptions of diseases that my have matched those abnormalities. So far, there are a couple of diseases that sound similar although not exactly the same.”

“One thing I’ve learned as a medical archivist,” she replied, “is that even though people may have the same disease, they don’t manifest them all quite the same way. Some people have it in more severe forms than others.”

“I’ll think about that.”

“So why do you think the medical histories of Samuel Verne’s family will help us with the job Pelorus gave us?”

“I’m thinking that anything will help us.”

They had reached the first floor. Verity noticed that the welcoming station was empty. Georgette and Patrice had already left for home. The only person loitering about was the bewhiskered custodian slowly mopping up the floor.

“Some acquaintances of mine invited me to one of their Feasting Day parties. It’s supposed to be a casual luncheon,” said Verity. “They mentioned that I could take one other person along.” She felt her hands shaking and shoved them into her coat pockets. What was she doing? When she had ever asked her ex-boyfriend if he could go somewhere with her, he had always had an excuse. He was working. Of course, now she knew why he was “working” late every time. The skin under her bandages suddenly felt itchy. “I’m sort of new in Monteport and I don’t know very many people. I was wondering if you’d like to come with me. I mean, if you’re busy, that’s all right too.”

“No, I’m not busy, in the afternoon. One of my acquaintances had given me an invitation for two for a party he is throwing for Feasting Day too. But it’s in the evening. It’s one of those elaborate costume parties in the Old Quarter. I was going to ask you the same thing.” He grinned self-deprecatingly. “All my female acquaintances think I’m insane, but you’re the only one who seems to have stuck around.”

Was she his last resort? But then suddenly hopeful, she said, “I don’t have anything planned for the evening of Feasting Day. So how about this, you come with me to the party in the afternoon and I come with you to the party in the evening and we’ll call it even.”

“Is this some sort of business deal?”

“Well,” she stalled.

He suddenly seized her chin in his palm so that they were eye to eye. His gaze was sharp, just on the verge of being angry. His hand felt rough along her jaw. “I don’t want this to be some sort of deal. We go to each other’s parties because we want to.”

She jerked her head away from his hand. “Fine. I’ll go because I want to.”

A brief smile flitted across his mouth. “Same with me.”

“Verity!”

She turned at the crackling voice and saw Aeneus ambling toward her. He was holding three rolls of aluminum foil under his arm. “Hello Aeneus. Shouldn’t you be having dinner or be back in your room? It’s getting late.”

“I just wanted to catch you before you left. I just finished…” he glanced up suspiciously at Gammell. “Who’s he?”

“Oh? That’s Gammell.”

“Gammell?” The old man squinted. “The Nathaniel Gammell?”

“The same,” Gammell replied.

Aeneus chuckled. “You’re famous, just famous. I’ve heard that you’re the only patient that

Greene is tearing his hair out about.”

“Why’s that?” he asked.

“Because you’re a Rothburne, that’s what. Even though the Rothburnes donated the institute—well I’m sure you already know all about it—they still have controlling interest in what goes on here. I guess I can trust you. After all, your ancestors are one of the guardians.”

“Guardians?” said Gammell sharply. “How did you hear about that?”

“I hear many things” said Aeneus, crafty. “They’re the ones who make sure Montepoort’s barriers don’t break during the Unnamed Days.”

“Who told you about the barrier? Are you one of Greene’s other patients?”

Aeneus shook his head. “I’m lucky Greene isn’t my doctor.” He shoved the aluminum rolls into Verity’s hands. “Protect yourself. I’ve already gotten my room prepared and I’m staying there starting this moment. And you,” he pointed at Gammell, “had better start doing a better job of it. Someone at the church might be able to help you.”

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## Chapter 16 – The Corvus

“The old man may be right,” Gammell mused as they walked out of the institute. The evening air was chilly, but it wasn’t snowing. The sky was clear with stars. The waning moon was a bright crescent. In about a week, the moon wouldn’t be there at all.

“You know what he meant by guardians,” said Verity.

“Yes.”

“Well, what did he mean?”

No one else was in the parking lot. Gammell had parked next to Verity’s car and they stood facing each other, leaning against their own cars.

“My family is supposed to be in charge of making sure that the other doesn’t get from there to here.”

So they were back to his delusions. Or everyone’s delusions. Or perhaps she was becoming delusional too after hearing it all repeatedly. “If you’re in charge, then why are you doing all this research? You’re supposed to know all about it.”

“That’s the problem. I don’t. The last time my family really had to do anything was a little more than a hundred and fifty years ago, right before the manor was given away to be made the institute. They thought that they had gotten rid of the other or strengthened the barrier enough so that they wouldn’t have to worry about it ever again. And so the knowledge was never really passed down.”

“I’ve read reports from patients claiming there are people trying to bring whatever it is you’re alluding to back to Montepoort. These reports were fifty years old. I don’t think they succeeded then. What makes you and everyone else like you think that this year will be different?”

“Probably timing. And I hate to say it, but also my intuition.” He slipped his key into his car door. “I’m going to head on over to the Corvus. Maybe we’ll get dinner together another time.”

“You’re really going to church, aren’t you? What if I come with you?”

He stopped in the midst of opening his car door. “You’re serious aren’t you? People have listened to my theories but have dismissed them as just superstitious and delusional stories. You really want to see what I find out?”

Under his sharp gaze, she suddenly felt uncomfortable. “I mean, why not? I’m not really saying that I believe you...well, I haven’t been inside the Corvus before. As a non-religious person, I never had reason before to take a look.”

“It’s quite a place. You can follow me in your car if you like. I’ll be parking on the square.”

Verity did not think any sort of following was necessary. Even from outside the city, the spires of the cathedral, or the Corvus as many of the natives of Montepoort called it, could be seen. In the night, it was a black sharp thing in the sky. No one could miss it. She parked her car near Gammell’s in front of the library and walked with him to what was supposed to be the entrance. If there had been no moon and no street lights, the façade of the cathedral would have simply been a black impenetrable wall.

As they stepped toward the front door and Gammell put his hand on it to push it open, Verity heard cackling noises above her. She looked up and saw dark birds perched on the eaves, watching them. The crows made more cackling noises and then settled down again as they entered the Corvus. The small

foyer they entered was dark except for the few electric lamps placed at the corners. The pillars ringing the room were carved intricately with ivy and crows in varying poses—flying, wings spread, wings by the side, nesting.

There was another door apart from the entrance that was located at the opposite end of the foyer. Beside it was a square wooden box on a stand. There was a slit at the top. Gammell took out a bill from his wallet and slipped the money into the box before opening the door and entering. He did not look back to see if she was following him. Hastily, she took a crumpled bill from her coat pocket and crammed it into the collection box feeling like she was paying some admission price instead of a donation. Then she followed Gammell into the main part of the Corvus.

The main room was enormous—it could have easily held thousands of people during a service. Huge pillars rose up from the sides of the room to support a high vaulted ceiling that seemed to stretch upward to the heavens. There were also windows of darkly stained glass with pictures of crows. Stone cubbyholes lined the side walls. The novices had already started decorating for Fasting Day as the cubby holes were filled with white candles. Half of them were already lit which cast the room in flickering light and moving shadow.

Gammell did not look at any of this. Instead, he headed to the front of the room which held an altar draped in white and a terrifying statue of a man-like thing with the head of a crow. The nameless one, Aunat, stared out at the two new visitors with his stone eyes. A silent priestess in a black cloak was at the altar arranging some white tapers on a brass stand.

There were a few pews to the side for the elderly and the disabled, but the rest of the room was empty giving the visitor an eyeful of the floor which was painted in an intricate array of strokes that resembled a cloud of black and blue feathers. At the front, before Aunat's idol, Gammell dropped to his knees and bowed his head. Verity followed suit and closed her eyes as she bowed her own head.

Instead of a prayer for the nameless one, she thought of the man beside her. Why was she here with him now? Why did she accept being his assistant in the first place? Was he in his right mind? Or more important, was she in her right mind? Did she even like him? Her mind shut off after that thought and she began listening to her own breathing.

The cathedral itself was cold. The candles did not give off any noticeable heat and there was no heater making grumbling noises in the silence. There were tiny noises, however, of the priestess moving things on the altar. There was also a tapping noise that slowly grew louder.

Verity opened her eyes and looked up seeing a priest, also in a black cloak, walk toward them. His face was round and red from the cold. His thinning brown hair was meticulously combed back and around his neck, he wore a tiny iron crow pendant. She heard Gammell exhale. From the corner of her eye, she saw him raise his head and fix his eyes on the priest. He rose to his feet. Verity hastily scrambled up soon after.

“Good evening, Consul,” Gammell said.

The priest stopped and nodded politely. “Good evening. May I help you with something?”

“As a matter of fact, yes. One of my, ah, friend's acquaintances had mentioned that you may be of some help about some of the myths of Monteport.”

“Are you a scholar?”

“Somewhat.”

“I'm not sure if anyone here knows too much about the myths of Monteport although I might have some references in my office that might be helpful.” The priest turned to the priestess. “I will be right back.”

The priestess nodded and went back to her task.

They followed the priest into a tiny corridor that branched further into the church. His office was a couple doors down. It was like one of the tiny cubbyholes in the main room except this one was large enough for one person, a desk, two chairs, and a small shelf. As the priest sat behind his desk, Verity stood shoulder to shoulder with Gammell.

“What specific myth do you have in mind? I'll warn you that I don't know very much about stories on Monteport. You might have better luck with the humanities department at the college.”

“It is about the Unnamed Days and the Rothburne guardians,” said Gammell. “I have heard that they were supposed to take care of the city while Aunat is in hiding during the last five days of the year.”

The priest held up his index finger. “That is wrong. Aunat is not in hiding. He is gone. He will resurrect during the new year. It is the nameless one's test for mankind to see if he can survive on his own without a protector. If mankind can survive, Aunat will return the next year to bring us blessings.”



“And what if mankind can’t survive?”

“What do you mean? Mankind has always passed the Unnamed Days peacefully. There isn’t anything particularly chaotic about them.”

“Sure, but what would happen if mankind could not survive the Unnamed Days?”

The priest waved his hand dismissively. “It would be an apocalypse then. Mankind would be destroyed and Aunat would not return to rebuild. But that’s never going to happen.”

“So what prevents it from happening? I’ve heard about the Rothburne guardians doing something, but what is it that they do?”

“Not very many people know about the guardians,” said the priest, “which is probably a good thing. If the superstitious realized how dependent we are on them, well, people would be a lot less calm. The guardians, of which the Rothburnes are only a branch of, are sort of like a police force if you will, making sure that people will not turn to worshipping unnatural things. How they do it is a mystery. I suppose it’s only kept within the family to make sure that whatever it is they do aren’t subverted.”

“Do you know of any guardians, then?” asked Gammell.

The priest shrugged. “They are only stories. The guardians are myths. The Rothburnes haven’t been in Monteport for over a century and nothing has happened. I think these are just tales to scare people into staying true to Aunat’s teachings during the Unnamed Days.”

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## Chapter 17 – Afternoon

Both Bob and Quinn had come back to work the next day but by the afternoon, they had both convinced her to take the rest of the day off since she had been in charge of the archives and handled all the work herself the other day.

With the extra time, Verity visited one of the old boutiques along Dorsum Road. Perhaps she would be able to find an affordable and acceptable costume to the Feasting Day party that Gammell had invited her to. The store was called “Hesters” and located closer to the main square and the market district than the Old Quarter. It was dimly lit, rendering all the mannequins modeling the displayed dresses in an eerie life-like quality.

Verity walked among the white and silver bolts of fabric, occasionally brushing her hand against the satin and lace. The designs were not in the modern fashion which was tight in the bodice and puffy and voluminous at the waist. Instead, these older dresses were extremely frilly with lots of lace and ribbons and faux pearls. She didn’t care so much about fashion, but this obvious bias towards the popular fifty years ago made her hesitate.

“May I help you?”

The sales clerk was a small dark woman in a free-form turquoise robe. Her hair was covered in a turban in the same shade of turquoise. Her black eyes watched Verity.

“I’m looking for a dress that will fit my budget,” said Verity.

The clerk nodded. “And what kind of style would you prefer?”

“It doesn’t matter to me, although I would like one that I...I would look acceptable in.”

“Hm.” The woman raised her eyebrows until it disappeared underneath her turban. “You need something that will make you stand out. You need something that accents your attributes.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“I think I might have something that you might like. It’s nothing like these old things out in front. They’re to appeal to women thirty years your senior.”

“Does this shop primarily cater toward the older woman then?”

“It caters toward the older woman because mostly older women shop here. But that doesn’t mean that we don’t stock other things. Over here, it’s near the back.”

The clerk led her toward the back of the store where the mannequins were replaced with blank faced dummies. The dresses here were not necessarily old, but they were definitely stranger. Some were made of fur. Others leather. And there was another one made entirely of silver sequins. The clerk pulled out a dress from a rack and held it up.

“This one, I think, will do for you. If you’re going to one of those costume parties in the Old Quarter, there’s a mask that goes with this.”

Something in the back of her mind told her that the clerk was right. “How much?”

The clerk named a figure.  
“I’ll take it.”

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In the afternoon daylight, the lighthouse disappeared into the gray sky. The door opened a crack. There was nothing but a dark shadow behind. “Who’s there?”

“It’s me, Verity.”

Gammell threw the door open wide. “You’re early.” He was wearing a black turtleneck with black pants. He frowned slightly as he peered at the sky behind her. “Aren’t you supposed to be at work?”

“I am at work.”

He stepped aside to let her inside. “No, I mean at the archives.”

“They made me take the day off.”

“And you came straight here afterwards?”

“No, I did a little shopping.”

“Huh.” He closed the door and shoved up his sleeves. His couch was piled with various books on history, furniture, and price guides. On top of the stack was a pad of paper and a pen. He picked up the paper and pen. “Holiday shopping?”

“Yes, but that’s not important.”

“Not important? Every woman I’ve ever met loves to talk about shopping.”

“I only talk about shopping if I’ve bought books.” Verity shrugged out of her coat and draped it over one of the couch arms. She rummaged around in the tote bag she had brought with her and pulled out a disc. “I have the database program.”

He waved a hand toward his computer. “You can do what you will with it. I don’t know anything about that machine except to turn it on or off. I’ll just watch and see if I can learn anything.”

“Well, these are your files that we are cataloguing.”

She sat down at the desk and pushed the power button. The machine beeped and the internal drives began whirring as the computer booted up. Gammell wandered into the kitchen and then came back with a glass of water in his hand.

“Why did you get a computer in the first place if you don’t know how to use it?” asked Verity.

“I don’t know. I guess since everyone has one, I might as well get one myself.”

“So you bought yourself a machine that’s been collecting dust all this while. Didn’t you bother to read the manual that came with this to familiarize yourself with it?”

“I never read manuals.”

Verity rolled her eyes. “Figures.”

“You think I’m like every other man.” His voice was flat. Accusatory.

She looked up at him, but then slid her gaze away from him to look at the screen. “I didn’t say that.”

“You didn’t say it, but you thought it.”

“You don’t know what I think.” The computer had finished booting up and she tapped a few keys to examine the system specifications.

“But I can guess.”

“Guessing is overrated.” She examined the memory and the processor type and nodded to herself. “Well, you have the latest model. I could probably install the database several times over and not make a significant dent on this machine’s performance. Someone must have advised you which computer to get.” She inserted the disc and didn’t have long to wait for the computer to recognize the new software.

“Sure. I listened to the advice of the store clerk.”

“I hope you didn’t get ripped off for it.”

He told her the price that he had to pay for his computer system.

She shook her head. “Lucky. This isn’t the latest model, but it’s hard to get this at that price even now. You must have met a really nice clerk.” She entered the commands for the program to begin installation. “This is really simple, actually. It pretty much installs itself. Then the program will appear here on the screen beside all these other programs. You just select it and start entering your data.”

“It sounds simple, but I’m afraid you’ll have to show me exactly what you have to do. I get confused easily.”

“All right, now I’m confused. You say you don’t read manuals, yet you want me to show you

how to get this to work?”

“I want to see how you’re supposed to operate the program. I don’t want to read about how you can theoretically work with it.”

“Okay. That makes sense. Sort of.” The program finished installing and Verity took the disc out and placed it in its case. She left it on the desk. “I’m leaving this here in case something happens to the program and you need to reinstall it. So you open the program just by clicking on it. We’ll create your database like this.” She typed in some commands and then a screen opened asking if the user wanted to create a new file.

“I think I can handle that,” said Gammell.

“So do you have some records with you at the moment? I can enter the first one to show you how it’s done in case you want to put the files into the computer yourself.”

He opened one of the drawers in the desk and pulled out a folder. His hand briefly touched hers when he placed the folder next to her. She felt the sharp tingling feeling, almost like when he was looking at her with his odd gaze. She wondered if he also felt that static electrical charge. Probably not. He was standing closer to her after giving her the file—his forearm almost brushing her shoulder. He did not appear to notice that anything was amiss.

“The records in that folder are more recent. They’re from last month,” he said.

“Fine. I’ll customize all of these fields for the new files. You can put down the customer name, price or commission, the item that was being purchased, and other miscellaneous information about the transaction.” She pulled out the first file and entered the information. “Remember to save it after you’re done. That’s a good habit to get into even though the program does prompt you to save before you close it. There are a lot of other interesting features in the database that you might want to fiddle with on your free time. You can sort the files in particular ways. You can search the files according to the different fields or comments. And a whole host of other things.”

“I’ll look into that, although I’m afraid that you might have to show me eventually how to do that too.” He moved back to the couch with the books. “If you don’t mind, I’m going to get back to the bit of research I’m doing for Pelorus’s pet project about trying to snag that titanium mirror. I suppose you can start cataloguing since you’re already on the computer.”

She nodded, feeling somewhat more relaxed that he was not so close to her.

^^^

Chapter 18 – A Brief Walk

“Have you ever visited the port itself?”

Verity blinked away the words and numbers staring at her in the face and turned her head to look at Gammell. He had a book in his lap. The pad of paper in his hand was filled halfway with words.

“The city’s port?”

“Yes.”

“No I haven’t. I thought there were only fishermen’s boats out there.”

“That’s not all that is out there.” He tucked the pad into the book as a placeholder and placed it on top of the pile of other books. “I can show you around.”

“Right now?”

“Why not? Think of it as a break.” He got up and got his coat. “Or at least I need a break. I can’t stand sitting around in one place for long periods of time.”

She glanced at the file she was in the midst of working on but left it on the desk. “All right.” She got up to take her own coat.

“You look so wrapped up in your work. You must really like cataloguing.”

She shrugged. “I’m good at it.” And sometimes while cataloguing, she could forget about the problems in the real world, she thought silently.

Gammell took up his keys and stuffed them into his pocket after he locked the door behind them. The air was crisp and cool. As Verity breathed out, she could see her breath as a cloud of white vapor. The sky was a pearly gray as wispy clouds raced overhead toward the sea. The ground the lighthouse sat on did not immediately meet the sea. First, the land had to steeply slope downward onto a rocky beach.

“This way,” said Gammell.

There were some rough stone steps a few yards away hewn into the slope. The edges of the steps

were rounded and smoothed away as if years of airborne sand had whittled away the sharp edges into something softer. They descended onto the rocky beach which felt hard and cold even underneath the thick padding of their boots. As they navigated the beach stones, some of the rocks would tumble and clack together as sharp hiccupping sounds among the uniform roar of the sea. In the distance, Verity could see the port that Gammell had mentioned. Naked masts and bobbing vessels looked like so much driftwood on the winter water.

“Some sources say that the ancient things did not initially live on this land,” said Gammell. His gaze was away from her, fixated on their destination, the docks. “In the beginning of time, Monteport and all the rest of the cities were nothing—just a barren empty plain. No spirits or gods looked over the land. It was useless, until man ventured to the shores and brought with him his beliefs. It was only then that the other ever took hold here.”

“And you believe that?” said Verity.

“It is hard to believe anything if what you’re talking about has happened so long ago,” he replied. “Perhaps man did bring in things that were better left undisturbed to this formerly pristine land. But I think the other—the other doesn’t care about man. It just is. And it is always searching for something new for its own strange purposes.”

Not understanding, she said, “That doesn’t make sense. Why doesn’t whatever it is just remain where it is if it’s fine where it already is?”

“I don’t know. These other things do not think like humans. If they think at all.”

The dock neared and Verity could finally make out a dark wood boardwalk rimming the edge between land and sea. Small dinghies and rowboats were the closest to shore, some of them tied up simply to a stump on the dock by a coil of rope. The larger boats bobbed on the dark water like silent animals with unblinking eyes, the masts without sails as antennas listening to anything and everything. A larger cargo ship was anchored further off from the shore. From that distance, it looked unmoving in the waves. A sudden gale whipped up stinging the cheeks. The smaller boats rocked dangerously in the water.

“The Rothburnes, back when they were still a prominent family, used to own a fleet of ships,” he said. He tucked his hands further in his pockets and glanced at her. Verity was looking out onto the boats, momentarily fascinated by their small chaotic movements. “They were into businesses of all sorts and shipping was one of them. They imported spices and fabric and various other types of cargo.”

“So what happened?”

“As the family fortunes declined, whether from the economy or the supposed curse one of my hapless ancestors bestowed on the following generations, the fleet of ships was sold off to various other shipping companies. The ships sailed to other ports, never to return to Monteport.”

“It must be sort of bittersweet, coming out here to the dock.”

“I never saw the ships, so I can’t say. And after all this time, I’m sure they’ve already been dismantled, decommissioned, destroyed. One can’t miss something that one has never had.”

“I suppose that’s true also. But at least you have some sort of family history you can look back on. I know very little about my own ancestors except for the fact that they lived overseas.”

“Sometimes, the past can be a burden. It completely colors your life.”

Verity finally turned to look at him. “You never gave me the impression that you resented your past.”

His lips twisted in an ironic smile. “If I had been born in a completely different family in a completely different city, I wouldn’t be here trying to find out what I’m supposed to do and chasing down unknown and unseen things.”

“But then you wouldn’t be what you are.”

“Crazy, you mean?”

“Not necessarily crazy, but perhaps, not as self-aware?”

“Sometimes I wish I weren’t so self-aware. Let’s go back. There’s no one here.”

They turned around to head back to the stony beach. Now their destination was the lighthouse on the cliff, a solitary sentinel along the sea.

“Earlier this morning, Pelorus called me wanting to set up a meeting later today to check up on our progress.”

“Really? What is our progress?”

“Not very far,” Gammell replied. “So far in my research, I haven’t found anything about titanium mirrors. I wonder if Pelorus blew a rumor completely out of proportion and that all we’re chasing here are dust motes.”

“And what about that Verne warehouse?”

“I was thinking of checking that out if he hadn’t called for a progress report. I have a hunch that there might be someone there who would have more information than what I or some of my colleagues who keep up with rumors about the underground market have gathered so far.”

“Do you have hunches often?” she asked.

“I have hunches all the time. I’m just never sure I’m right until the event comes to pass.”

“Are you often right?”

“I never kept track, to be honest.” Verity took one of the stone steps and stopped as his hand touched her elbow. She looked back. They were now level, face to face, eye to eye. “Verity?”

“Hm?” He was close enough that she could faintly smell his after shave in the wind. He was close enough that she could see that his eyes weren’t a uniform brown-green but were bursts of dark gold with a greenish halo. She felt her heart hammering in her chest and she wondered if it would be best for her to move away.

“Have you ever met someone and...”

“And what?”

“And realized that things were not quite the same as before?”

“Have you?”

Instead of answering, he dipped his head and pressed his mouth against her mouth. Instinctively, she closed her eyes and felt the wind tugging at her hair and his lips moving against hers, a bit rough, chapped, and cold from their jaunt outside. Her mind scrambled for purchase.

When he raised his head to gauge her reaction, she felt paralyzed. Had she fallen into that same hole again? She blinked slowly and pressed her lips together.

“I’ve realized a lot of things,” he said finally.

“Yeah, me too.” Her voice sounded hoarse to her own ears.

He started up the stairs. Automatically, she moved, keeping up beside him. “Pelorus is not going to be happy when I tell him we have not made any headway on his project so far.”

“It was his fault for calling for a meeting this early. But if I’m there too, you don’t have to bear all of his wrath.”

He slanted her a glance, but kept his hands away from her. Instead he said, “You’re the first person who has ever offered to stand up for me.”

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Chapter 19 – Colbrin

As they entered the lighthouse, the phone rang. Gammell reached it first. “Hello?”

Verity stood next to the couch and did not take off her coat. She looked at the pile of books that he had left there, pretending to be interested in the titles. From his end of the conversation, she assumed that he was talking to Pelorus.

He put down the phone. “Pelorus cancelled the meeting. He said some emergency came up.”

“What sort of emergency?”

“A potential buyer has just walked into his shop. He can never pass up an opportunity to make some quick money.”

“Perhaps it would be better for him to just concentrate on his business.”

“You could be right.” He glanced at the computer. “I should turn this off.”

“Everything on there is already saved.”

He closed down the operating system and flipped the power switch. “Since there is no meeting, I was thinking about visiting the Verne warehouse. It probably won’t be too interesting. It’s located in the older business district. Most of the businesses there are closed down anyway.”

They went back out to take his car. As Gammell started up the engine and eased the vehicle onto the road, Verity finally wondered where she was. She was partially glad that he had not asked her how she felt after the kiss or to discuss where their supposed relationship was heading. In truth, she wasn’t sure how she felt and she didn’t know where they were heading. But she did want to curse him for changing everything. She had wanted whatever that had been between them to have stayed the same.

She briefly looked at her hands and bandaged wrists and then looked outside at the passing scenery. But nothing ever stayed the same. Everything always changes.

Gammell navigated his car along Seadoch Road passing by worn apartment buildings. Some of them seemed vaguely familiar. Was one of those discolored rectangular blocks outlined by the darkening sky one of the apartments that Miranda lived? Verity crossed her arms and wondered why she suddenly felt hungry.

The business district branched off into a myriad of small streets. As they drove further into the district, the buildings began sagging more as if they were carrying some invisible weight. The buildings also grew larger until they finally reached a small street packed with warehouses that were so close together that only one person could walk between them. They were five to six stories tall with dirty windows. Some of the windows were cracked and broken. Gammell parked on the side of the road and when Verity got out, it seemed abruptly silent and colder.

The closest warehouse had a sign pasted on the front door. It was a fading blue and the words were in grayed, chipping paint. "Verne Storehouse." All the windows on the first floor, at least, were unbroken and it appeared as if someone was inside as a faint light radiated out from the dirt-caked panes.

"I don't like the looks of this," said Verity.

"Nothing looks good in the old part of the business district," said Gammell. He knocked on the door. "We'll try the conventional route. And if no one answers..."

"We go in the back and break in?"

He looked at her. "You're feeling contrary today aren't you?"

"I'm always feeling contrary. Well, if no one answers, are you going to break in?"

"I don't want to do anything illegal. My record with the doctors is already a black mark against me."

"Good. I just wanted to make sure."

"We could call whoever owns this now."

She shook her head in disbelief. "Then why didn't you call earlier? It could have saved us all the trouble of coming all the way out here."

"Sometimes doing things the hard way can lead to better results."

"The phone call sounds like a simpler and more elegant solution."

The door finally opened revealing a stout man standing on the threshold. He had a small moustache and small eyes that peered at the two visitors suspiciously. He wore a navy uniform of a security guard, but it did nothing to disguise his growing gut. A tight cap on his head finished the ensemble—he looked both professional and incompetent as he pulled at the lobes of his ears nervously.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

"This is the Verne Storehouse?" said Gammell. "I heard that there was some inventory down here. I just wanted to know if Samuel Verne still owns the place or if it has been sold to someone else."

"It doesn't belong to Samuel Verne anymore," sniffed the security guard. "Is that all you wanted? It's cold out there and I don't want to let all the warm air out."

"So who does it belong to?"

"The current owner prefers to remain anonymous, so if you don't mind," the security guard began closing the door.

Gammell laid a hand on the door to push it open. "I just wanted a few other questions answered too."

"Now wait a minute, I don't have to answer any of your questions," the guard spluttered. "This is private property and I could have you arrested for trespassing!"

"What is it Wood?" came a voice from the interior. "Who are you entertaining at the door?"

"Some nosy people," replied the security guard.

A short figure shuffled into the light. To Verity's eye, the man looked like an ugly imp. The imp, seeing Gammell, grinned revealing sharp teeth. "Come in, come in! This is an acquaintance of mine."

Reluctantly, Wood ushered Gammell and Verity to the interior and then closed the door to prevent any more of the heat to leak out. The Verne Storehouse looked like the inside of a garage stacked up with numerous objects and boxes as if someone were in the midst of moving day. Most of the objects were things like crockery, battered pieces of furniture, and broken pieces of ornamental knick-knacks. The warehouse itself was supported on thick concrete columns interspersed at regular intervals. Some of the junk and boxes were also leaning on these columns as if someone had been attempting to build a miniature fortress of useless things.

"What are you doing here Gammell?" The imp of a man wore an ugly brown body suit and was incredibly short; he barely came up to Verity's shoulder. He was bald and pale and wrinkly. His eyes were

wide and so black that from a distance, one would think his entire eye was just one large pupil. The tips of his ears was sharp, as was his beak-like nose. He held his claw-like hands close to his chest, his left hand absently petting the back of his right hand as if it were a cat. He grinned again and Verity wondered if the man filed his teeth to points for vanity—just as some women religiously plucked their eyebrows.

“Colbrin.” Gammell said the man’s name emotionlessly, but Verity could tell from the slight twitch of his mouth that he found the little imp distasteful. “I was just wondering who owned the warehouse. I’m just doing some research for a colleague. What are you doing here?”

“You probably don’t know this, but Samuel Verne, the man who used to own this died and bequeathed this particular estate to one of his nephews. The nephew contacted me to get an assessment of the place. Obviously, you can immediately see there’s not much here that would even attract vultures. You can take a look around if you like.”

“I’ll do just that.” Unerringly, Gammell headed into the depths of the warehouse to root around for anything, something.

Verity moved to follow him, but Colbrin moved to block her pathway.

“Who are you?” Colbrin’s inquiry was a loud, threatening hiss.

“I’m his assistant.”

“Gammell doesn’t have assistants.”

“He hired me.”

Colbrin turned his head slightly and sniffed the air. His eyes narrowed as he turned back to stare at her. A snarl was on his lips. “I smell him on you.”

“You must be kidding me. I’m supposed to be helping Gammell with his research.” She stepped to the side and tried to brush past him.

Colbrin blocked her again. “You stay right here! Wood, make sure she doesn’t wander off.”

“Yes sir.”

Verity watched the imp stalk toward Gammell.

“I wouldn’t worry about it much if I were you.” Wood, the security guard, took out a packet of cigarettes and put one in his mouth. He lit it with a lighter he kept in another pocket. “Colbrin’s real weird. He’s like that all the time.”

“I’d say. I just want to help my boss on his research, you know?”

“Yeah, I know. It’s tough being the employee of the head honcho. You don’t have much authority. That’s why I figure if I saved enough money, I’d start a small store of my own.”

Verity and the security guard stood near the entrance watching as Gammell seemingly rummaged around in among the junk in a haphazard pattern. Colbrin, however, had not gone to Gammell to ask him if he needed any help. Instead, the small man hid behind one of the concrete columns watching Gammell as he rubbed his hands and repeatedly brushed his right leg against the column.

“Pervert,” Wood muttered. Then he held out the packet of cigarettes to Verity. “Want a smoke?”

“No thanks.”

“Suit yourself.”

Gammell finally wandered back toward the entrance. Colbrin trailed him.

“I think that phone call you mentioned is a better idea,” Gammell told her.

The security guard took a drag on his cigarette and watched the two visitors as they headed out.

“I want to let you know that the job I offered you six months ago is still open,” said Colbrin.

Gammell stopped briefly but did not turn back to look at the little man who was watching his back hopefully. “I don’t work for anyone.”

“Well, we can always work out a partnership.”

“I’m not into that kind of partnership.”

“Then why did you hire that...that woman as an assistant?” Colbrin spat out the word ‘assistant’ as if he had accidentally ate a fly in his soup.

“I’m not justifying my work decisions to you.”

As Gammell opened the door and motioned for Verity to exit before him, Colbrin suddenly launched toward him and latched onto his free arm. “I think you’re the best consultant in the city. I want to hire the best for my business.” It was obvious that he was actually not talking about his business at all.

He not so gently shoved the imp-like man away from him. “Don’t touch me.”

Colbrin reverently placed his hands on his cheeks. “Call me, the job is always open.”

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## Chapter 20 – Cards

The recreation room, during the evening, was lit with floor lamps creating an odd contrast of a lit ceiling and a dim floor. Someone, possibly a nurse or orderly, had drawn the drapes on the windows so that the entire room was enclosed, cozy, as if the outside snowy world didn't exist at all. A feeble old man sat in a corner with a tray of food in his lap. He was slowly eating as if his arms an extension of an uncoiled hydraulics system. A woman with steel-colored hair piled on top of her head and a garish red shawl on her shoulders sat in an armchair knitting something that looked like a blob of yellow yarn.

Verity found Aeneus crouched at the coffee table attempting to lean two playing cards together to form a teepee.

"I thought you would be in your room," she said.

Slowly Aeneus pulled his hands away from the cards. They stood. He let out a noisy, relieved breath and the two cards immediately collapsed. "Drat."

"That's very tricky. A lot of things can disturb them, including breathing."

"I know that." Aeneus slowly stood up and then sat down on a nearby chair. He winced. "My bones aren't as they used to be. Sit down, I hate craning my neck. But after staying in my room for a couple of hours, I realized how much I like coming out to the recreation room."

Verity sat across from him and looked at the cards on the table. She was supposed to be on her way home that day instead of meeting with Gammell for her side job as assistant since he said he needed the day off to run some errands himself, but instead, she was here talking with an old man. She wanted to delay as much as possible going home to an empty, dark home. She didn't want to be alone.

"I hate those things," he said. "I've always seen these people, these experts who have practiced all their life, working with the cards and building structures several levels high. And I can't even get two cards to stand up."

"Maybe you should start using glue," said Verity.

"That's not the same thing. And where's the challenge in using glue?"

"Sometimes you have to use any help you can get."

"I don't need any help. I'm fine enough on my own. So what are you doing here making conversation with me? I thought you were with him, Nathaniel Gammell."

"I got the night off."

"Figuring out the guardian stuff, eh?"

"He said he was going to do some errands. You know what guardians do, right?"

"He didn't tell you?"

Verity didn't want to say that she knew that Gammell knew nothing about being a guardian. Instead she said, "He didn't tell me much about anything."

"Well, that's guardians for you. Secretive and all that." Aeneus leaned back and briefly closed his eyes.

"So do you know what guardians do?"

"Why are you asking me? Do I look like I know?"

"I don't know. You seem to know a lot about those other things, if you know what I mean."

"I'm sure I don't look like the kind of person a guardian would confide things in." He opened his eyes and looked at her. "I only know of their existence, just as I know about the existence of other things. That doesn't mean, however, that I know how they work. If I did, I'd be a genius. Or the knowledge might make me completely insane. So have you used the foil I gave you?"

"No."

He shook his head. "You're being risky and dangerous. When you find out how useful the foil would be, it might be too late."

"I'll keep that in mind." Verity crouched down at the table and picked up two of the cards. "So what does the institute have planned for you and the other patients for Feasting Day?"

"Every year, the cafeteria staff cooks up a special menu." He frowned as she put up the two cards and quickly put up another two cards. She finished it off by placing a card flat on top of the four cards to make a table like structure. "Or rather they call it the special menu. It's the same every year."

"What do they serve?" She found herself quickly establishing a solid lower level of cards. Soon she would start on the second level.

"They always have pork roast and stuffed lamb. There are berry pies and fish appetizers in the



shapes of small rolls. Of course, if you're on a special diet, you'll have to forget about all of that, but, well, I'll have to say one thing, it's literally a feast."

Verity placed the first two cards on the second level. They held. "When I lived back south, the big thing for Feasting Day was actually the stew. The contents of the stew itself varied from household to household, of course, but the must have ingredients were lentils and beets. I hated it."

"They serve that here too although it's not as important. Now that I think of it, the cafeteria staff changes the type of soups they serve every year. Last year it had been some sort of chowder with chicken and a plain vegetable soup. The year before that, they had that lentil stew you talked about. There's not one course that's particularly important in Monteport, but the institute staff also serves, as a delicacy they say, of roasted crows."

"Crows?"

"They have to import it from out of town. Mainly, it's the staff and the doctors who are still around who eat the stuff. I think it's bad luck partaking of Aunat's chosen form. It's blasphemous."

"Perhaps they're not religious."

"Not religious? Not religious?!" Aeneus's face became red. For a moment, he sat in his chair, rigid with anger. She merely waited, not wanting to say anything to set him off further. After a moment, his shoulders slumped. "Of course they're not religious. They don't believe in anything that can't be proved in tangible form."

"That's sort of my philosophy for my own non-religiousness."

"Yes, but at least you don't eat crow. There are just some traditions you have to follow, religious or not. People don't eat crow. They're not supposed to eat crow. It's just wrong. They don't realize that Feasting Day is a religious day."

"It may have begun as a religious day, but now it's just a holiday, like everything else."

"Nothing is everything else." The old man folded his arms and watched Verity complete the second level. "You're good at that. Have you built a house of cards before?"

"I've seen it done before."

"You're a natural at it."

"I don't think it's natural. Building a house out of cards is not your run of the mill kind of hobby." Verity finished off the third level and stood up. "For the first time since, well, since when I was first on my own, I'm going to a Feasting Day party. Two of them in fact."

"That's nice." Aeneus got up too. He looked down at the house of cards and a wrinkle crossed his forehead as he thought of something. "Once, when I was younger, I went to one of those invitation only affairs at the Old Quarter. Old prominent families in the Old Quarter like to show off their influence during Feasting Day by making everything exclusive and expensive."

"Oh? How was it like?"

"Predictable and maybe a little snobbish. But," the old man raised his head to look at Verity with a lucid gaze, "they like doing strange things. Maybe in the beginning it all started as an innocent ritual to Aunat, but well, I don't know."

"What was the ritual?"

"It doesn't matter what the ritual was. What it turned into is the problem. Of course, it may just be me and my lack of ability to change with the times."

"What did it turn into?"

"Something more corpulent than the feast that the institute throws, I can tell you that. But you don't have to worry about it if you're not going to the Old Quarter."

Silent, Verity stuffed her hands into her coat pockets.

"So you are going to the Old Quarter." Aeneus frowned and then said, "Well, if you can't avoid it, just be careful of yourself. People may still celebrate Aunat in their own new ways, but that doesn't mean that the change just happened by itself. The Old Quarter is notorious for its strange influences."

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Chapter 21 – Rivals

She suddenly awoke from a disturbing dream. But in the morning light streaming from her bedroom window, everything that she had dreamed had evaporated like so much sublimed ice. Only an

uneasy feeling lingered, as if she had heard some sort of unconscious warning but she did not know what it was, why it was, or what it was for.

But when she had gone downstairs to get some breakfast, those whispers had come back. And with those whispers, she felt the remnants from those dreams knocking softly on her consciousness. She had left the old mirror on her dining room table, face down and words up. The whispering became louder in her ears as she neared the mirror. When she was finally looking down on it, nothing seemed amiss; it was just an old object.

It was at that moment that the something in the back of her mind burst into her consciousness and she realized what was wrong and the whispering stopped.

The strange writing on the back of the mirror had changed.

She had no way of proving it aside from her gut feeling. She still did not know what the strange unnatural writing said, but whatever it was, it had caused her to dream those dreams. It was then that she went to get a sheet of paper and a piece of crayon to make a rubbing of the back of the mirror. If it changed again, she would have proof. But if she had the proof, how then would she explain the change?

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“Verity?”

“Hm?”

Georgette and Patrice, the two ladies who manned the reception desk in the entrance foyer of the Rothburne Institute had organized a fairly large Feasting Day party in one of the halls of Montepoort College. The hall itself was painted a tedious beige and lined with sconces that provided weak light. Most of the light came from the uncurtained windows at the head of the room which also contained a long buffet table. The rest of the room had large round tables, large enough to seat ten people, which were draped with linen the same tedious beige as the walls. Perhaps this dining hall had originally been intended to entertain staid college professors.

The hostesses were seated several tables away, visibly enjoying themselves. Verity and Gammell had arrived a little later than most of the guests and were sitting with a group institute administrative personnel gossiping among themselves about the latest crash and burn inter-office affair.

“You’ve hardly touched your food,” said Gammell.

Verity glanced at her plate which had two sandwiches—one of them half-eaten—a slice of tomato and mushroom quiche, and a small berry tart. Gammell’s plate was almost empty except for the tart which at the moment was rapidly disappearing into his mouth.

“I guess I’m not that hungry,” she said. She picked up the half-eaten sandwich and took another bite.

“You looked preoccupied with something.”

“I am.” She continued eating the sandwich until it was gone. By that time, the administrative employees had completely finished their lunch and had left to get to Corvus early. “Do you know any foreign languages?”

“Why do you ask?”

“I might have something that needs to be translated,” she said vaguely.

“I learned how to read two other languages when I was in school,” he said. “But I don’t know how to speak them properly. What language do you need translated?”

“I don’t know. I can’t tell what language it is.”

“Ah.”

“I don’t have it with me at the moment. Maybe I’ll show it to you later.”

“The college probably has some foreign language professors that may help you if it’s a language I don’t know.”

“I’m not sure I want to show this to a professor.”

“Why?”

She shrugged and said instead, “I’m sorry this party is such a bust. I wish I knew more people around here.”

“It’s not your fault. People tend to stick together with other people like themselves. It’s easier and more comfortable that way, even if the result is a lot less interesting.”

By the time Verity had finished eating, most of the people had filtered out of the dining hall to attend the service at the cathedral. They disposed their plates and put on their coats for the cold walk

across the main square to the Corvus.

The cathedral itself was only half-filled with people on Feasting Day. The main service would be held the next day, Fasting Day. All the cubbyholes on the side walls were now filled with lit candles making the walls look like it had captured all the stars in the sky. The people attending the Feasting Day service at the Corvus were all dressed as casually as Verity and Gammell—heavy coat, sweaters, boots for walking in the snow. They chose a spot near the back of the crowd of people kneeling at the front half of the Corvus.

A few minutes after they knelt down on the cold, hard floor, a priest and priestess entered the chapel from a side door. Both of them carried a long white wax taper which they placed on holders at the altar. The priest and priestess then stood on either side of the statue of the crow-headed Aunat who looked out over his worshippers. The two religious leaders stood, arms loosely at their sides.

The service itself consisted of an opening prayer led by the priestess. The main sermon was conducted by the priest who expounded, from memory, the passage from the holy texts about the nameless one's year-long toil to create the world and then his disappearance at the end of the year to see if the world still held up after he returned for the next year. Afterwards, the priestess closed the service with another prayer.

Verity listened to the voices of the priest and priestess echoing in the vault of the Corvus. She felt nothing from those words that she had heard from childhood. It wasn't exactly boring, but this kneeling in supplication to a nameless one she wasn't even sure existed seemed to miss the point of, well, everything. Perhaps she should have never come.

When the service ended, Verity stood up, eager to escape the suddenly confining cathedral. It was as if the entire world had abruptly shrunk during the service to the size of just the main room with all the worshippers. It was as if it had tried to stifle what she was trying to feel and think.

"Ah, Ms. Tage, what a surprise to find you here. You didn't strike me as the religious sort."

She recognized that voice. And with it, she also remembered Aeneus's very first advice to her. "Good day, Dr. Greene," she said politely. Coldly. She hoped fervently that he got the message.

Miram Greene had come to the service alone wearing a dark coat and a fine ivory scarf. An expensive watch glittered at his wrist and he had meticulously combed his graying hair over his balding spot so that at first glance, he still appeared to have a full head of hair. "If I had known you would be coming here, I would have offered you a ride here myself."

"I have my own car."

The doctor glanced at Gammell who stood beside her. "What are you doing here?"

"Attending the Feasting Day service just as you are," he replied. "Is there something wrong with that?"

"No, of course not," the doctor said placatingly. He turned his gaze back on Verity. She felt as if slime had suddenly oozed onto her skin. "I've been invited to a Feasting Day event in the southern part of the city. Since you're new here, I'd like to take you to it. It's being organized by a friend of mine. Have you ever been to the Montepart Park? It's a wonderful place."

"Sorry, but I've had prior plans."

"Plans? What plans? You know, I've been thinking about it, and I don't think you're not available at all. You're trying to avoid me. It's bad form to refuse an invitation just because you don't want to go."

Verity didn't like his line of reasoning at all. "If you really want to know, I'm going to another party with Gammell."

"Gammell?" Greene's voice was incredulous as he swept his eyes back on his patient. "But he's crazy."

"I would appreciate it if you don't bring up my medical history in public," said Gammell. His eyes glittered as he stared hard at his doctor.

"I agree with him. Patient confidentiality and all that. Records are supposed to be kept private. It's an ethical responsibility, especially for doctors," said Verity.

Visibly nettled, Greene said, "Knowing him, he's going to take you to a gathering of crackpots. You're a smart woman, Ms. Tage. I know that the people at the event I'm going to will be much more interesting."

"Well, I'm afraid I will have to decline your generous offer again."

"Then why are you going with him?"

"I asked her first," said Gammell.

Greene's lip curled up in a snarl. "Don't try to be clever with me. I only tolerate you during the appointments."

"That's not very nice," Gammell replied, "after all the money my sister spent on your fees."

The doctor shook his head and tried to paste a smile on his face. "So why him?"

Verity wanted to escape the disaster of a conversation. She was going to try the same trick again. Even if the adamant doctor didn't believe her, at least she would escape again. She looked at her watch. "Oh sorry, Dr. Greene. We have to be somewhere soon. Excuse us."

As she started to move away, Greene suddenly grabbed her arm. She tried to pull away, but he held fast. "Why him?" he whispered in her ear.

Gammell intervened, pulling the doctor's hand off her. He gave the doctor a hard look. "We've got to go."

A strange calm expression came across Greene's face as he shook his hand away from Gammell's grip. "You know you're treading on dangerous ground, Gammell. I can have you locked up with a mere word. And don't forget that I eventually always get what I want."

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## Chapter 22 – Tower

Verity wiped the condensation off the window of the bus and peered out at the deep turquoise sky outlining the soaring columns and arches of an ancient aqueduct crossing the Old Quarter. In the distance rose the solitary conical pillar of the East Tower.

After the service at the Corvus, she and Gammell had decided to meet later in the Old Quarter at the East Tower before they both headed over to the residence of one of Gammell's acquaintances for the evening Feasting Day event. Verity had gone back home to change into the costume that she had bought earlier at the small boutique, Hesters, that had been located in the business district.

The traditional color for the holidays was a plain white to reflect the color of snow in mid-winter. It represented the purging of the old year for the new. It also represented the death of the old year and the purity and possibilities of the new. The dress that the clerk at Hesters had picked out for Verity was bone white, the texture not quite satin and not quite silk, but it was smooth and the rustling it made while she walked was only felt and not heard. The bodice was close-fitting and laced up in front. The neckline was a rounded scoop and when Verity looked at herself in the mirror to see if it fit properly, she thought the neckline was possibly a little too low, maybe almost scandalously low.

The sleeves came down in a slanted cut past her wrists so that her bandages were obscured. The rest of the dress flared slightly from her hips and trailed to the ground. She had to pick up the tresses if she didn't want to trip while walking on the stairs. The clerk had also sold her the mask that came with the dress. It covered the upper half of her face, just the eyes and the temple, and it was the same color as the dress and just as simple. When she put the mask on while in front of the mirror, she no longer looked at the pale woman with badly cut dark hair. Instead, a ghostly apparition with black locks just teasing the lower ears and the back of the neck stared back with wary eyes.

Verity had decided to take the bus, line seventeen, down to the Old Quarter. From the bus schedules, a few of the lines in Monteport operated through the night from Feasting Day to Fasting Day in the rationale that it may be better take people home after the revelry and binging from Feasting Day celebrations rather than letting them drive home by themselves. Verity did not want to take her car as she knew that many people would be on the streets during this one day in the year when people let all their urges rather than their mind to rule their bodies.

The bus itself was filled with other Feasting Day revelers masked and in costumes of white, cream, or silver. Heavy dark coats covered the majority of the costumes just as she had buttoned her own coat to keep warm. Everyone was laughing and joking and talking and gossiping about the various parties that they were going to attend in the Old Quarter. And as she listened to all the talk and the laughter, she watched the East Tower slowly creep closer and closer.

Line seventeen stopped at the corner of Main and Bilemot, the very heart of the Old Quarter. Verity filed off the bus along with the other passengers and for a while, she stood on the sidewalk breathing out a white cloud of warm breath as she watched the other passengers disperse to their various destinations and the bus rumbling off down the road. The tower was still a block away.

The tower itself was connected to the aqueduct serving as a way station of sorts, channeling water

into one of the city's two reservoirs. The other reservoir was located on the other side of the city at the West Tower. A second line of aqueducts rimmed that part of the city's border. But this elaborate water supply system that stretched north into the mountains some thirty miles away had been built in ancient times. It no longer worked, the water had been permanently shut off when technology had improved to such an extent that every household could have access to purified drinking water. Now the aqueduct and the towers were merely remnants of a previous civilization, curiosities for historians and students of architecture and landmarks for sightseeing for bored tourists.

Fountains, decorated by gargoyles that served as spouts and empty except for snow, ringed the East Tower and served as ancient water distributing centers. All along the street, strings of white electric lights were hung among the doorways of the sagging apartment buildings and the old-fashioned iron railings as garlands. The small electric lights cast the street in an eerie silver glow. A group of revelers in white face paint, long conical hats and silver capes rounded the street corner and passed Verity as if she was nothing other than another lamppost. They sang a lusty song about barmaids and sailors. She watched them march down the street in careening, drunken circles before heading toward the tower again.

The doors to the East Tower were thrown open to invite any passing visitor to walk up to the top and to survey the city from above. Someone had mounted torches on the interior walls of the tower. The flickering flames cast orange-yellow light and twisting shadows onto the winding stair that circled the very inner core of the tower which was inaccessible because that was where the water from the aqueduct had been originally channeled through.

Verity picked up her skirts and climbed the stone steps. There were no other visitors and it was silent except for her own footsteps. Near the top of the tower, there was small wooden door that led up to the parapet that overlooked the connection of the aqueduct to the tower and the rest of the Old Quarter. She was about to open the door when she noticed the low voices drifting through from the other side. She stood still and listened.

"I heard that they have finally found it."

"And it was perfect timing too. Everything is going to fall into place. Finally."

"I can almost taste my own excitement. It's like opening presents."

"Or sex."

"Well, it depends on who you're doing. A mistress maybe, but not the wife. She's a dead fish in bed."

There was laughter.

The second man said, "But when the new year comes we will finally have what is coming to us. A completely new era. And instead of being at the bottom, we'll finally be at the top."

"That is something to contemplate. So when is it?"

"The fifth day, of course. The fifth hour before. I actually managed to talk to him the other day."

"What did he say?"

"He said this year is the year. The last year. Things will change. He said that with it, we can finally, truly summon the other."

"Oh, dear Aunat. I can hardly even comprehend the thought."

"That's just the thing, isn't it? There will be no more Aunat or any other manifestations of the unnamed one."

"I can't believe I'm smiling at the 'blasphemy'."

"After this year, nothing will be held back. There won't be such things as blasphemy any more, because frankly, everything will be."

"But it hasn't come to pass yet." The man's voice dropped lower. "What if someone is overhearing us?"

Verity shivered. What if the two men suddenly opened the door and found her listening in on them? She took a step back and something took hold of her arm. Instinctively, she opened her mouth to shout, but a hand came over to smother any sound she might make.

"Sh. It's only me." The familiar voice softly caressed her left ear.

She twisted around and looked into a pair of brown-green eyes peering at her through a white mask that covered only the upper part of his face. "Gammell."

"They'll probably open the door at any moment. Let's go down."

Letting out a shaky breath, she said, "All right, but you scared me." She followed him down the steps until they were outside again. The cold air calmed her.

He turned his head slightly to glance at her. "Sorry. I'll try not to surprise you so suddenly

again.”

“No. I understand why you did it. I just wasn’t thinking.”

He nodded. “Well, my colleague’s residence is on this street. I think it’s not too far away, just a couple minutes on foot.”

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## Chapter 23 – Sheldon

The house that was owned by Gammell’s friend was an unassuming narrow building further down the street. It was sandwiched between two other narrow buildings, both of which were obviously occupied. The lights were on and the windows thrown open despite the cold. Music and loud laughter drifted out and an amorous couple had escaped onto one of the balconies for a more intimate rendezvous. The address that they were heading to, in contrast, almost looked as if it had been abandoned except for a small light on one of the first floor windows next to the door.

Gammell rang the doorbell.

“Are we even at the right address?” said Verity.

“Yes. I’m quite sure.”

“Do you think anyone’s here?”

“I’m sure. Are you thinking you might want to go to the party next door?”

“It might be more fun. What’s your friend’s notion of celebrating Feasting Day? I’m giving him a benefit of a doubt that he’s not a crackpot.”

“No, he’s quite sane. He just likes doing things a little differently than most people.”

The door opened and a long square face with squinty eyes peered out. From the small taper that the man carried in his hands, the weak light cast his skin in a ghoulish green. The doorman was not smiling. “Name?”

“Gammell. Nathaniel Gammell.” He took out a small white card from his coat pocket and showed it to the doorman.

After scrutinizing it, he said, “All right. Who’s she?”

“My friend, Verity Tage.”

The doorman’s gaze briefly flickered over to Verity. “If you’re bringing her with you, you’ll be responsible.”

“I know.”

“What does he mean, that you’re responsible for me?” whispered Verity. “I’m responsible for myself.”

“That’s true, but the fact is, you’re a guest of a guest. That’s part of the rules.”

“Who is this friend of yours?”

“You’ll meet him soon enough.”

The doorman opened the door wide for them to enter. The foyer was very narrow and dark. He took the visitors’ coats to place them in a nearby cloakroom. Underneath Gammell’s coat was a simple white jacket over a grey waistcoat with shiny silver buttons. His slacks were white and tailored for his frame. His tie was silver. To Verity’s chagrin, she found herself admiring how he filled out the shoulders of his jacket. Gammell’s gaze when he first saw Verity’s dress, however, was inscrutable from behind his mask.

The doorman came back and ambled down the foyer and opened the door. Light spilled outward revealing a flight of stairs leading down to the lower level. “I believe that dinner is going to be served shortly,” he said.

Gammell and Verity traversed the narrow stairs which directly led into a large room lit brilliantly with white candles placed strategically on wall holders and tables and a chandelier hanging from the center of the ceiling. It was a large banquet hall decorated entirely in white. Long tables stretched along the walls and seated many guests, the majority who had arrived earlier. At the opposite end of the room was another long table where the hosts sat in front of a large bronze gong. Small doorways also branched off from the rooms and servants and waiters bustled to and fro from these portals carrying trays of sweet-smelling food. The traffic of waiters studiously avoided the middle of the room which held a giant ice sculpture of a crow with its wings spread.

“Gammell! Glad you could make it!”

The voice belonged to a tall and thin man wearing a suit that was alternatively striped with silver and white. His complexion was a pale pink and his dark eyes were framed with an outlandish mask decorated with sparkly sequins and black feathers. He grinned showing a gap between his two front teeth.

“Good to see you, Sheldon. Looks like you outdid yourself this year.”

“Isn’t it every year, though?” Sheldon looked at Verity. “But you finally brought somebody with you this year.”

“Sheldon, this is Verity. She’s an archivist up at the institute. And I also recently hired her as an assistant.”

The host winked at Verity. “Sure. Right. An assistant. I gotcha. Whatever you say, Gammell. Well, welcome Verity. Gammell’s a paranoid bastard so I’m sure anyone he trusts is a friend of mine.”

He shook Verity’s hand. She noticed that his hand was as thin as the rest of his body and his fingers fine and spidery so that she could see the veins. It was also clammy and Verity discretely wiped her hand behind her. She wondered if this foppish character was the result of excessive inbreeding among the prominent families in the Old Quarter.

“Pleased to meet you,” said Verity. “I guess I could say the same of any other friend of Gammell’s.”

Sheldon laughed and slapped Gammell on the shoulder. Gammell smiled ruefully. “I wish I were so lucky to have gotten out of this place like you,” said the host. “But you know how it goes. Stay here and submit to their wishes. And bam, you find yourself sitting across a surely shrew at the breakfast table.”

“Surely it can’t be that bad,” said Gammell.

“The worst thing isn’t that. It’s the pocketbook. You’ve got to watch it constantly or she’ll clear out the bank with her obsessive spending.” Sheldon shook his head. “My wife, the shrew,” he clarified for Verity. “Well, enjoy yourselves. Dinner’s going to be ready in a few minutes. Just find yourselves a seat somewhere.”

As Sheldon turned to greet the next guests, they found their way to a pair of empty seats near the center of one of the tables close to the wall. All of the seats were on one side so that the guests sat with their backs to the wall. The other side was free so that the waiters could freely come and go, refilling glasses with champagne and red wine, putting down trays of steaming glazed meats and vegetables arranged in colorful cornucopias and taking up any platter that was empty.

As Verity steadily consumed wine and food and felt her mind swim into a strange level of awareness where she seemed to feel aware of everything and everyone around her—especially of Gammell who curiously ordered water from the waiters—entertainers traipsed around the center of the room, dancing to the tunes of fiddles and flutes in a whirl of white and silver. Clowns in faces smeared with white paint went around the room doing silly magic tricks for the guests. Verity found herself giggling as one of the clowns pulled a handkerchief for her out of thin air. She never giggled, she thought in consternation, it just wasn’t her. But when she turned to check Gammell’s reaction, he was smiling at her.

When she stopped laughing, she said in a mock serious tone, “Do you have any idea how they do their illusions?”

“I have no idea.”

“Well, I do,” she said louder. No one else in the room paid any attention to her. Everyone was talking and laughing loudly from the alcohol. “You see, they trick you into focusing your attention elsewhere. That’s when they pull out whatever it is that they want to come out of nowhere. It’s only when you pay attention to where they don’t want you to look that you can figure out how they do it.”

“That’s fascinating.”

But she noticed that he wasn’t looking at her anymore. The musicians had started another tune and a new troop of dancers came out. These dancers were women in long filmy gowns and as they twirled, they offered tantalizing glimpses of bare flesh. Verity sighed, suddenly morose, and held up her glass to have it refilled by a passing waiter.

Sipping the spicy wine, she said, “They’re pretty.”

He glanced at her. “I think it’s in the nature of the profession to be pretty. People don’t hire ugly dancers.”

“No.”

After a moment, he picked up his own glass and drank some water. He placed the glass down. “Have you thought about becoming a dancer?”

Verity had been in the midst of chewing some of her dinner when she nearly choked. “What?”

“Have you thought about becoming a dancer?”

“I don’t even know how to dance!”

“Too bad.”

The wine was making her mind work slower. She still wasn’t sure what he meant although she was sure she’d realize what he was trying to say the next day when all the alcohol was out of her system. “Do you know how to dance?” she asked instead.

“Passably. I’m not an excellent dancer. No troop would hire me.”

As the final entertainers filed out of the room and the waiters picked up the empty dishes, Sheldon, who was sitting at the head table, stood up. One of the servants handed him a mallet which he struck against the gong. The reverberating percussive sound immediately caused the guests to halt their conversations.

“Dear friends,” Sheldon said, “I hope you’ve enjoyed yourselves. In a couple of moments, the ceremony will start. So if you’ll kindly move yourselves over to the next room, we’ll begin promptly.”

The guests clapped and almost immediately, they got up from their chairs, the people slowly moving toward the end of the room, particularly to one of the smaller doors.

“What ceremony is he talking about?” asked Verity.

“For Aunat,” Gammell replied.

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Chapter 24 – Unmasked

The guests entered a room with a low-leveled and rounded ceiling. Only a few candles lit the front of the room and part of the sides so that the entire place was bathed in a dark orange glow. At the walls were floor stands with rounded metal containers that held glowing coals of resinous incense. Thick smoke rose into the air clouding the already dim light. The scent was even spicier than the wine that had been served at dinner and it stung the nose.

Verity felt her perception waver as if she had entered a dream. An inner voice told her to hold back near the entrance of the room.

The floor was scattered with pillows for the guests to kneel on. The guests themselves had quieted to a murmur. As everyone found a seat and settled down, three servants ventured to the head of the room bearing several more stands of white candles so that the area was better lit. She could now see that there was a square table covered in white linen. Some objects were also on the altar, but from the back, she could not tell what they were.

Two more servants carried in a large clear glass basin and placed this next to the altar. They then came back with large buckets of water which they poured into the basin. The three servants that had carried the candles put more incense into the wall holders and the air thickened even more. Verity felt constricted as if she were sleeping face down on a pillow.

Sheldon walked to the front when the servants finished preparing the scene and bowed toward the guests. “A priest and priestess from the Corvus has agreed to help us host the ceremony tonight. I welcome them and may our Feasting Day service be pleasing to Aunat.”

As the host went back to the audience to take his place, two hooded figures walked up to the altar to take their places beside each other.

“Tonight, we celebrate the nameless one,” said one of the hooded figures. From the voice, Verity assumed this was the priestess. “The nameless one brings order among the chaos. Something from nothing. Life from death. Tonight, we offer up ourselves to please Aunat.”

After a prayer intoned by the other figure, the priest, both of the religious leaders took off their cloaks revealing naked flesh underneath. Verity blinked once, not sure if she was shocked, surprised, or puzzled. Priests and priestesses weren’t supposed to run around naked. It just wasn’t done. What sort of ceremony was this anyway? It was then that she belatedly remembered Aeneus’s warning about strange rituals in the Old Quarter.

The priestess, an aging woman with sagging breasts and graying hair waved an arm. “Bring our sacrifice out!”

The two servants who had carried in the glass basin came back into the room carrying a pole between them. On the pole was a large black pig tied by its feet. Its frightened squeals shattered through the incense laden air. Only for a moment did Verity think her mind cleared but then the incense came rushing in again, clouding her mind. The servants placed the pig on the altar.

“Aunat brings life from death,” repeated the priestess. “From one, we must have the other. May the death of one bring the life of us all.”

The priest, a rather hairy man with a large belly took up a blade that glinted in the candlelight. Verity felt her wrists itch. “May Aunat give us life,” the priest said.

With a quick swing of his arm, the pig’s squeals were abruptly silenced and the white linen tablecloth turned red.

Verity felt nauseous.

The priest and priestess dipped their fingers in the growing pool of blood and marked their foreheads and cheeks. They dipped their fingers into the blood again and painted a line starting from their necks to their groins.

“From this sacrifice,” said the priestess, “May we have life from Fasting Day to the new year.”

The priestess took up the pig’s decapitated head and the priest took up the pig’s body. They dumped the body parts into the basin of water which immediately turned red.

Verity held her hand to her mouth. She couldn’t take it any more. She had to get out.

“Are you ill?” whispered Gammell.

She could only nod and Gammell immediately helped her to her feet. As they slipped through the exit, they could hear the priest saying, “May we each drink to the nameless one’s cyclical return.”

She staggered out into the dining room which the servants were busy cleaning up and the stairs to the first floor foyer. She didn’t care if she tripped. For some reason, she just had to get out. Something in the back of her mind, old and bad memories tried to surface.

“Why can’t we go to dinner tonight?” she asked him.

“I’m busy. I’m working on a big project at work. I promise. We can do dinner this weekend.”

But there had been no big project.

“Please, it was an accident,” he pleaded on her answering machine as she was busy throwing her possessions into cardboard boxes. “It was a lapse. Please come back to me.”

She had picked up the phone then and said, “Sorry, I can’t forgive your lies.”

There was a pause and then he said, “Fine.” He then hung up. He didn’t even curse her. He never called back. And she was finally alone.

The doorman was not there as she yanked open the door and rushed out into the frigid night air. The wine was still in her system and she could still faintly smell the incense, but most of her mind had cleared. Those memories that she believed been buried the past week had brought back that empty feeling.

She felt someone placing her coat over her shoulders.

“I didn’t think you would be so affected over the ceremony,” said Gammell.

She stared out onto the street lined with small electric lights. No one was out, but she could hear the sounds from the neighboring Feasting Day celebrations.

“Do you want to go back?”

She turned to look at him. “Do you want to go back?”

“I’ve seen it all before.”

“I’ll just take the bus back home, thanks.”

Gammell put on his own coat. “No, I’ll drive you home.”

“But you’ll miss your friend’s ceremony. I’m sure he went through a lot of trouble setting it all up.”

“Believe me, he won’t miss me once that whole thing is over.”

They walked over the few blocks toward the East Tower. Gammell had parked his car in one of the nearby alleys. As Verity got into the passenger side and leaned back into the seat, she closed her eyes, wanting to calm her racing mind that was trying to overcompensate from the heavy incense at the Feasting Day ritual.

As Gammell started the engine, she gave him her address. Wordlessly, he nodded and maneuvered the vehicle down Bilemot and Main Street. She turned her head to look out the window, to observe the dark shapes of buildings passing by in a blur.

They finally arrived on her street, Finsen, in front of the row of apartments that she called home. Gammell stopped at the curve, the engine idling.

“Well, here we are,” he said.

She stayed in her seat, not wanting to go into the house alone.

“Verity?”

“Do you want to come in for a moment to warm up before heading back home?” She held her breath as she waited for his answer.

“All right,” he said. He turned off the car and Verity finally moved, getting out.

At the door, she almost dropped her keys. Her fingers felt stiff and she wondered frantically what she was doing. She finally opened the door and walked in to turn on the light. Gammell came in behind her and closed the door. She took off her coat and turned around.

“Let me take your coat.”

He shrugged out of his coat and handed it to her. Their hands brushed and she felt that charge of skin against skin. For a moment, she froze staring at his hand.

“It’s all right,” he said gently. He took the coats from her and tossed them onto the empty table in the foyer.

She looked up at him. “I didn’t ask you in just to be friendly.”

“I know.”

When their lips met, she was opened mouthed, hungry, wanting to devour, wanting to rid herself of that emptiness. He broke the kiss off to take off his mask. He reached up to undo her own mask. It was almost as if they were already bare. He kissed her again and then his mouth moved downward to her jaw and her throat. One of his hands cradled the back of her neck, the other caressed her back.

She felt heat wherever he touched her. Dimly, she registered that they were still in the foyer.

“Upstairs.” She felt strangely winded as if she had jogged up a steep hill.

He trailed her upstairs and when they entered her bedroom, she suddenly found herself against the door. In the moonlight filtering into her room, she saw his eyes glinting, burning onto her skin. His fingers reached the ties of the bodice and began undoing them.

“I think you were trying to drive me crazy with that dress the entire evening.” He finished unlacing the bodice and pulled the dress downward. A hand came up touch a breast. The skin to skin contact made her shiver. She felt her heart beating hard. “Where did you get it?”

“A small shop in the business district specializing in old-fashioned clothing.”

“Interesting.” He took off the jacket of his costume. Verity reached up to undo the tie and pulled off his waistcoat. She unbuttoned his shirt and reached in to touch the muscles of his chest and abdomen which were taut and expectant.

“I didn’t think you liked it.”

“Didn’t like it?” He pulled the rest of the dress off her and briefly admired her only in panties and stockings. “You have no idea what went on in my mind when I saw you in it.”

She stepped closer to him so that she was pressed against him. She turned her head to breathe in his scent. She unzipped his slacks and touched his arousal. “I can’t believe that people say that women run away from you. Or maybe I’m just crazy myself.”

“No, you’re not crazy.” Gammell let himself be guided as she nudged him backwards to the bed. When she pushed him down, he lopped an arm around her waist and brought her sprawling on top of him. She gasped in surprise and then she giggled. “Verity?”

“Do you ever laugh, Gammell?”

He smiled. “Of course.” With his arm already around her waist, his hand wandered lower to tug off the last barrier between them. “But I don’t think this is exactly the right time to do that.”

“Hm.” She nuzzled his neck and lapped at his skin. “That’s too bad. I’d like to hear you. A loud laugh, all the way from the belly.” Her hand reached down to touch his flat stomach. “Yes, from here.”

He had ducked his head momentarily to explore the area between her neck and shoulder. “It seems that you like to talk a lot all of a sudden.”

“If you don’t want me to talk, just stop me.”

He raised his head, and stared at her. “Maybe I will.” In the next second, she found herself flat on her back, legs spread. He moved and he was suddenly inside her, his mouth silencing a surprised exclamation. Her last thought was that perhaps talking, and thinking for that matter, was highly overrated.

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Half-awake, she sensed that something was not quite right. She rolled over to find that she was alone in bed. Had she dreamed everything? She debated for a second before getting up and covering herself with a robe.

Verity went downstairs to the dining room and kitchen and found Gammell standing at the table in his costume slacks and shirt pouring freshly made coffee into mugs that he had found in her cabinets. It was practically domestic, she thought. He had even managed to make eggs and pancakes and toast.

Sensing someone watching him, he looked up after he finished pouring the coffee. "Good morning," he said. He sounded serious and he didn't smile.

Verity wondered if he was staring at her because she wasn't quite awake yet. She raked a hand through her hair, hoping she looked somewhat presentable. "Good morning. Is something wrong with me?"

"No, of course not." He ducked his head, pretending to be preoccupied with arranging the food on the plates, but not before she saw a small grin curve the edge of his mouth upward. "Why do you say that?"

"You were staring at me." She sat down and took one of the cups. "Well," she amended, "you're always staring at me, but this was a different stare."

"You probably don't want to know what I was thinking."

She sipped some of the coffee and said stubbornly. "Yes I do. Tell me."

He looked her in the eye and told her.

She felt blood rush to her cheeks. "But it's too early in the morning for that!"

"It's never too early in the morning."

She felt her skin flushing further as he continued to look at her so she tried a different subject. "I didn't know you cooked."

To her relief, he finally turned his attention to buttering a piece of toast. "I cook out of necessity."

"You don't like cooking?"

"I didn't say that." His eyes slid over to the end of the table where Verity had left the old mirror lying face down. "And I didn't know that you collected antiques."

"I don't. It was in some old boxes in the archives. I just cleaned it a bit."

"It looks vaguely familiar," he mused. "And to be honest, a bit disturbing, as if I were recalling it as some object that had appeared briefly in a bad dream."

"Do you often have bad dreams?"

"Sometimes. It's as if there was something that I had to do, but I didn't know what. Maybe it has to do with the other thing, I don't know. So many things are worrisome."

"It's what I wanted to ask you about," she said. She reached over to take the mirror and place it in front of him. "There's writing on the back of this."

Gammell swallowed and took a sip of his coffee as he stared at the back of the mirror. He blinked slowly before glancing back at her. "I know the language it's written in."

"Well, what is it? What does it say?"

He hesitated before saying, "I shouldn't. I'm assuming that since you found it in the archives, it used to be part of the Rothburne estate. I have heard that my ancestors have owned many strange things. Maybe they owned some things that they should not have had in possession in the first place."

"And this is one of those things?"

"Perhaps."

They finished breakfast and cleared the dishes. Gammell got up to get his coat which was lying on the table in the foyer. Verity came out to watch him put on his coat.

"I'm going to check up on some things for Pelorus," he said. "You don't have to come with me. You should take the day off."

"You should take the day off too," she replied. "It's Fasting Day."

"And tomorrow is unnamed. I wish I could take time off, but time is growing short, Verity. For a variety of reasons."

She didn't pretend to understand him. "All right. Dinner?"

"Where?"

"Here."

He nodded. "Fine. And something tells me that you should keep that mirror safe, somewhere." And then he disappeared out the front door.

Verity did not want to watch his car leave. Instead, she climbed back upstairs to take a shower and change.

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Chapter 26 – Unknown Checkout

The atrium at the entrance of the Rothburne Institute was silent. It was Fasting Day and the receptionists were either home or at one of the services at the Corvus. Verity walked across the hall, listening to her own steps. She had not wanted to stay at home, waiting. Unsure thoughts and doubts had started to creep into the edge of her mind. What if he decided not to come back? What would she do then? She refused to dwell on it. So she needed to do something.

She recalled the boxes that Quinn and Bob had hauled out of the sub-basement. Perhaps she would look at those. She ventured down into the archives and unlocked the door and turned on the lights. Her co-workers had not come in—after all it was the holiday. She placed her coat in her office and noticed the blank book and the box of strange doorknobs that Quinn had unearthed earlier. They were curiosities, she thought, perhaps nothing more.

She went into Bob's office. A ring of keys sat on his desk. She took these and found the master key, silver and oblong. When she tried it, it fit easily into the lock on the door to the sub-basement that she initially had thought was a custodian's closet.

The interior was dark. She touched the walls and felt only stone and mortar. The sub-basement was probably not wired for electricity. She went back to her office to grab a flashlight. But when she turned it on, the weak light illuminated little. There was a stair downward and a cold draft billowing upward to her ankles. Down the stairs was a small room filled with the boxes that Quinn and Bob had talked about. They had initially thought that these contained even older records than the ones shelved in the archives.

Verity placed the flashlight on one of the boxes and tried to lift up the one closest to her. It was heavy. So she opened it instead. A cloud of dust spewed outward when she lifted the lid. She coughed and angled the flashlight to examine the contents. The only object in the box was a large, ugly brass vase. She closed the box and shoved it aside.

The next box contained a leather-bound book. She flipped it open and saw handwriting. It was a hasty scrawl as if the author was trying to write everything down before he forgot it. She tucked it under her arm. The rest of the box held more of the strange doorknob-shaped objects except for the bottom where she found a leather pouch. She opened the pouch and saw something that looked like metal disk.

She climbed the stairs back up to the archive proper and locked the door to the sub-basement. She went back to her office to examine her finds.

The metal object in the pouch was like a round mirror without its frame. When she looked into it, though, her reflection looked odd as if it were emitting brighter colors or that it was skewing the colors that it was reflecting. She blinked, hoping that she wasn't imagining things. Was the metal disk actually rippling like a pond? She passed her hand over it, but it felt smooth and cool. She put it back into the leather pouch and turned her attention to the book.

She opened it up in the middle.

I told Delia about the family legacy this afternoon.

At first she didn't believe me. She told me I wasn't serious. But when I did say that I was serious, she told me I was mad. She left, telling me not to expect her the next day. I suppose I did have it coming to me. The family legacy, to say the least, is a bit outrageous to anyone who doesn't understand how this whole place works. If she decided not to stay, even to try to convince me that I was wrong, I suppose she probably only wanted to talk to me because of my connections.

So why does my heart feel like it has been bruised?

Perhaps I should try being upfront with the family legacy to any of my new acquaintances.

At any rate, the last week of the year is fast approaching. I have a gut feeling, an intuition, that I may have to use the Eye. I wish Grandfather was still alive. He would know what to do. And I wouldn't feel so anxious and foreboding.

She flipped a couple more pages, but one line caught her eye.

Even in my sleep, I hear it whispering to me.

Verity abruptly closed the journal and noticed that her hands were shaking. It was nothing, she told herself. Just a coincidence. Just the mind playing tricks on oneself. But even with those thoughts, she did not open the journal again. Instead, she put it into one of the drawers in her desk and shut it. She wouldn't have to think about it if she didn't see it.

She put on her coat, and she took the leather pouch with the strange mirror and put that into her coat pocket. She turned off the lights and locked up the archives. For some reason, she did not want to go back to the sub-basement to rummage around in the institutes leftover artifacts.

Upstairs in the welcoming atrium, it was still empty although there was one older woman in a large green parka and a red cap sitting in the waiting area reading a magazine. Verity crossed the atrium to the second set of stairs that led up to the second floor. She could already hear voices drifting down from the recreation room.

The recreation room itself was lit. All the interior lights were turned on. The curtains at the windows had been pulled back, letting in the tepid winter sunlight. The tables in the recreation room had been pushed back to the edges of the room and the chairs and couches were lined up in makeshift pews. All the seats were taken up by patients who were watching the priest at the head of the room with bored and detached expressions. The priest was a younger man dressed in a white vestment and a golden collar. He droned on about the nameless one and his purpose during the nameless days from memory. The priest appeared rather bored himself.

Verity examined the audience and could not find Aeneus. Puzzled as he had told her once before that he had been looking forward to the Fasting Day sermon, she edged past the audience and found herself in one of the upper level corridors which contained patient rooms. She had visited Aeneus in his room once—as good as his word, he had lined his tiny living space with strips of protective aluminum foil.

Aeneus's room was one of the rooms further down the corridor. Verity easily found it, but the door was opened. She peeked inside and saw the fat, bewhiskered custodian slowly mopping up the floor. The aluminum foil that had lined the ceiling, the window, and the walls were gone. Originally, Aeneus's room had one bed, a bedstand with some academic books on religion, and a desk with a pad of paper which he sometimes used to write letters and a large quartz paperweight that he had told her he kept for sentimental reasons. But now, all those personal effects were gone. The bed was meticulously made as if it had never been slept in.

She stepped out of the room before the custodian noticed that she was there. She stopped a passing orderly, a boyish-looking man dressed in a white uniform.

"Excuse me, but what happened to the patient who used to live here? What happened to Aeneus?"

"The old man with the obsession with aluminum foil?"

"Yes."

The man looked at her suspiciously. "Why do you want to know?"

"I'm his friend," she explained. "I work at the archives here. I talk to him sometimes."

"Ah," he said, finally understanding. "Well, he checked out this morning."

"Checked out? Can patients do that, check themselves out?"

"Well, only if their doctor pronounces them fit. One of the old man's relatives came to get him. Some holiday family reunion I think it was."

"Which relative?"

The orderly shrugged. "I'm not sure. His son? His brother? The man was wearing a scarf over his face from the cold outside so I couldn't tell very clearly. He said his name was Cochran or something like that."

"Aeneus only one nephew and his name was Kenny."

He shook his head. "Sorry, but that didn't sound like it."

It was only after Verity had walked out of the Rothburne Institute to head to her car that it finally occurred to her that perhaps Aeneus might not have checked out of the institute willingly.

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Verity drove back home, almost automatically maneuvering her car from street to street as her mind wandered elsewhere. Had Aeneus willingly gone with this person who had checked him out? Was this person a relative or someone else? If Aeneus had not gone willingly, what had this person threatened him with to comply? And more importantly, why did someone come to the Rothburne Institute to discharge an old man who to say the least, wasn't entirely right in the head? Or maybe Aeneus was right all along and somebody finally paid attention.

Perhaps this person wanted to keep Aeneus quiet.

She parked her car at the curb and got out. As she was walking to her door, she observed the front door to her neighbor's house opening. An older, middle-aged woman emerged from the house dressed in an elaborate fur coat and an even more elaborate headdress that was also made of fur. The woman walked passed Verity, not giving her a single glance.

Once inside her own house, Verity took out the leather pouch she had found at the archives and placed it on the dining room table. She took off her coat and for a moment, looked at the pouch and the antique mirror frame. She wondered if the strange metal disk could fit into the frame, but did not take the disk out from its pouch. There was something instinctive holding her back.

The phone on top of the shelf in the dining room rang, jarring her out of her reverie. She took the receiver and automatically placed it on her ear. "Hello?"

"Verity?"

Her skin prickled at Gammell's voice.

"I just wanted to call to say that I can't make it this evening."

Her stomach knotted. Her throat closed up. But she did manage to say one word, "Why?"

"Something came up. I promise I'll come by later."

"All right."

When she hung up, she felt her fingers balling up into fists. She couldn't breathe. A pressure started to build up behind her eyes. Why do I do this to myself? She thought. They're all the same. It doesn't matter to them who you are. You're just something convenient, the first thing lying around that they use. It was as if everything she had felt before was suddenly escaping and creating a void where she was cold and numb. It was as if she were no longer a person, but an unfeeling automaton.

She forced herself to move. She went upstairs to the bathroom.

The knife was lying lengthwise on the lower shelf of the medicine cabinet. She took the knife and held it in her hands. It was cool. Sharp. The top was poised above her bandaged wrists. It could cut through all that wrapping to the skin beneath. It was only an inch below.

But she hesitated.

Her hand began to tremble and the blade wavered. With a cry, she threw the knife into the wastebasket and looked up at the cabinet mirror. A pale woman no longer stared back at her. Instead, this woman was livid; her face flushed with emotion and wet with tears.

Verity tore out of the bathroom, slamming the door and stormed down the stairs. She would not let her suspicious nature and her past get the better of her. The next time she saw Gammell, he would have to explain himself more clearly. Otherwise, well, she didn't dare think about what she might do if history repeated itself.

She wiped her face on her sleeve and took her coat. She needed to get out somewhere. Anywhere. Driving seemed like a good idea.

She maneuvered her car around the small streets in the city, hands gripping the steering wheel tightly. She still felt angry and despondent, at herself, at her past, at everything in general. So she was surprised when she turned down a corner and found herself at the edge of the business district on the row of warehouses. The sky was already darkening in the afternoon. A solitary crow above flew away, heading south.

Verity parked her car in a small secluded alleyway and walked out onto the street. At this time of day, it was difficult to tell if anyone was in the buildings or if anyone simply left the lights on. The Verne Storehouse looked no different than any of the other buildings on the street. She knocked on the entrance wondering what her excuse would be for visiting. Perhaps she would say she was doing research for Gammell, but if the strange little man called Colbrin was around, she probably had no chance of getting in. She had the impression that he was actually jealous.

She knocked again, but no one answered. The warehouse was possibly completely closed and maybe the first time she had come here was a fluke that others were also here. Turning the handle of the door did nothing. She saw nothing when she peered into the windows.

Each of the warehouses was only narrowly separated from each other so that if one was not looking closely enough, one might have surmised that the entire block was occupied by one building. But there were small alleyways between one building and the next, but these alleyways were only large enough to let one person pass through. Verity slipped into one of these cracks and was immediately engulfed by gloom. The high, close walls effectively closed off most of the natural sunlight.

A few paces into the alley, she could make out a door in the wall of the Verne Storehouse. She grasped the handle and tugged. The door didn't budge. She tried jiggling the handle and with a groan, the door swung inward.

Verity regretted not bringing a flashlight—she could have been more circumspect. But to her luck, the light switch was on the wall close to the door. Overhead lights flooded the interior and she found herself in the warehouse filled with junk. What had Gammell tried to look for when they had been here before? He had only mentioned that he didn't find anything of use. But what if he had overlooked something? After all, this was a large warehouse and it appeared that to look thoroughly at everything, one would need several months. Samuel Verne had somehow accumulated enough knick-knacks to last several generations.

She began at the nearest pile and dug through various broken ornaments and faux antiques. Wouldn't it be easier, she wondered, if Verne or whoever had inherited this stuff to throw all this away? It wouldn't take up so much space and it would make it easier for her to sort through things. After half an hour of rummaging, she stood up and sighed. Something caught the edge of her eye. She turned her head. Did something move?

Dismissing it as a trick of the eye or perhaps a warning that she had not eaten lunch yet, she began on the next pile. What was the use of headless dolls and chipped china? Why keep objects that have lost their function: jewelry boxes without drawers, vases with holes, a lyre missing all its strings? Perhaps a better way to sort through all of these neglected and broken objects was by using a sieve. But how can one construct a sieve to keep something that one doesn't know to look for?

As Verity lifted away a dirty table cloth that was covering something, she suddenly heard the whispering voices. She shook her head. It was tinnitus. She just needed to get lunch. But beneath the cloth she saw something that made her freeze. It was a bronze frame that was slightly taller than herself, but the curious and disturbing thing was that it was simply a larger replica of the antique mirror that she already had in her possession. The frame itself was empty, but she was suddenly sure that if she turned the frame around, she would find the strange, unnatural writing etched onto its surface.

She reached out, in a morbid curiosity, to turn the frame over to actually see if there really was writing on the other side when she noticed a dark shadow on her left that hadn't been there before. She turned to see what it was, but her reaction was too slow. Something hard rammed into her from behind and pain exploded in her head. Darkness clouded her vision.

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## Chapter 28 – Sleep

Verity opened her eyes.

She found herself sitting on a wooden bench, half covered with snow. Her head ached terribly and gingerly she touched the back of her head and hissed. There was a tender knot at the back, just above her neck. What had happened? Slowly, she got up, muscles aching and protesting from her previous awkward and prone position. Around her was a frosty field dotted with dead trees. There was an empty path passing nearby. Where was she?

A larger street started a few yards away. She trudged toward the bus shelter on the corner. A small street sign proclaimed, "Leander Avenue." Another sign a little further away where the path began labeled the frosty field as "Monteport Park." How had she ended up at the southern part of the city?

She reached into her coat pocket and retrieved a set of keys, her wallet, and a scrap of paper. She flipped through the wallet feeling relieved that nothing seemed out of place—that she was not robbed. The paper, which looked like it had been torn out of a notebook, simply had two words on it scrawled in an unfamiliar handwriting. "Stay away." She felt foolish and stupid for not being careful.

Glancing at her watch, she blinked briefly in disbelief. Had she really been out of it for an entire day? Had she really been sleeping on that park bench during the cold night or had the person who had knocked her unconscious put her there later?

A bus rumbled down the road a moment later and she got on the nearly empty transport and told the driver to take her to the old business district. She took a seat near the front and sighed as she rested her forehead on the window. Although she saw the city passing by outside the window, she paid little attention. What had happened? She only remembered that she was at the warehouse looking for something and then someone had ambushed her. She also remembered that she had been angry that Gammell had called to cancel their evening meeting. Did he even wonder where she was last night?

At the old business district at the edge of the row of warehouses, the bus stopped and she stepped off. The buildings were the same as before. The Verne Storehouse still looked closed as if she had never been inside it. She found her car and thought that it was a miracle that it had not been stolen. She was not a native of Montepoort, but after reading about various crimes and the annual kidnappings in the newspapers, she was surprised that nothing worse had happened to her other than the cryptic warning she retrieved from her coat pocket.

She drove back, wondering if she should even be doing that. Her head ached. Her whole body ached. She felt tired and hungry. Verity made it back home and stumbled to her front door. After the twist of the key, she was inside and the ringing of the phone immediately assaulted her senses. She winced as the pain in the back of her head grew. She picked up the receiver.

“Where were you?” His voice was exasperated and annoyed and perhaps a little frantic. She had never heard him sound that way.

“Good morning to you too,” she replied, feeling surly as the pain mounted. She needed to find some medicine. Or at least an ice pack.

“I’ve been trying to call you ever since I got back last night. You never answered. I came by too and it looked like you weren’t home. Don’t tell me you were at the institute working.”

“I wasn’t.”

“Where were you?” he repeated.

“And where were you?” she said. “You never saw fit to tell me what you were up to except some vague comment about something coming up. Don’t I get any answers?”

“At least I told you I wouldn’t be able to make it for dinner. Where were you?”

She sighed noisily, not caring that he heard her irritation. “I was at the business district. At the Verne Storehouse to be exact.”

“What?”

“I got bashed in the head too for snooping around. The bastard dumped me in the park and I had to find my way back by bus. Fun times.”

“Verity! That’s not something to make light of. That was dangerous—you could have been killed. Why didn’t you use your common sense?”

“It’s so great to know that you care about me.”

He ignored her sarcastic remark. “I can’t believe you did something so stupid.”

“You know what, Gammell? I am stupid. Even I can’t believe how stupid I am, especially for falling for the same old tricks again.”

“What tricks...”

“I’m just going to save myself by just going to sleep.”

“Wait a minute, didn’t you just say you got bashed in the head? The worse thing is to go to sleep. Just hold on, I’ll come over. Let me explain.”

“No. Don’t bother coming over. I don’t need any explanations.”

“Verity...”

She cut him off by dropping the receiver back into the cradle of the phone. Her head felt like it was about to explode. She went off to the kitchen and dumped a few ice cubes from the freezer into a plastic bag. She placed the makeshift ice pack on the back of her head and immediately her skin felt numb. She made herself climb the stairs to the bathroom. She took out a bottle of painkillers and popped two pills into her mouth. She ignored the knife lying in the wastebasket.

Downstairs, she managed to make herself a ham sandwich and a cup of instant tea. Sipping the hot liquid and feeling the ice at her neck made for an odd but soothing combination. Or perhaps it was the painkillers already taking an effect on her system. At the dining table, she spotted the mirror frame and the leather pouch. Slowly she finished her sandwich and her tea and pushed the cup and dish aside. She looked at the two objects for another moment before reaching out to slide them in front of her.

The whispering was back, but it was quiet and low as if it was muffled by an intervening wall. She took out the metal disk from the pouch and tilted it in the light. It reflected little of the surrounding



room. The disk also looked similar in size to the frame. She flipped the frame over to the other side. The original glass at first glance looked like it had been rubbed away over time. But upon closer examination, it was actually the unpolished backing of the frame. The original glass had been removed.

She turned the metal disk again and placed the dull part into the frame with the more reflective part looking outward. The whispering suddenly became louder. She looked into the mirror. Although physically, the woman being reflected was her, something struck her as wrong. She felt her shoulders shuddering and she closed her eyes. The mirror reflected something about her that shouldn't be. She turned the mirror face down and the whispering abruptly stopped.

Verity left the plates and the ice pack also on the dining room table. She went back upstairs to her bedroom. She felt so tired. Flopping onto bed, she closed her eyes again. She drifted off to sleep breathing in his scent on her pillow.

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Chapter 29 – Not Quite

The street was clear and deserted. A plow had arrived earlier that morning to shovel all the snow that had accumulated during the previous night onto the sides creating large drifts laced with dirt. In the weak late morning light, dark heavy clouds hung overhead, filled with snow but reluctant for release. It was as if a gray blanket had smothered the sky.

Verity arrived in the Rothburne Institute parking lot and parked close to the entrance. The parking lot itself was mostly empty except for the few cars of the skeleton staff working during the holidays. She should be staying home, sleeping or puttering around or even reading some of the books her uncle left in the study, but something nagged at her. And she felt a stab of shame when she thought of Gammell. She should have never been abrupt with him when he had called.

Her head still ached a little, a reminder of her foolishness. She climbed out of her car and took in a deep breath of cold air. Something told her that she would need her wits about her.

She walked toward the institute when from the corner of her eye, she saw a shadow detach from one of the nearby cars and glide towards her. She turned quickly, her hands clenching into fists. This time, she was not going to let some anonymous criminal get the better of her. From a few feet away, the shadow looked up, and from the folds of a hood, she saw a familiar face.

“Aeneus!”

“Shh! Or someone will hear you. Even empty air has ears.” The old man took out a ratty handkerchief from his coat pocket and blew his nose in it loudly. “I had a feeling you would be back today.”

“I heard that you were checked out by someone.”

“Yeah, I was checked out by someone. But that is irrelevant. I just wanted to tell you to be careful.”

She smiled wryly. “I found out the hard way yesterday.”

“Huh. What was that?”

“Someone hit me on the head.”

“You're lucky you're still in one piece,” he said seriously. “What about Nathaniel Gammell? What happened to him? Did he manage to get whoever it was who hurt you?”

“No. He was elsewhere doing whatever it was he said was important. To be honest, I was angry at him and went investigating myself.”

“Bad idea. Well, be careful and don't dig too deeply into anything.”

“But you said...”

“Forget what I said. I ramble a lot. Most people don't pay attention to what I say and it would do you good to do the same.”

“But if what you say is the truth, why should I ignore it?”

“Because it's safer that way.” The old man sighed. “Look Verity, I see you as a sort of daughter although I don't have children of my own. I don't want you to get hurt chasing a crackpot's imaginings.”

“Is being safer really better than finding out the truth?”

“I don't want you to get hurt. Or rather, I don't want to get hurt. Despite all my care, I neglected to notice that I talk about things that shouldn't be talked about too much. My mouth will get me in trouble. It already has gotten me in trouble. And when you see Nathaniel Gammell next, tell him to keep quiet too.”

She shook her head. “I don’t understand, Aeneus. Who checked you out of the institute? They didn’t say it was your nephew Kenny.”

“No, it’s not my nephew. Ungrateful wretch that he is, I want to keep my family out of this. I want you out of it too. You just moved to Monteport. You shouldn’t be dealing with it at all.”

“Who checked you out?” she repeated.

The old man’s eyes slitted and he turned his head quickly surveying the area around them. The parking lot appeared devoid of any people except themselves. “A not-quite friend,” he said finally.

“What is that supposed to mean? If you don’t trust this guy, you’re more than welcome to stay with me. I have an extra bedroom you could use for the rest of the holiday.”

“I may be a crackpot, but I’m not stupid,” said Aeneus. “I know how to take care of myself. I haven’t forgotten. And if something does happen to me, it wouldn’t be that tragic. I’m old. I’ve lived quite long enough.”

“Stop talking like that. Unnatural deaths are nothing to make light of.”

“You’re right, they’re not. But I would hate for anything to happen to you. Be careful where you look, Verity. And don’t look too deep or other forces may decide to take malicious action on you. Well, I’ve got to get going.”

Aeneus turned and walked through the parking lot. Verity headed back to the institute but then turned her head the last moment, wanting to say something to him. But the old man had already disappeared.

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She found the doors to the institute locked. Puzzled, she unlocked the door with the key she had been given on her first day on the job and slipped inside. The lobby was dimmed except for a single overhead light in the waiting area. It was silent. Where were the workers—the nurses and the crew—working during the holiday? Where they all upstairs where the patients were quartered or were there truly no one here?

Quickly, she headed downstairs to the archives. When she turned on the light, everything appeared to be in place. She went into her office and promptly took out the old leather-bound journal that she had shoved into the drawer after she had first glanced at it. She put it underneath her coat and walked back out.

Before she turned off the lights in the archives and locked the door, she took one last look around. The door to the sub-basement caught her eye. The door was slightly ajar. Shuddering, she quickly locked up the archives, not wanting to check on the door that was supposed to be closed.

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Chapter 30 – Healing

The journal was a heavy weight in her arms. The gray clouds from the morning still loomed above in the afternoon. The light seemed to grow even weaker—but was this only from her own perception? But even at noon, she had not felt hungry. She had lost all of her appetite for the day when she awoke realizing that what she had to do. It was cold and she tugged her coat closer to her. She should have never worn the skirt no matter what her intention was.

She pressed the doorbell to the lighthouse and heard it buzz from within. In a way, she was grateful for that little device. She didn’t know if she had the strength or the will to knock.

The door opened. Gammell stood just beyond the threshold in a brownish plaid shirt with the first couple of buttons undone and a pair of faded jeans. His dark hair was messy as if he had run his hand over it a couple of times rather than combing it. Faint shadows lurked underneath his eyes which widened when he realized that she was at his doorstep.

Verity fought from toppling over on her feet from relief and some warm but nervous emotion making her skin bite from other than the cold and her heart beat faster. “Hi.”

“Why are you here?” He stepped back allowing her inside. “It’s the holiday.”

“I know it’s the holiday.” Verity dropped the journal on top of the pile of books that he had left scattered on his couch. The floor was covered with newspapers again and two different projects seemed to be going on. One was a wooden sculpture of a horse that had been stripped of its coating of grime and was

awaiting a brush of protective finish. The other project was a brass candlestick of unusual curving design. The dirt and tarnish was still etched into its crevices; the cleaning phase had not started yet. "I came for another reason."

"Oh?" He took her coat and dropped it at the back of the chair. "It's a mess in here. Come into the kitchen. I'll make some hot tea if you'd like any."

"All right." She followed him into the back, into a room filled with wooden cabinets decorated by old fashioned handles. A modern stove and a refrigerator hugged the corner. A small table with thick sturdy legs occupied the opposite corner. The sink was next to the stove and a small window was above the sink overlooking the sea. The kitchen itself was actually rather small. She leaned against the cabinets watching him fill a shiny metal kettle with water and place it on the stove. Her throat felt closed up. She swallowed. "I want to apologize."

He turned his head, his gaze holding hers. "For what?"

"Yesterday. I completely lost it on the phone. You didn't deserve my verbal abuse."

She waited and for a moment thought that he didn't accept it, that her apology was even weaker than she thought it was. He raised a hand and cupped her jaw. A thumb roughly brushed her cheek. "I should be the one to say that I'm sorry."

"But..."

"I should have explained that I canceled our plans because I was meeting one of my associates who had some information on the Samuel Verne property. And I was using it as an excuse because I was afraid."

"Afraid of what?"

"Afraid that when I came to see you again, you'd turn me away."

"Why would I turn you away?"

"Because you would have come to your senses and realized that I'm not a sensible man at all."

She laughed weakly. "Senses? What is that? I realized I lost it quite some time ago when I went to the business district by myself without taking any sort of precautions."

"I see you're still all right."

"You wouldn't be so blithe about it if you'd actually seen what happened. But that is neither here nor there." She leaned closer to him. "What matters now is that I'm here."

His hand slid to her shoulder. She reached up to put her fingers in his hair and fitted her mouth against his. He stumbled backwards until he was standing against the edge of the table. She began nibbling his jaw as hands wandered to the hemline of her skirt and pushed the fabric up. Her breathing hitched as his fingers discovered that she had neglected to put on a critical piece of clothing that morning.

His breath tickled her earlobe. "How unexpected and naughty of you," he whispered.

"Disappointed?"

"Far from it." His fingers moved and she thought that he was playing music on her soul. She cried her happiness into the side of his neck. Her head felt flooded as her own fingers sought the zipper on his jeans.

"It's not the appropriate time or place," she managed to say. "But..." She raised her left leg so that her knee was against the table top. He took a quick intake of breath when she slid onto him.

"But what?" he said, his voice dark and slightly hoarse. His hands wandered to the bare flesh of her hips underneath her skirt. The pupils of his eyes were dilated, nearly obscuring the brown-green of his irises.

"But I don't care."

And at that moment, neither of them did.

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Later in the afternoon, they stood against the lighthouse stairs side by side, thighs slightly touching, as they sipped mugs of hot tea. Verity felt as if something had loosened from her chest. It was still there, but it was no longer constricting her. "I have something to tell you," she said.

Gammell didn't reply. Instead, he just looked at her over his mug.

She held out her free hand and turned it so that it was palm up. "The bandages."

"You don't have to tell me about it if you don't want to," he said.

"Yes I do. These aren't the result of an accident. I did it myself."

"Verity..."

“It’s funny how the past can influence you. I hated my past, failed relationships. Or rather lack of involvement in them. When someone lies or obscures what they have done, it takes something inside me away. Have you ever felt so numb that you felt that you might as well be dead?”

His free arm wrapped around her waist. “I’m here.”

“What is it between us?” she mused, half to herself. “I don’t really want to call it anything. I’m afraid that whatever it is, it might disappear.”

“I don’t want it to disappear either.”

The phone rang. Gammell reached over to put his cup on the desk and took the phone. “Hello?” Verity put her head on his shoulder. For that one brief moment, she felt her world tilting back on its axis.

“Gammell?” boomed a voice out of the receiver. She was close enough to listen in. It sounded like Pelorus. “I need a progress report on that mirror. I have some sources myself that Colbrin is quite close to it.”

“He’s close, but he still hasn’t got it,” replied Gammell. “I’m still working on it.”

“I could say work faster, but anyway, I was hoping you could drop by later this afternoon. In three hours?”

“That’s fine.”

“Huh. And your assistant too, or in your foolishness, did you give her the holiday off?”

At his end, Gammell smiled wryly. “She refuses to take the holiday off.”

“She’s crazy,” exclaimed Pelorus. “Well, maybe I should revise my initial impressions. Perhaps you’re better off with her than a mindless but muscle-bound mover. Muscle is cheap. And you can always hire a moving truck.”

“I’ll keep that in mind, Pelorus.”

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## Chapter 31 – Entry

Gammell placed his works in progress on a nearby table and dumped his tools into a small metal box. He rolled up the newspapers and placed them beside the tools. Verity took the books off the couch and stacked them on the floor. She took the journal and sat down. She opened the leather-bound cover, hoping to find a name on the first page. It was blank.

“What were you looking for in the Verne Storehouse anyway?” she asked.

“Something that looked like a mirror, I guess. I didn’t have any idea what it would look like and the warehouse had enough stuff to make searching a lifelong endeavor, so it would have probably been pointless to go through it randomly.”

“And if you had found the mirror?”

“I don’t know.” He grimaced. “Colbrin was there. I doubt he’d let me take it out of his vicinity.”

“I figured you were going for that.”

“So you went to the warehouse hoping to find what I didn’t?” He finished clearing up his living room and took a pad of paper and a pen from the desk. He sat down across from her, pad and pen on his knee, legs slightly spread. “I gather you didn’t find anything.”

Her hands rested on the journal as she looked up at him. “I saw something. It looked like a frame for a mirror. It was taller than me. It was a body length mirror without the glass.”

“It could have been part of the broken junk in the warehouse if it didn’t have the mirror on the frame.”

“The strange thing is, it looked like an exact duplicate of the smaller frame I had. The one I showed you before, remember?”

“Yes, I remember. But how can that be important?”

“I found some things in the sub-basement of the archives. I found this book, a journal of sorts, and from what I gather perhaps it once belonged to one of your ancestors. I also found the mirror that went with the frame.” She hesitated for a moment before she said, “There’s something very odd about it.”

“About the mirror you found?”

She nodded.

“What is odd about it?”

“I can’t quite put my finger on it. It’s as if it’s showing me how it sees the world rather than

reflecting it.”

“That doesn’t sound physically possible.”

“No it doesn’t. Not unless you look in it.” She sighed and flipped a page on the journal. “Or maybe I’m slowly losing my mind,” she muttered.

“No you’re not.” He leaned back in his chair. “Well, I had a meeting with one of my contacts who is well-connected to the underground market. He heard a few rumors about the titanium mirror that Pelorus is trying to obtain. Some say that the mirror has been sold to a collector. Some say it’s still circulating somewhere, ready to be bid on. And another—the strongest and perhaps the most believable lead I have so far—is that the mirror never entered into the underground market at all.”

“Didn’t Pelorus say something about the mirror disappearing when Samuel Verne’s will was read or something like that?”

“I don’t think it disappeared into thin air. According to my source, the mirror was actually distributed to one of Verne’s descendants when his estate was split up after his death. It supposedly now belongs to one of his cousins who still lives in the Old Quarter.”

“Then Pelorus should get in contact with this person and offer to buy it off of him.”

“Not so fast. We have to confirm first that Verne’s cousin has the mirror in the first place. I’ve arranged a meeting with him tomorrow.” He looked down at the empty pad of paper for a moment. “I’d like you to come with me.”

“Why? Isn’t this person just expecting you?”

“You’re my assistant. Maybe you’ll see something that I don’t.”

She nodded. “It’s not as if I have anything else I need to do.” The journal that she had been half paying attention to was rather dull in the beginning as the writer talked about the daily events in his life. “This doesn’t have a name to go with it, yet I assume this was written by one of your ancestors.”

“Nothing interesting?”

She flipped to near the back of the book. “I wouldn’t say that. Perhaps this ancestor of yours was once a guardian.”

“What?”

“Maybe this entry might explain something.” She read aloud.

*No one knows how our family got the Eye. Perhaps we’ve always had it. Grandfather, when he was still here, once told me that it was part of us—that it was our duty to carry on this legacy. But I don’t want to carry on this legacy. I want to be as normal as everyone else.*

*Father solved the problem by denying everything. He has his own life, which on all appearances appears as usual as anyone else. He doesn’t want to know what sort of things our family has always done. He doesn’t want to know how responsible this family is for what hangs precariously in the balance. I once asked him for advice on the Eye, but instead of even telling me to not dabble in things I am too young to think about or to ignore things that were in my Grandfather’s domain, he told me he didn’t know anything about it at all. He told me to finally face reality and to take my heads out of the clouds. Concentrate on life, not the ravings of an old man.*

*But as the time nears, I feel a great uneasiness. Perhaps this was what Grandfather meant by a peculiar sensitivity in the soul—that I am more aware of things unseen and of things that might happen. Most people may ascribe events to coincidences and bad luck, but I see everything as deliberate and with purpose. When crows fly off to warmer lands, it is not simply migration. It is Aunat leaving. Or even if there was no such thing as religion and the nameless one, perhaps these birds have observed something that makes them uneasy. That makes them leave.*

*And then there are the disappearances. People have pretty much accepted that it has always happened and will always happen—but I don’t think it is due to any unscrupulous person dealing in some underground slave trade or a murderer. There’s something systematic about all of this—especially how it always happens about the same time every year. I don’t think I’m intelligent enough to figure out what the pattern is, but my gut tells me that there is.*

*Grandfather passed on some peculiar traits to me. He once remarked that it had been useless with my father. He simply didn’t have the temperament. He would never understand. His sensitivity for some reason had been dulled to a point that he was like everyone else. He would never hear. He would never sense. At first, I didn’t believe him. I only learned those particular tricks with the Eye that Grandfather taught me to humor him. But then I’ve begun hearing and I’m beginning to believe that he was right.*

*This acute sensitivity, however, is not endemic to our family. It can also occur sporadically and randomly within the population. These are the mad and melancholy. They feel too much and do not understand why they do so. They inherited something that puts them in close contact with the other but they have no one to guide them. One of my great-grandmothers from some family stories was like that. She was of a different family altogether and she felt things, other unnamable things, and at times, she was stronger in this sensitivity than anyone in our family.*

*Grandfather once mentioned that the Eye itself did not require sensitivity. His father before him had used it successfully without being able to hear anything at all. But at least he had an open mind when he was taught—and more importantly, that he realized why he had to use it at all. My father, on the other hand, has completely closed himself off from the rest of the family. He doesn't understand it at all. He doesn't understand me—and normally, that would throw me into a protracted fit like the ones I had in my childhood when I heard things from the birds and he told me to stop making things up.*

*At least Grandfather believed me. But now he is gone and I am not sure what to do. The time is coming closer, and in the dark, I think I hear it whispering to me. Without Grandfather, I have to face it alone.*

*I don't want to look at the Eye. It prophesizes and distorts. It reflects what shouldn't be. That is the burden that one faces in possession of something that belongs elsewhere. It's required as long as it exists in that unnamable place. In my recent dreams, I see the shadows of this place that can only exist trapped in a reflection within a reflection.*

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In Gammell's car, they headed northwest on Avtandil into the heart of the city. Verity looked out the window. Her fingers felt cold and she registered none of the passing scenery. Gammell, on the surface, appeared to be calm as he easily maneuvered the car on the road. The road itself, was deserted.

"Most people don't come out during the Unnamed Days," he said, his voice cutting through the singular rumbling of the car engine. "Old beliefs about bad luck days die hard."

"Do you believe in bad luck days?" she said.

"I believe every day is bad luck if you're not careful. That journal only confirms what I've always felt was to be true. That other things are out there, only waiting for the right time."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Perhaps the sensitivity that my ancestor talked about in that journal has diluted over time. I have intuitions and gut feelings. I make connections where other people don't see anything. But perhaps there is a sort of upside too. I don't hear things; I don't hear birds talking. If I did, I'd be locked up."

"No you wouldn't. You're smart enough not to say that—at least to doctors."

"Ah, doctors. If only there weren't so many bad ones."

They turned onto Dorsum Road and Gammell parked in the same alleyway as they had before. The street itself was deserted. A closed sign was plastered on the window of the new fusion cooking restaurant. The boot store was also similarly darkened and closed down. Verity hugged her coat closer to her body, wishing that the sudden coldness she experienced had rather been a sudden cold wind than her uneasiness. The pawn shop windows were dark.

As they neared Pelorus's place of business, a small movement at the base of the door caught her eye. A small brown creature, the pet mongoose that Pelorus kept, chattered at their feet and ran in strange, confused circles. The door itself was left ajar by a chipped china cup. The mongoose ran back inside and Gammell shoved the door open and kicked the cup aside. The interior was very dark.

Even in the shadows, one could make out the pawn shop trinkets strewn in haphazard array over the shelves and floor. The glass display cases along the wall were all smashed in although remarkably the expensive contents inside were still present. Whoever created the mess was more interested in sending a message than thievery.

Verity found the switch on the side of the wall where the ugly vase that once held umbrellas and canes and walking sticks was tipped over. In the light, the mess looked worse—as if someone had unleashed a herd of unruly horses in the vicinity and the animals simply trampled over everything.

"Pelorus?" Gammell called out.

No one answered.

They walked over the debris and to the backroom. A figure in a tweed jacket and a streak of red across the forehead laid prone on the floor among a mess of papers. A pair of broken glasses was perched

on his nose. The mongoose had found its way back here again and it chattered nervously before rushing out of the store, perhaps permanently. Pelorus's eyes were open wide, seeing nothing.

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## Chapter 32 – Fate and Choices

“I don't want you to stay in the city alone.”

Verity glanced at his profile as he drove. They were heading on a familiar route toward her house. “You want me to stay with you.”

“It's not just an overnight thing.”

“Should I pack an entire trunk?”

Earlier, the authorities had arrived on Dorsum, cranky and annoyed that they had to be called away to do work during the holidays. The paramedics had arrived on the scene and had given a diagnosis that they had already figured out on their own. They had loaded up the body bag into their ambulance and had driven off toward the hospital to have the forensics department to have a closer look. The police had cordoned off the area in warning tape and had taken pictures. Gammell and Verity had been detained for about an hour at the scene being questioned about their observations and whereabouts. And then they were let go.

The police dusted the place for prints and put bits of possible evidence in plastic bags, but there was no hope that they would even begin working on the case until after the new year. And by that time, it might be too late.

“I don't like the idea of you being alone, at least not until after the holidays. Something is clearly wrong and I don't like it,” said Gammell. They turned onto Finsen and arrived at her residence.

They got out of the car and as they neared her apartment, Verity noticed the middle-aged woman with the fur coat leaning on her neighbor's door. The woman watched the both of them with narrowed eyes. In one hand, she held a smoking cigarette. She placed it to her mouth to take a long drag and when they reached the entrance, she blew out a cloud of stinging smoke. Verity fought not to cough.

“Nice day isn't it?” said the neighbor. Her voice was deep and raspy. Her mouth was painted bright red and there were prominent lines across her forehead and around her eyes and mouth. The sky was already quite dark and the only light was from the thin sliver of the moon which occasionally peeked out whenever there was a break in the cloud cover.

“It's not too warm,” Verity replied. Didn't her uncle say something about the neighbors not caring and not bothering with anyone else in the neighborhood?

“You seem really busy for the holidays.”

“It's work.”

“Too bad they're not giving you the days off.” The woman took another drag on her cigarette. “The holiday lets you start off the new year afresh. Hope the pay's good.”

“It's good enough.” She put her key in the lock and turned.

“I thought you lived alone.”

Verity pushed open the door. “Not any more.”

Gammell closed the door behind him as she went inside and climbed the stairs to her bedroom. “I didn't know your neighbors were so chatty.”

“I didn't know either.” She pulled out her duffle bag from underneath her bed and started to empty her wardrobe into it. “My uncle told me that the people around here weren't supposed to care.” She zipped up the bag and tossed it over her shoulder. “I think I preferred it that way.”

They went back downstairs to the dining room where Verity took the mirror and the leather pouch. Before putting it inside the bag, she showed Gammell the frame with the looking glass.

“What do you think?”

Carefully, he took the mirror in his hands with the reflecting surface facing downward. Slowly he turned it over. He glanced at it for a moment before handing it back to her. “Put it in the bag.”

She slipped it into the leather pouch and then stuffed it into her duffle bag. “What's wrong?”

He stuffed his hands into his coat pockets and walked toward the front door. “Everything's wrong.”

“What did it show you?”

“That's the problem, it didn't show me anything.”

“But...” She reached back to take the mirror out and looked into it herself. She blinked and felt her head swim. All she saw in the reflection was the room itself. She shoved the mirror back into her bag and tried to tell herself that she was too tired and stressed and that her mind was playing tricks on her.

Outside, the woman with the fur coat had disappeared, but the scent of her cigarette still lingered in the cold air.

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She had offered to set the table when he said he was going to make dinner. Putting the dishes and cups and silverware onto the table had not taken long and when she found herself with the extra time, she stood against the counter to watch him. He had put on a light brown apron that looked like it was made of burlap. He quickly peeled carrots and potatoes and cut up other vegetables as well as some parsley. He dumped all of these into a large boiling pot of water and put in some seasoning. He stirred the concoction with a wooden ladle.

She liked this small cozy scene, but how long would this kind of thing last? Was this the beginning of something she had long ago discarded as impossible, or was this something transient like a dream? Gammell had rolled his sleeves past his elbows. She admired his forearms, the sprinkling of hair, the play of muscle underneath the skin. Perhaps she shouldn't think too hard. Perhaps at this moment, she shouldn't worry too much about what was happening out there.

She blinked and then in her mind's eye, saw the sad limp body of the pawn shop dealer sprawled on the messy floor of the back room. A shudder worked its way down her neck to the bottom of her spine. What had happened? What was happening? What had Pelorus done or found out that warranted his sudden murder? And what of Aeneus who claimed that he could take care of himself when he talked too much of his conspiracies? What about herself? And what about Gammell? Her mind suddenly stopped working.

“That mirror,” said Gammell as he sprinkled some pepper into the stew. “I don't like it.”

“Do you want me to get rid of it?”

“No.” He turned to look at her. “It's somehow related to all of this. You know that since what happened today we don't have to work on finding what Pelorus wanted.” He turned back to the food on the stove. “I've known him for what, ten years? He was old, but he didn't deserve to go that way.”

“No one deserves to go that way.” She walked over to the fridge and opened it. “Wine?”

“Go ahead.”

She took out a bottle and found a corkscrew to get it open. She poured the dark red liquid into two glasses. Gammell took one and swallowed deeply. She sipped hers. “So we try finding that titanium mirror anyway?”

“It's not about finding anything any more. It's about getting answers. And it's also about finally figuring out what this other, unnamed thing is, what I am, what I'm supposed to do.”

“You want to find yourself?”

“It's not so simple.” He held up the ladle with a hand underneath to catch anything that dripped. “Taste.”

Verity leaned over to lick the sauce from the spoon. “Hmm. It's good.”

“Have you ever had the feeling that you were supposed to do something, that you were bred to do something?” he asked. “It's as if every little sign is pointing in one direction to a place I don't know anything about, but nonetheless, I'm swept headlong into it without any control.”

“I've always had that feeling to some extent. But I wander from place to place, not sure where I should stay,” she replied. “And then something comes along to tell me in no uncertain terms that it is not for me and I'm forced to leave whether I like it or not.”

He took the pot over to the table and began ladling the stew into the bowls. “It's as if fate is playing a harsh hand.”

“It may seem that way. In fact, I do sometimes think that is the case, but when all is said and done, I don't believe in fate. We make our own choices—we just have to make sure we make the right ones.”

He put the ladle back into the pot and grinned ruefully. “Let's hope that you're right.”

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## Chapter 33 – The Scientist

In the early morning light that bounced off the reflecting windows to create shadows, the rows of square buildings Lisdon were silent black sentinels watching the only two people on the sidewalk. Like the rest of the Old Quarter, these houses were old style elegant with flat roofs and ornate railing. But since it was the holiday, no one had shoveled the sidewalks which were covered with heaps of snow. It was also snowing too and there was no doubt that those heaps would grow even bigger by the afternoon.

Verity wished that she was still in bed at this time in the morning. She slanted a look over at Gammell who had his coat collar pulled up and his yarn cap tucked over his ears. What was he thinking?

“You like being a morning person, don’t you?” she said.

“And you object to that?”

Their breaths created white clouds of vapor in front of their mouths. To Verity, this seemed like the longest block she had walked so far. Her fingers and toes were beginning to feel the cold. “I don’t necessarily object, but it would be better if I had an incentive to come out in this freezing weather.”

“What sort of incentive were you thinking about?”

“I don’t know. It’s sort of hard to think out here in the cold. Why don’t I tell you when I do come up with one?”

“I hope it’ll be one I won’t mind providing.”

“Oh, I’m not sure about that. But it will definitely be one that I would like getting.”

He laughed and she found herself grinning. “I think I see where your thoughts are heading.”

“Really? What do you think I’m thinking?”

He told her.

She was glad that the scarf that she had tossed on that morning was covering her flaming cheeks.

“You enjoy embarrassing me, don’t you?”

“Well, it’s not as if there’s anyone else about.”

“I certainly hope not.” She turned her head to look at the houses. “You know, if the owners of the Old Quarter weren’t so stubborn about renovations, this area of town could really be beautiful.”

“You’re right. But it’s difficult to convince generations of entrenched families to change their ways.”

“Your family moved out.”

“We’re a different case.”

The house that they had been looking for looked a bit shabbier than its neighbors. Its dark green shutters hung at a crooked angle next to the windows. The paint on the door was chipped and the doorknocker was tarnished beyond recognition. But at least there was an electric bell at the side of the door frame. Gammell and Verity stood on the doorstep waiting for someone to answer the door.

“This person, what was his name again?” she asked.

“Tiberius Verne. He’s supposed to be Samuel Verne’s cousin.”

“Does he know that he’s supposed to meet you today at this hour?”

“I’m positive.”

She tucked her hands further into her coat. The falling snow was still whipping into her already numb face. “Maybe he forgot and overslept. I wouldn’t blame him.”

“I have a feeling that he didn’t sleep in today,” said Gammell.

The door opened showing an aging and wrinkled face against a mass of gray hair pulled back ruthlessly in a bun. The old woman was wearing a dark working dress and she glared at them. “Yes?”

“I’m Nathaniel Gammell and this is my assistant Verity Tage. We had an appointment with Mr. Verne this morning.”

“That’s Dr. Verne, to you,” sniffed the old woman. “Come in before we lose all the heat. It’s expensive heating during the winter you know.”

They stepped inside. The interior wasn’t much warmer, but at least the winter wind was left outside. The old woman, probably the housekeeper, didn’t even ask them for their coats. The interior was in as much disrepair as the exterior. The foyer was wallpapered in a fading beige and brown pattern and there was even some rips where the wall met the ceiling or where the wall met the floor. A couple of ugly floor lamps lit the interior.

“Dr. Verne is downstairs in his workroom,” said the old woman pointing to a closed door in the hallway. “He’s expecting you.”

“Thank you,” said Gammell.

The housekeeper crossed her arms as she watched them open the door and climb down the stairs to the basement. Verity felt as if she had hot coals for eyes. And suspicious coals at that. She hoped that Gammell didn't plan on staying too long. She had the feeling that if they neared lunch time, the housekeeper might be forced to serve them lunch and there was no telling what the sour old woman would put in their food.

The basement, or what would have been a normal basement, had been converted into a laboratory. The walls were mostly stripped of anything that would have taken up extra space such as decorative plaster or woodwork and instead the walls were lined with water and gas pipes. The main floor was arranged with lab benches which were flat dark tables with cabinets below and shelves attached to the top. Various glass apparatuses were hooked up to water and gas lines and filled with strange colored liquids. There was even a hot plate hooked up with a Bunsen burner and a beaker of water was boiling.

Along the left wall was a shelf filled with bottles of chemicals and a noisy fume hood. The right wall also had shelving, but these shelves were filled with cages. Half of them were empty. The other half held mice and rats of various colors, their red beady eyes peering nervously out onto the lab—some of them so agitated that they were chewing on the metal bars or running in crazed circles in their tiny cages. Next to that shelf was a small desk littered with papers and textbooks.

“Dr. Verne?” Gammell called out.

“Eh?” A figure in a white lab coat, green latex gloves, and goggles peered from behind one of the bench shelves. In each hand, he was holding two test tubes. “Who is it?”

“Nathaniel Gammell.”

“Ah, Mr. Gammell. Is it time for our meeting already? I always lose track of time. Pardon me while I finish up.”

Tiberius Verne poured the clear contents of one tube into the other tube which also contained a clear solution. The liquid immediately turned bright blue. He sighed loudly in satisfaction and placed the two tubes on a nearby tube rack. He wrote something quickly on a notepad.

“So,” said Verne, “did you have trouble finding the house?” He snapped his gloves loudly as he pulled them off and dropped them into a nearby wastebasket. He pulled up his goggles revealing keen dark eyes in older lined face. He was perhaps sixty or seventy but still spry and energetic. He pulled over two folding chairs before dropping into his own seat at his desk.

“We found it easily enough,” said Gammell. “This is my assistant, Verity Tage.”

She shook the scientist's hand. “Pleased to meet you, Ms. Tage,” he said. “Mr. Gammell mentioned that you would be along also.”

She nodded. “And you too, Dr. Verne.”

“So much to do,” Tiberius Verne sighed. “Too much work. Sometimes I think about hiring a technician to help me out, you know? But then I'll have to waste some time training him and you know Janice? You met my housekeeper, Janice, right?”

They nodded.

“Janice is a bit too loyal, I'm afraid. She thinks everyone is trying to spy on my work, trying to figure out what I'm doing to scoop me. But I'm old and a lot of people think this is just a hobby I'm doing so what does she know? No offense to you, Ms. Tage, but women tend to be a bit stubborn and tunnel-visioned, if you know what I mean. She wouldn't even listen to me when I say no one is out to do harm.”

“She's right in a way,” said Gammell. “Not everyone is benevolent.”

“Well, there is that,” said the old scientist reluctantly. “Anyhow, you were here to talk about Samuel?”

“Yes, particularly how he partitioned his estate. We heard that he willed part of it to you.”

Tiberius Verne sighed. “Useless too. It was all junk as far as I'm concerned and I'm an old man myself. What use is it to give me something when I'm already thinking about how to disperse my own things? Samuel was a fanatical collector. He had to buy an entire warehouse in the business district to hold his stuff.”

“We also heard that he willed a particular object that he used to own to you.”

“Oh?” He eyed the two of them speculatively. “Exactly why are you looking for Samuel's former possessions?”

“I'm a consultant to one of the antique dealers in the city. We're on a job to help track it down,” said Gammell.

“You should tell your client that all Samuel collected was junk. I only hired an antique dealer myself to help survey what was valuable and what was not. To sell it off, you know. I don't want to keep

all that junk.”

“My client was looking for an antique mirror of unusual design. It is supposed to be titanium.”

“You’re looking for that one, are you?” The scientist folded his hands across his abdomen. “I don’t have it anymore.”

“Did you sell it?” asked Verity.

“In a manner,” said Verne. “That mirror was quite unusual. I noticed right away that it had strange optical properties. I called in my friend, Miram Greene who has a hobby in optics. I think he studied physics on the side when he had been in college and helped design a better microscope for laboratory use. Anyways, we looked at it up and down and couldn’t figure out at the time what sort of material it was except that it did resemble polished titanium to an extent. But titanium doesn’t have selective reflective properties.”

“You gave the mirror to this friend of yours?” said Gammell. His features were carefully schooled not to show any recognition at the name.

“Actually, no. Miram suggested to have the mirror appraised by an antiques dealer first and so I called up Colbrin. I didn’t really like that mirror anyways so I had it removed by Colbrin and told him to transfer whatever he got for it to my account. At the time, I also thought it was a good idea to also hire him to appraise the rest of the things I got from Samuel.”

“But your friend specialized in optics. Didn’t he want to buy it from you because of its curious properties?”

“If he did buy it, he probably bought it off from Colbrin. By the time the mirror left this house, I lost interest in it. I only remembered it again when you mentioned it today.”

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## Chapter 34 – Execution

“Good luck trying to track it down,” said Tiberius Verne as he shook their hands again and showed them out of the laboratory.

Back out in the foyer, the housekeeper was nowhere to be found, but as they were about to step toward the door, the doorbell rang. Verity’s skin prickled in alarm.

“Drat,” muttered Verne, “Where is Janice when you need her?”

“Our car is actually closer to the back,” said Verity. “Do you have a back door.”

“Yeah, sure. Just go down here and through the kitchen. Can’t miss it.”

Gammell slanted her an inquiring look, but didn’t protest when she pulled him insistently toward the back of the house. The foyer led into a dining room which directly fed into the kitchen. Everything seemed dusty and disused. What was the use of a housekeeper if everything couldn’t be kept clean? As Verity reached the back door and tugged it open letting in a stream of cold air, they heard voices back in the foyer.

“Ah, I didn’t know you would be dropping by today. In fact, I was just talking about you two to some of my visitors. Maybe you could meet them if their not gone already,” said Verne. “Hello?” As the old scientist stepped into the kitchen, they had already shut the back door. “Drat. They are already gone.”

“What was that all about?” said Gammell.

Verity shook her head. “There was something about those other visitors. Something’s not right.”

They rounded into the little alleyway between the houses, but once they were in sight of street side, Verity abruptly stopped and Gammell nearly crashed into her. “What is it now?”

“Shh.”

A group of cowed figures in dark robes were gathered at the doorstep of Tiberius Verne’s house. They were standing in a loose, strange formation. The door to the house opened and two more hooded figures, one much taller than the other, were hauling out the struggling form of the scientist.

“Get your hands off me, you traitorous thugs!” shouted Verne. “What have I ever done to you?” He tried flailing his arms, but the figures held him fast.

Another figure suddenly came flying out of the house, wailing like a banshee. It was the housekeeper. She pounded her ineffective fists on the smaller hooded figure holding the scientist, but he only slapped her hard with the back of his free hand. The housekeeper landed in the snow, sobbing and raging. She got up again for another attack, but the smaller figure made a strange gesture and the other figures standing around took hold of the screaming and cursing old woman.

In the falling snow, they saw one of the figures detaching from the group to take hold of Tiberius Verne's head. At first, it looked as if he was performing a strange blessing ritual on the old scientist, but then there was a quick twisting motion and a sickening crack. Verne's body went completely limp and the old woman screamed and wailed even louder on the silent street, her crackling voice echoing eerily in the cold air. None of the neighbors deigned to look outside to see what was happening.

The figure who had broken Verne's neck quickly strolled toward the housekeeper and slapped her hard into a whimper. This time he did not even bother with the ritual. There was another quick movement and a snap in the stillness. Two more figures detached from the group holding out large brown cloth bags. The bodies were shoved into these and two people each carried each body, stretched out from shoulder to shoulder as if they were carrying so much lumber.

The cowled figures then proceeded down the street, in the opposite direction to where Gammell and Verity were originally headed.

Verity had chewed her bottom lip to stop from crying out in shock. Her heart was still pounding wildly and she heard her blood hammering in her ears. Gammell took her arm and pulled her back.

"This way," he whispered.

They used the connected backyards of the houses to head down the block. They sprinted nervously from yard to yard, all of them filled already with a foot or two with snow. But it was still snowing and even as they made footprints across the white, they were already being filled back in until they were no more than slight imperfections on the blanket of snow. It was also to their luck that none of the people who lived on the street looked out of their windows to observe them. Or perhaps they couldn't—it was still early morning and perhaps they were all still asleep.

Once they reached the alleyway where Gammell parked his small black compact car and got inside, Verity breathed hard, shaking. Gammell locked the doors, his head laid back on his seat trying to calm his own accelerated breathing.

"We could have been..."

"Try not to think too hard about it," he advised. "It will probably only make you feel worse."

She felt her breathing eventually slow down. He had still not started the car. "Who were they?" She hugged her arms to herself, her face feeling numb from the cold. Her eyes felt full but dry.

"They could have simply been common criminals or a cult of some sort," he said. "But somehow I doubt it. Why target Tiberius Verne? I don't think that this is so random, especially since we just finished visiting with him."

"I read some patient reports in the archive some weeks before," she said. "These reports were, what, fifty years old, but one of the patients reported seeing a gathering of cult members of some sort. Actually he said that they weren't exactly a cult as we know it per se, but that they were worshippers of a sort. Worshippers of the thing you have often mentioned about. Some unnamable and unexplainable thing."

"Perhaps it is that."

"Where are they going?"

"I don't know. But I don't think it's a good idea to follow them at this juncture. We don't know what we're up against and we're not prepared at all. Something in the back of my mind tells me that I have read something somewhere that relates to this. We're going back to look through my books." He started the engine and eased his car out of the alleyway to the street.

Verity stared out onto Lisdon. The street was white with snow, pristine, as if nothing had ever happened just before. "We should call the police."

"The police won't do anything, Verity. You should know after what happened to Pelorus. It's the holiday. They're only going through the motions. They won't be serious until the new year starts. Besides, what are they going to do if we just report we saw two murders by a bunch of hooded individuals? There are no bodies, no clues, no proof."

"At least we could tell them."

"I still don't think it's a good idea. What if it somehow got back to them that we saw it all?"

She shivered. She didn't want to think about what would happen to her or Gammell if they found them. She felt as if she were being sucked into some underground, insane world where nothing was safe or sure anymore. "I guess you're right."

As they drove through the small streets of the Old Quarter and then back to Avtandil to head back out of the city, Verity had a thought that made her heart feel like it was a pulsating piece of ice.

"Do you suppose that Tiberius Verne accidentally gave our names to them? He also mentioned

that he talked about them to us during our conversation.”

Gammell’s hands slightly tightened on the steering wheel. “You mean you think they, Verne’s supposed friends, are in this? I sincerely hope he completely forgot about us after we left.”

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## Chapter 35 – Knock

They spent the rest of the morning and part of the afternoon going through Gammell’s books and the journal that Verity had found. They found no mention of anything remotely like the group of people they had witnessed in Lisdon.

“The archives,” said Gammell as he sat beside Verity on the living room couch. She was half-heartedly leafing through the index of a history textbook. “You said that you read about it in the old patient files.”

“Yes, but these patients only had glimpses like we did ourselves. They didn’t know anything factual about them. They mostly superimposed their own fears and ideas of what they thought they were doing.”

“But you didn’t go through all the files.”

“No. I still have a pile in my office. I was thinking about filing those after the holidays. But if there’s anything there, we could go see. I have the keys to the institute and the archives themselves.”

They drove to the Rothburne Institute. From the outside, the windows looked dark as if the building was still deserted. But surely, someone was up at this time of day? Surely some of the crew still on duty during the holidays was looking after some of the patients? The institute was locked still and Verity had to use her key.

The front lobby was dimly lit, but it wasn’t completely empty. The fat bewhiskered custodian was on the floor slowly mopping the tiles in wide random circles. It was the holiday. Shouldn’t he be on break? The oddness of the custodian sent prickles of acute awareness across Verity’s skin. She quickly traversed the floor to the corridor with the stairs leading down to the archives. The custodian never looked up to greet them even though the sound of their footsteps were loud in the silence.

The door to the archives was already unlocked and the lights on.

“Someone’s here,” said Gammell.

She tried to shake off her uneasiness. “Everyone should be off from work. What’s so important about today?”

“I don’t know.”

They went inside. Verity gave a quick furtive glance at the sub-basement door. It was firmly closed. In the glassed in offices, she saw that Bob was sitting at his desk intently watching his computer screen. At the noise of their entrance, he looked up startled and a strange expression briefly crossed his thick face. But it soon disappeared when he pasted on a smile and waved to them.

Verity waved back.

“I don’t think it’s a good idea to say hello to him,” whispered Gammell in her ear. “He’s usually agitated when I’m around—before you were hired, I was mostly left alone because of Quinn. I didn’t like his pity, but at least he was sympathetic enough to have me left to my own devices.”

“Why don’t you like Bob?”

“Call it intuition, but I just don’t feel comfortable with him around. And today, he seems even, I don’t know what the word is for it, but there’s something more to him. As if he is hiding something. Or it could just be my own paranoia.”

“Well, I admit its sort of strange seeing him around on the holidays.”

They went into Verity’s office and closed the door. They took off their coats and draped them on a nearby chair. She hauled a pile of files she had kept on the floor next to her desk onto the tabletop. As they both reached for the top files, there was a knock at the door. Gammell quickly withdrew his hand and leaned back in the chair he was sitting in across from Verity. She took the folder and watched as the door opened and Bob poked his head in.

“Afternoon, Verity. Working on a holiday?”

“Of sorts,” she said.

“Well, don’t work too hard. It’s time to relax.”

“You should too. Weren’t you working?”

“I just remembered that I had forgotten something and was just retrieving it,” said Bob dismissively. His gaze landed on Gammell who wasn’t smiling but was watching the male archivist closely, almost suspiciously. Bob frowned. “What’s he doing here?”

“I’m just helping Gammell do some research.”

“You’re being too nice to him,” he said bluntly.

“It’s sort of rude to ignore a friend’s request, isn’t it?” she replied coolly.

“A fiend,” he said directly to Gammell. He didn’t flinch at Bob’s blatant derision. “What’s wrong with you, having to go through some wild goose chase even during the holidays? I bet you called her this morning to get her out of bed to open the archives for you. You should be locked up.”

“So do you think that my session with the good doctor upstairs isn’t enough?” said Gammell quietly. Verity felt her hands tighten on the folder she was holding. If Bob said anything more inflammatory, she was sure Gammell would do something physically rash.

“No, I don’t think it’s enough.” Then he turned back to Verity. “I don’t think it’s a good idea that I leave you alone with him.”

“It’s all right, Bob. I’ve been with him the past couple of days. I trust him.”

“The past couple of days? What have you two been doing?”

“Mostly celebrating the holidays.”

Bob rolled his eyes. “Whatever you say. If you say you’re all right with being with this kook, who’s to argue with you? Good day Verity.”

She let out a breath when he closed the door. “He’s certainly in a bad mood today.”

“It’s me,” said Gammell. “I put a lot of people in a bad mood.”

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By the time they had read through all of those files, Verity felt her stomach grumbling. She was hungry and they still had not found what they were looking for. She suggested that they head to her house for dinner since it was closer. Verity locked up the archives. Up in the reception area, it was empty again. The custodian was nowhere to be seen.

Gammell drove them to Finsen. The sky was getting darker and the moon, or what was left of it, was a bare sliver. It had stopped snowing and the heavy clouds that had been overhead the entire day had blown away further inland. The interior of Verity’s house was cold and besides the light, she flipped on the heating. She was glad that the warm air from the vents started in the kitchen and dining area. The first thing he did after he took off his coat was to go to the kitchen to look in her fridge.

“You really like green peppers, don’t you?” he said pointing to a large bag filled with the green vegetables stuffed on the top rack.

“Um, well, they were on sale,” she said.

He gave her a teasing grin. “That’s not a very good excuse,” he said, “but I’ll see what I can do about it.” He took several of the green peppers and then a slab of roast from the freezer to defrost.

“Can’t I do anything?” she said. “I sort of feel left out if I’m only setting the table.”

“You can boil some water. And you must have a pan somewhere. Do you also have some noodles?”

Verity found all of these utensils and ingredients when there was a loud knock on the back door. She froze in mid-step. “I’m sure they don’t know where I live. No one knows where I live except you.”

“If it’s them, don’t open the door.” He was chopping the peppers with a long, sharp knife. His fingers tightened over the handle.

Nervously, she drew the curtain of the backdoor window. The next door neighbor in her fur coat stood in the doorstep. She took a deep breath and opened the door.

“I just want to borrow a cup of sugar,” the middle-aged woman said.

“Come in. I’m sure I have some sugar somewhere.” Verity closed the door when the woman stepped inside. She peeked into the kitchen spying Gammell chopping up the vegetables.

“Actually, don’t bother about the sugar,” her neighbor said. “I was just being nosy. I wanted to see what your apartment looked like.”

Suddenly amused, Verity said, “It’s exactly the same as yours in terms of layout, isn’t it?”

“Yes, but well, as I said before, I’m nosy. And you’re lucky to catch one that cooks for you.”

“Oh? You mean Gammell?”

The woman nodded. “What sort of name is Gammell anyway?”

“That’s his last name. His first name is Nathaniel.”

“Why don’t you call him by his first name?”

She shrugged. “I guess I’m used to calling him that. I’m Verity, by the way.”

“I’m Fala.”

“You’re welcome to stay for dinner.”

“Truly?”

“Of course. Apparently I have a surplus of vegetables sitting in the fridge.”

“That sounds nice.” Fala took off her fur coat and put it on the back of one of the dining room chairs and sighed as she sat down. Verity noticed that the woman, despite her garish makeup and thinning hair, wore a stylish white sweater of soft wool and pleated slacks fit for a woman socially from the upper crust. A silver chain with an iron crow pendant hung from her neck. She went into the kitchen to take up the dishes to set the table.

“I hope another person isn’t putting too much burden on you,” said Verity. “I can help.”

“No, I’m okay,” said Gammell. He had dumped the vegetables in the pan and was beginning to cut up the meat. “She seems all right for a nosy neighbor.”

“It’s a difficult thing, to find a man who cooks,” said Fala as Verity emerged from the kitchen and placed the dishes on the table. “I haven’t found one so far. But if I do, I’d latch onto him and won’t let him get away.”

“I don’t think most men like to be chained up in a relationship.”

The woman winked. “I’ll make it worth his while. When I wake up, I’ll make love to him to make him forget any thoughts about leaving and then he’ll have to make me breakfast in bed.”

Verity felt the heat creep up her face again, but she said, “That doesn’t sound like a bad deal.”

“No, not a very bad deal at all.”

“So have you lived in this neighborhood long?”

“I’ve lived in Monteport all my life,” she said. “But this time of the year makes me itch to go out somewhere, elsewhere. It gets worse every year, to tell you the truth. But there’s only a few days left until the new year. That’s when the feeling usually goes away.”

“Maybe it’s some sort of seasonal disorder,” said Verity.

“Perhaps. Sometimes I like to go to the museum to calm myself down, though. You should go if you haven’t.”

“Isn’t the museum closed during the holidays?”

Fala chuckled. “Closed? Not if you have the key. I work there as a curator of the ancient civilization exhibits. Really old, fascinating stuff. Did you know that back before Monteport was truly colonized and built up, there were people already living here worshipping old, unnamed gods? Actually, I’m not sure if I would call them gods. More like beings or things or something with some sort of sentience. But that’s just me. There’s also some interesting exhibits on the history of a hundred years ago that the museum has just put up. It’s a hit with a lot of patrons.”

Something in the back of Verity’s mind stirred. Was it intuition? “Gammell and I have been doing some research on the history of Monteport,” she said. “I work in the archives of the Rothburne Institute but so far we haven’t really found much.”

“The museum has some archives in the basement,” said Fala. “Tell you what, you can come with me tomorrow to take a brief look around as payment for the dinner you so graciously offered. I was going the museum anyway. If you’ve noticed, I don’t like staying in my own house. The museum is like a haven for me.”

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## Chapter 36 – Museum

“Well, here we are.” Fala dropped the stub of her cigarette and stomped it out with the heel of her shoe.

The Monteport Museum was a large square block that appeared to be carved out of singularly large granite boulder. Columns and stairs rose up from all sides as if this itself was some place of worship. A purple banner was unfurled on the front proclaiming the museum’s latest exhibit. The museum itself was on southwest Seadoch, past the city park. A large parking lot, not entirely empty, surrounded the building so that its nearest neighbors, a couple of small offices, were quite some distance away.

Verity and Gammell had followed Fala's sleek vehicle to the museum and now they were standing in its shadow and surrounded by slushy snow. They were right beside a small, almost hidden door at the side of the building which had a tiny black and white sign over it that said "Employees Only." Fala took out her key and gave the doorknob a quick yank.

Inside, they found themselves on a dark landing. Narrow stairs led up and down.

"Ah, isn't it fabulous?" Fala took in a deep breath of air before coughing loudly.

"Are you okay?" asked Verity.

The middle-aged woman waved her off. "I'm fine. I shouldn't be breathing too hard. Anyways, it's downstairs."

Down one flight of stairs, she opened another door which led into a darkened corridor lined with clear display cases lit up by interior lights. Some of them were table-like cases holding objects like old jewelry and pens and decorative objects. Some of the cases were taller than a person and held faceless dummies modeling old clothing from perhaps about a hundred, two hundred years ago. Dresses were of yellowing lace and chiffon and dulled pearls. Men's suits were starched and creased by still looked delicate as if one touched them, they would crumble into dust. There were some paintings also hanging on the walls, dark, swirling oils and watercolors, the style indicative of their era.

Along the floor, a cubby custodian was brandishing a broom.

"Hey, how are you doing?" called out Fala. "I thought you guys were already done for the holiday."

The custodian looked up and Verity felt her pulse suddenly race when she recognized the slightly bloating face and the moustache. "Just cleaning after all you people who come in when you're not supposed to," he replied. He glanced at Fala's companions and even in the dim light, she saw something cross his face. Was it surprise?

They followed Fala to the end of the room which had another locked door. Inside was completely dark. Fala flipped a switch near the door and the light bathed a low ceiling room filled with shelves and drawers, all labeled meticulously with letters and numbers in some unknown system.

"That custodian, I saw him before," Verity whispered to Gammell.

"Are you sure?"

"Positive. What's he doing here?"

"Perhaps the Rothburne Institute and the museum hire the same company to clean up."

Verity frowned skeptically and tried to push the matter out of her mind. Surely it was coincidence, wasn't it?

"Is there anything I can help you look for?" said Fala.

"This ancient religion you mentioned before," said Verity. "Do you have any records of their rituals, what they did, and so on?"

"Our records are far from being complete." Fala took off her fur coat and draped it over her arm as she walked into the lines of shelves toward the back of the room. Verity and Gammell followed her. "We know they used to worship something. There are some pottery shards and some stone tablets with something carved on them, but we're not sure if it's actually writing or some sort of decoration. See for yourself."

The curator stopped at one of the back shelves and pulled out one of the drawers. She took out a stone tablet with a curious, unnatural script. "But isn't that ancient?" said Verity. "We're not supposed to touch it since it might be fragile, right?"

"Those are just rumors to frighten the masses so they won't come loot the museum if they get a hankering for stealing something," shrugged Fala. "This has survived for thousands of years. I don't think a little handling will cause it to crumble into dust." She dropped the tablet into Verity's hands. It felt smooth except for the letters which were carved on it. Those felt sharp. "Scholars have been studying these things for who knows how many years and they still haven't deciphered it. Maybe it's indecipherable. Maybe it's nothing more than decoration."

"No, it's decipherable," said Gammell.

"It is?" said Fala surprised.

"Perhaps the scholars you consulted were poor at languages or didn't want to decipher it for you. This looks like a sort of prayer tablet. It's an ode to the one that must not be named. Quite tame, actually."

"It's the same kind of writing on the back of the mirror," said Verity.

"What mirror?" asked Fala.

"Gammell's mirror. It's a family heirloom," she lied, not wanting to say that she had found it.



“Huh. That’s interesting. Maybe you can come down later after the new year and help us decode all of this that we have down here.”

Gammell raised an eyebrow.

“The museum will pay you of course,” Fala added hastily. “Didn’t you say once that you were a consultant of some sort?”

“Yes.”

Fala nodded enthusiastically. “Wonderful. You must come back. At any rate, we don’t have any actual artifacts that pertain to the rituals and the cult that you spoke of earlier. But we do have a book on the subject. A really old manuscript, and unlike these stone tablets, it’s quite fragile. You need gloves to touch it.”

Verity handed the tablet back to the curator to place back into the drawer. They followed Fala further down the shelves to a bookcase filled with ancient books with weathered bindings. There was a small table with a wooden box nearby. Fala opened the box and took out three pairs of white cloth gloves and handed one pair to her companions. The curator put hers on and selected one of the books near the top shelf. It was a large square volume with a leather binding. The corners were worn away, but the edges of the pages still gleamed with gold. Fala opened the cover and turned the first stiff thick page which crackled in the quiet air.

“This book was initially produced in the old country,” said Fala. “And then it was shipped here when one of the older families settled in the city. This text is mostly a compendium about the strange practices of the unsettled lands at the time. This book is about five hundred years old.”

She turned a page and they could see that the printing of the book was an odd blocky form with curving serifs. The spellings were odd too which probably helped date it back five centuries. Fala stopped at a page that was titled, “Unmentionables.”

“I’ve read this chapter before,” said Fala, “But I’ve often puzzled over it. There’s nothing in contemporary times that I know of that would compare to it and there is no concrete evidence about it. Basically, what it’s trying to say is that this reality is only one of many. I guess it’s more like many different parallel worlds, some that could be similar and some that are utterly different. There are places in each world where the barrier is thinner than most and this is where things can pass from one place to another.”

“That sounds like fantasy,” said Verity, “or the theories of a very deluded physicist.”

“Well, who knows what they believed back in those times,” said Fala. “Science wasn’t as developed and superstition was as common as, well, common sense. Anyways, what this says is that some parts of this country is weaker than others. It even specifically mentions the East Tower.”

“The East Tower is five hundred years old?” asked Gammell.

“No, it’s older than that. I think they picked that place because it was interface between water and land. There are a couple pages of mumbo jumbo in this book about the special properties of interfaces and such,” said Fala. “The East Tower was here for a long time, even before the old families came to settle in Monteport. Of course, back then, the East Tower was more like a pile of rocks than an actual tower. It was only the later generations that built it.”

“And what about the West Tower?” asked Verity.

“The West Tower is actually a very recent landmark, maybe about two or three hundred years old. It was built for surface symmetry. Before that, there was only one tower. But the East Tower, that was where the barrier between these worlds or realities was thinner and there would often be people who go there to see if they could commune with Aunat, the Nameless One. And there would be others who would go there to commune with their own spirits or gods. Some even said that the barrier only led into one kind of reality—the reality that would make one mad because it was never meant for any human comprehension.”

“And what do you think about it?” said Gammell.

Fala closed the book and tapped her gloved fingers on the cover. “I’ve been to the East Tower a couple of times. I typically don’t go to the Old Quarter, it makes me uneasy, but I had to go to the tower to see if what some people said about being closer to Aunat was true.” She paused for a moment and then took the book up in her arms to put it back on the shelf. “But the East Tower, especially if you go inside where the reservoir is or up on top, is far from being religiously enlightening. I found it terrifying.” She then shrugged. “Or maybe I was just afraid of heights.”

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## Chapter 37 – Lock and Key

The three of them spent the next couple of hours going through some of the manuscripts that the museum had kept in storage on the shelf. They found little, if anything, on any sort of strange unmentionable religions that had started in Monteport before the Nameless One and his followers dominated religious life in the country.

“Well, I’m sorry I couldn’t find anything definitive for you,” said Fala.

“That’s quite all right,” said Gammell. “We’ve actually learned some things even if it had not been what we were looking for in the first place.”

Fala laughed. “Ready to go? I could go for a smoke myself.”

They headed back toward the front of the museum archives. Gammell reached the door first and he gave the knob a tug. It wouldn’t budge. “Is it locked?” he asked.

“Here, let me try it,” said Fala. “Maybe it closed itself when we went in.” She pulled on her fur coat first and pushed up the sleeves before giving the door a good hard yank. It still did not budge. She reached in her pocket to get out her key. “That’s odd. I know it doesn’t lock itself. It’s not designed that way. I don’t think someone else locked us in—I mean the only other person who saw us was the custodian and I don’t think he was the key to this place—only the employees who need access to this place has the key.”

“Maybe it was someone else?” suggested Verity.

“Could be, although it seems highly unlikely,” replied Fala. “The others don’t go to the archives often and they wouldn’t even know that it was unlocked.” She pushed the key into the keyhole and let out a loud screech as her hand immediately jerked away as a spark enveloped the knob and the key. The key fell onto the floor with a clatter. Fala wrung her hand, squinting in pain.

“Are you all right?” said Verity. She took her hand to examine it for any burn marks. There weren’t any.

“Fine, fine,” said Fala quickly. “I think it was just static electricity.”

Gammell picked up the key and tried to put it in the lock. He let out an oath as another spark touched him. He took the key again and gave it to Fala. “I don’t think locks are supposed to be like that. Did the museum install some sort of new security device?”

“Not that I know of,” said Fala.

Verity briefly touched the knob. It felt cool, but there was a sense of wrongness about it. She was suddenly sure that someone had tampered with it while they were in the back of the archives doing research. “Are we stuck here?” she asked.

“Well, now that you say it, there is another exit near the back,” the curator said. “It would be fire hazard if we only had one door. Over here. We can’t possibly have bad luck twice.”

They went to the back and sure enough there was another door hidden behind an empty dusty shelf. They shoved it away and Fala took another key and unlocked it without shock. She pushed the door open and they found themselves in a dark unused stairwell.”

“Hm,” murmured Fala. “I always knew there was a door back here, but I haven’t been back here before. Something handy to know. And I’ll have to remember to alert maintenance about the problem with the main door.”

They walked up the flight of stairs and out the first door and found themselves at the back of the museum on the parking lot. There were only two cars left on the lot, both of them on the side of the building. One was Fala’s and the other was Gammell’s. It was snowing again and Verity wondered when all the precipitation would stop. Or maybe it wouldn’t stop at all and the whole city would be covered in white ice if spring even bothered to come.

“I’m going south to meet up with a friend of mine,” said Fala. She took out a cigarette from her pocket and lit it with a lighter. She puffed heavily and sighed with satisfaction. “So you don’t have to wait up for me. It was really nice seeing you today, even if we didn’t get to find what you were looking for.”

Verity nodded. “Same here.”

“So you two heading home?”

“Yes,” she replied. “And then we might visit the East Tower again. We’ve never been to the top or the inside.”

“Visually, it’s not too interesting. It’s only something an architect would love.” Fala shook her head and breathed out a stream of smoke. “They say that the Unnamed Days are unlucky days.”

“I thought you didn’t subscribe to superstition,” said Gammell.

“I don’t. But there are some things I do know.” Fala reached back and took the chain with the crow pendant off her neck and placed it over Verity’s head.

Verity touched the crow pendant which felt warm. “You shouldn’t of. I’m not particularly religious.”

“Think of it as a gift. A protection charm.” Fala smiled wearily. “Stories say that during the Unnamed Days, Aunat leaves this world altogether and waits until the new year. I take to a different theory. Aunat, the nameless one, is still here, but he’s just sleeping. He knows what’s happening in his dreams.”

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“Do you remember what they said?” murmured Verity as they entered Gammell’s lighthouse and took off their coats. “The fifth day. The fifth hour before. It’s the fifth hour before the new year. Perhaps that is the time when the distinction between here and there becomes so thin that we can simply walk across from one place to another.”

“You’re beginning to sound as crazy as me.”

“Are you afraid that I am?”

“No.”

Gammell went back to the kitchen to boil some water in the stove. Agitated, Verity paced the living room wondering what was happening, where things were happening, when things were happening. Was everything going to end? And if they did nothing and just stayed at home like every other normal person, would they wake up with another new year? Or would things be so changed that life would be drastically different, that there wouldn’t be any sort of life?

Something on the edge of her mind whispered. She shook her head. She was not hearing anything.

“Did you say something?” called out Gammell from the kitchen. He strolled out and looked at her.

“No, I didn’t say anything.”

They were quiet for a moment. The whispers—they were definitely there. And they were getting louder. Verity turned her head in attempt to discern where it was coming from. She began to climb the stairs to the second floor. The whispers were coming from the bedroom that they had taken to sharing.

Verity’s duffle bag was lying on the floor underneath the window overlooking the winter sea. She unzipped the bag and shoved past a sweater to get at the leather pouch. She lifted it out of the duffle bag and took out the mirror. Gammell had followed her upstairs and was standing beside her. Verity had turned the reflecting glass face up. It didn’t reflect their images. It didn’t even reflect the room around them. Instead, the mirror was completely black and the surface looked textured and rippled. The whispering was loud, almost distinct.

“What are they saying?” she said.

“Time, here, there, now. It’s a mixture of things, warnings and prophecies of things to come. At first I thought the voices were all in my mind.”

“I had thought so too.” She held out her free hand over the mirror. Was it just her eyes playing tricks on mind again or did the mirror itself warp in a convex fashion trying to meet with her hand?

“Don’t touch it,” said Gammell.

She quickly turned the mirror over to prevent herself from giving into the temptation. The strange, obliquely angled writing was on the back. But had it changed again?

“That’s odd,” he said. “I swore it said something else before.”

“No, it’s not you. This is actually the second time that the writing has changed.”

He was silent for a moment before he said, “Soon. Whether it is fate that will take a turn or a set of choices that will be presented to us, it’ll be happening soon.”

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## Chapter 38 – Fifth Hour

The evening of the last Unnamed Day would have been beautiful if she weren’t trapped in a small

black compact car heading deep into the Old Quarter with only the vague notion that something was going to happen. Something utterly wrong and horrible.

That morning, she had awoken early, staring up at the ceiling of Gammell's bedroom, wondering if what she had found would abruptly end. The previous evening, the whispers had stopped when she put the mirror back into its pouch. The whispers were still quiet during the morning, but some fear lodged in her throat—those urgent voices beckoning, persuading her to chuck everything and to go to a place. Elsewhere.

She had turned and to her surprise found Gammell still asleep. Had she awoken too early or was he sleeping too late? He slept on his back, one arm to his side, the other bent across his abdomen. She tugged the sheet down slightly to watch his bare chest move up and down with his rhythmic breathing. She reached out to put her hand over his heart and then moved up to cup his chin and to trace his angular cheekbones. She had thought that he looked so young when he was asleep.

“What are you doing?” His voice was still rough from sleep, but his eyes were closed.

She jerked her hand away. “Memorizing you.”

He turned his head and opened his eyes. “Why?”

The fear in her throat grew larger. “I don't want you to leave.”

“I'm not going anywhere.” He reached out to pull her to him. His mouth touched her forehead. “I'm not letting you go. Don't you know that?”

She gave a small laugh. “You make me sound like a small pet that needs to be kept on a leash at all times.”

His fingers traced the pulse on her neck. “You're not a small pet. You're part of me. Sort of like an arm or a leg or a lung. I wouldn't want to let any of those go, but if I lost them, life would definitely not be the same.”

“That's not exactly a romantic metaphor, but that's a strong admission to make.” She gave him a small smile. “Well, whatever happens, I'll remember your words.”

The moon had completely disappeared. It was a new moon. Instead, the stars were out in the firmament, unblinking silver points. The dark sky wasn't quite clear. There were wisps of clouds snaking overhead in oilish forms. It was as if one was looking overhead into some celestial brew of unknown contents, boiling and fuming. The air itself had been crisp and cool. Although there was snow and ice on the ground, there was no indication that it would precipitate any time soon.

Gammell drove to Bilemot and parked one block away from the East Tower which loomed in the darkness, erect and ominous. A scattering of light could be seen from the top of the tower. Someone was there.

Verity felt completely unprepared. What was to happen? What would happen? Would they be able to do what they were supposed to do? The thought that Gammell had the small strange mirror in his coat pocket did nothing to calm her fears. She vaguely had an idea what it was for, but had no clue as to whether that idea was right or completely wrong.

They walked down the block toward the East Tower. There was no wind but the air stung the cheeks anyway. The neighborhood of the Old Quarter was quiet and dark and silent. It was as if all the inhabitants had packed up after Fasting Day and had left to southern climes. Or they had all died. Or they had all simply disappeared.

Verity shoved her hands deeper into her coat pockets and toyed with the small knife she had normally kept before. She had retrieved it from the wastebasket of her bathroom when they had visited her apartment again briefly. Gammell didn't know she had it, but he needn't have worried anyway. She wasn't planning on using it on herself.

The door to the tower was closed, but with the push of the hand, it opened a crack and they slipped through. The stairway was dark.

“Verity?” said Gammell.

“Hm?”

“I want you to go back. I'm supposed to do this myself. You just moved here and got swept along.”

“What are you talking about? I'm going with you.”

“I don't want you to get hurt.”

“Gammell.” She reached out to take hold of his arm. She faced him in the darkness, face heated in growing anger, but her voice was quiet. “Gammell, we all get hurt at one time or another, sooner or later. You told me that you wouldn't leave me. It works both ways. I won't leave you.”

“Stubborn aren’t you?” He sighed audibly. “All right. I have a feeling that if I said no, you’d be following me anyway.”

They proceeded up the stairs and a chanting noise filtered through, getting louder and louder as they neared the door that led up to the top of the tower. Carefully, he opened the door a crack and peered through.

“It looks like some sort of ceremony.”

“Who’s there?”

“See for yourself.”

He moved aside to let her see. Through the crack, she could see a wide platform at the top of the tower that overlooked the arching aqueduct. It was lit with scattered stands holding glowing but smokeless coals. The similar figures liked the cowed ones that waited in front of Tiberius Verne’s house stood along the platform in a loose formation. One member stood away from the group beside an object veiled with a long piece of dark cloth. That member was familiar with his balding hairstyle and well-etched features.

“What is Miram Greene doing there?” she whispered.

“I don’t...”

But Gammell didn’t have a chance to finish. Something had come over their mouths and someone had ruthlessly pulled their hands back and shoved them out of the door and onto the tower platform.

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## Chapter 39 – The Reflecting Eye

Verity tripped and fell down to her knees, hard. She let out a pained grunt, but whoever shoving from behind didn’t care and hauled her back to her feet only to propel her forward into the crowd of hooded strangers, presumably staring past her impassably. Gammell similarly struggled, but he did not put up too much of a fight. They were sadly outnumbered.

This was stupid, thought Verity. Why hadn’t they come prepared with a group of their own or at least the police? She thought of the small knife in her pocket. She might be able to use it once, but not more than that. There were too many people and she had no way of gauging any of her opponents’ strengths underneath their concealing cloaks.

The head of the group, otherwise known to most people as Dr. Miram Greene turned his head when he noticed the scuffle. Something resembling a smile crossed his face, but Verity found it ugly and terrifying when his gaze fixed on her. But before she could turn her head, one of the shorter cloaked members grasped her face with clawed hands.

“He’s mine!” hissed a voice beneath the cowl. It was the imp-like man Colbrin. She was so close to him that she could smell his foul body odor and nearly gagged. “Mine, mine, mine, mine!”

“Don’t gouge her eyes out yet,” called out Greene. Colbrin dropped his hands and the doctor grinned. Verity shuddered. “Not until I’m done with her.”

“Don’t touch her,” said Gammell. His arms were restrained by two other hooded novices.

Greene turned to look at his former patient. “Why should I listen to you, mad man? You are nothing to me. Perhaps I should keep you around to keep milking money out of your sister, but why should I? I have enough money as it is. And after tonight, I’ll have everything else.”

Gammell glared at him.

Greene laughed. “Speechless, aren’t you? Well, anyways, I have just decided. See this here?” The doctor held up a clear vial of red liquid. “This is my dear old friend Tiberius Verne. He was a bit naïve, you see. He cared too much about his own science and not about the big picture. I once told him about the old religions and he laughed in my face, telling me to go ahead and take up my new hobby in mythology. Mythology! Just imagine.”

“It is mythology,” said Gammell.

The doctor tsked. “A Rothburne of all people does not believe! In all the sessions that we had, don’t tell me that all of what you said was false. Because frankly, I don’t believe you.”

“You told me before that what I said was delusional. That no one would believe me. And now you’re taking back your word?”

“My word can be anything I want,” he said dismissively. “Tell you what, Gammell. I have decided that this would even be better. Tiberius was part of the old family lines even though he wasn’t directly connected to the old rituals. But his line was definitely odd. Right Ms. Tage? His family had

numerous files in the institute archives filled with their own delusions and hallucinations. I thought he was the perfect offering despite his departure from his familial stereotype.”

Verity found herself snarling and she tried to wrestle with her own captors. Colbrin who was standing nearby backhanded her. “I could have your neck easily broken,” the little man hissed.

“You’re crazy,” said Gammell.

“No, you’re crazy,” the doctor replied. “But you’re even better than Tiberius Verne in some ways. You’re the direct descendent of the first Rothburne who came over here. Your family is one of guardians, ones who disrupt the coming of the Other every year. You would be an even better offering to the one who must not be named. Especially this year when there is finally a new moon.”

Gammell tried to move his arms, but the henchmen behind him held fast.

“That’s a futile effort,” remarked the doctor. “All right, me, just put him there across the mirror and leave him. He has no way of escaping except for jumping.”

The hooded figures dragged him over directly across from the covered object and left him on the ground. Gammell stayed there, looking up, seemingly calm. Verity thought of using her knife to create a distraction, to allow Gammell to escape, but when she glanced over at the door leading to the stair on the tower, it was guarded by two more figures.

“Tonight, we will finally see a new era,” announced Miram Greene, his voice ringing across the top of the East Tower. “With our offerings, we will greet our new god and master, one who is not nameless, but unnamable.” Greene pulled off the cover from the object.

Verity winced. The whispering was louder than ever—like cacophonous shouts of massive crowds. But it was just not normal language; it was a strange language with frequencies not meant for normal human ears. She had no doubt that it was coming from the huge body-length mirror. She had seen the frame once before in the Verne Storehouse, but it had been empty of the reflecting mirror itself. But this time, someone had installed the mirror, the one that was supposed to be made of titanium. She was sure, however, it wasn’t titanium or any sort of metal that she knew about. It was completely black and unreflective and it looked like it was moving.

Briefly, Gammell’s eyes met hers. She felt something sizzling down her spine. She still didn’t know exactly what was happening, but he did.

Greene unstopped the vial of blood and drank it quickly. Verity felt her stomach churn in revulsion. The doctor grinned, his mouth bright red. From his cloak, he produced a large dagger. “I never come unprepared,” he mocked at Gammell.

“Neither do I,” Gammell replied. He took out the small mirror that Verity had initially found in the institute archive’s sub-basement and placed it in front of his face.

“What sort of ridiculous thing do you think you’re doing?” smirked the doctor. But then his gaze fell to the non-reflective surface of the small mirror and his smile fell. He cursed and fell to his knees, but his eyes were riveted to the small mirror. Verity belatedly realized that the doctor had found himself between two mirrors, watching a reflection within a reflection.

The doctor let out a high pitched squeal which sent all the hooded followers scattering as far away as possible. Greene clawed the air as if there was something trying to attack him. He surged to his feet and shouted, “No, no, it’s not supposed to be like this...” He backed away toward the larger mirror until he bumped into it. He screamed again and convulsed as if he was being electrocuted. The larger mirror which had been placed at the edge of the platform teetered.

“The mirror!” screeched Colbrin. The imp-like man rushed in panic to save the mirror, but when Green saw him, he gave a shout as if he had spotted another demon and the two began punching and scratching at each other, the cumbersome robes slowing their arm movements and further unbalancing them.

The large mirror finally toppled as Greene stepped too far back. Colbrin gave an outraged and horrified shout, but the two men and the mirror fell over the side. The screams were abruptly silenced.

Verity had been paralyzed, but her mind began to work quickly and she twisted out of her surprised captors’ grasps and brandished her knife. “Get away from me,” she shouted at them.

Gammell slowly stood up, the smaller mirror in his hands. Seeing that the cause of their leader’s death was mobile, the hooded figures shouted and scrambled in their urgency to escape. When the tower platform was finally empty, Verity stuffed her knife back into her pocket. Gammell put the smaller mirror away. She put her arm in his and they stood out looking into the night, waiting for the hour to turn to the new year.

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Chapter 40 – A New Year

Verity stood on the shoreline, not far from the light house, with her coat collar pulled up and her scarf wrapped around her neck and half of her face. Her hat was covering her badly cut hair which was already growing out and the tips of her ears. She stamped her booted feet and watched the winter sea lap along the land. She felt numb, but the feeling only extended as much as her fingers. She had forgotten her gloves.

The afternoon sun of the new year was a bright strong yellow overhead. The clear night had extended into the day. There was no chance of snow at the moment. The sea gently roared in its lulling white noise and then a sudden squawk sounded overhead. She looked up and saw a lone crow flying up from the south.

“I’m sure I’m going to be switched to another doctor who actually will care to cure me,” said Gammell. He was standing beside her, staring out onto the sea. “I’m hoping to convince him that I’m already cured.”

“Maybe you should start convincing your sister first,” said Verity. She clenched her fingers trying to get some feeling back into them.

“Maybe. Perhaps you should come with me when I next visit her. I’m sure she’ll listen to you.”

“You think so?”

“I know so.”

They were silent for a moment. The lone crow had decided to land nearby and was walking toward them, his head wobbling back and forth as he placed one leg in front of the other. He let out a loud greeting caw.

“I forgot my gloves,” Verity said finally. “My fingers are cold.”

“Give me your hands.”

She held out her bare hands which he took in his own gloved hands. He rubbed them and then blew on them. His breath tickled. “About a week ago, my uncle sent me a letter.”

“Oh?”

“I had read it and then promptly forgotten about it with all the things that have been happening. He says that he would like for me to visit.” She paused and then said, “You can come with me if you’d like to.”

“Is that an invitation?”

She nodded.

“Where does he live?”

“Overseas.”

He held her hands. “Are your hands warm now?”

“I wish I hadn’t forgotten those gloves.” She shoved her hands back into her pockets and she looked up at him. His gaze was glinting with humor even if he wasn’t smiling.

“Why don’t we go inside,” he suggested. “I can make the tea.”

“You want to make everything,” she replied.

They both walked back up the beach toward the rough hewn stairs leading up the hill and back toward the lighthouse. The crow standing on the beach watched them disappear over the top step before spreading his wings and taking flight.