

Beads of Horn Silver

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The Old God sleeps
Down in the dark, moist,
Odorous underfoot,
Waiting for us
To put down our roots.

— C. Hue Bumgarner-Kirby

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## **Prologue**

The lunch crowd at *The Black Bean* was large enough for most people to maintain their anonymity. Nonetheless, Mel Ang hid behind the business section of a newspaper that had been left by the previous occupant of her chair. Every few moments, she would peek from the edges of the paper to a point just beyond the salad bar and wince before disappearing back into the depths of black and white. A half eaten chicken sandwich, a tomato and avocado salad, and a glass of apple juice stood stoically untouched by her right hand.

“I didn’t know you had a sudden interest in the stock market.”

Mel slowly lowered the newspaper revealing a disapproving expression of sharp dark eyes and down-turned mouth which was somewhat spoiled by her black hair that had been braided into pig tails. A man, short dark hair—tousled and spiky—wire-framed spectacles, a white t-shirt that said “Tech Geek” plastered on a swimmer’s build, sat opposite of her. He grinned and took a bite out of his own sandwich. Mel mentally counted to three to prevent herself from rolling up the newspaper and bashing him on the head.

“Can’t you see I’m hiding?” Mel stabbed a fork into the salad. “Mad Dog is here.”

“Where?” He turned around to look, but Mel suddenly let go of the salad fork with a clang and grabbed the front of his shirt.

“Stuart. No. He’ll see you.”

He slumped back into his chair when she let go. “What’s the matter with you? He’s just our boss.”

Mad Dog, known as Ralph Bartlett in more professional circles, was the chief editor of the New Halis cultural magazine *Hot Tread*. As his nickname suggested, Mad Dog had a rather formidable and well-deserved reputation for being insanely tenacious.

“A boss that just got back from a vacation,” clarified Mel. “If I hear just one more time about his ecstatic tour to the middle of nowhere and his new found fondness for crab apple jelly, I’m going to scream.”

“Remind me to buy earplugs then,” Stuart replied.

She turned her nose up at him and with an audible rustle of papers, the shield was erected again.

But when she made another furtive peek, her lunch companion said blandly, “I trust you’re being entertained by the prices for ComTech shares?”

“Huh?”

“ComTech,” he repeated.

“For a reporter, you play way too many video games.”

“ComTech is a computer company, not a video game.”

“It’s all the same difference to me.”

“So! Roubere. Ang. This is where you two have been hiding on lunch break,” boomed a loud sonorous voice just above their heads.

Mel gave a small shriek and the newspaper slid to the floor.

A tall beefy man in biker leathers, a swirling dragon tattoo on his right bicep and scraggly blonde hair on his chin and head pulled up a chair at their table and plunked his lunch down. He shoved his sunglasses over his head revealing eyes as gray as the beads on the strange new necklace at his throat. “I have a great idea for the both of you. It came to me while I was standing in line to get lunch.”

“Oh, great,” said Mel.

“Are you sending us overseas?” Stuart asked hopefully. “I’ve always wanted to do a story on…”

“It’s even better than that,” Mad Dog replied. “It’s one of the towns I passed through during my vacation. Gavot. They have the greatest crab apple jelly.”

Mel made a strangled sound at the back of her throat.

The editor ignored the noise. “They also have this strange little harvest festival they hold every year. It was just too bad that I couldn’t stay there to see it. So I figured, why not send you two to cover it? And when you come back, you can tell me all about it. And we’ll get an article about it.”

“Why send the both of us?” Stuart frowned. “Isn’t it small enough for just one person to cover it?”

Mad Dog shook his head. “You know as well as I do that you and Mel work better as a te…”

The editor made a disturbing choking noise as his eyes rolled upward. His head jerked unnaturally. Stuart and Mel made startled exclamations and reached to help. Their hands simultaneously grabbed onto the necklace.

Mad Dog suddenly flailed into a seizure and flung the two away. They let go of the necklace too late and the string holding it together snapped. Gray beads popped and skittered and landed into Mad Dog’s untouched sandwich.

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## Chapter 1 – The Train

Acres of wheat rolled out on the gently sloping land like a golden bobbing ocean, but Mel’s eyes were unfocused as she stared out the train window. A history of the first farm pioneers was propped on her jean clad left leg, spine up, for the moment unread. She had her arms crossed tightly against her with her hands tucked inside the sleeves of her brown sweater making her look like a human knot.

Someone had called the paramedics and Mad Dog had been swiftly taken to the hospital. Since their editor had no close relatives except a sister who was currently out of the country on a scientific expedition to track some great apes and they had no way of contacting any of his biker cronies, Mel and Stuart had ended up in the ER waiting room as proxy relatives. Mel had taken to drinking the sludgy hospital coffee and pacing back and forth. Stuart had made himself an annoyance by inquiring about Mad Dog’s condition every ten minutes or so.

The doctors had managed to stabilize the editor’s seizures, but that was about it. While Mel and Stuart were on the west-bound train to Gavot, Mad Dog remained in an isolated room at the hospital, in a coma. Mel’s mouth slightly twisted as she remembered the first time she and Stuart were finally allowed to go in and see him. Ralph “Mad Dog” Bartlett could act like a bastard at times, but he was a good bastard. He didn’t deserve to be struck down by this strange medical malady that had all the doctors scratching their heads.

The gray beads had been gathered up by an employee of *The Black Bean*. At the moment, they were in a sealed plastic bag in Mel’s tote which was stuffed in an overhead bin.

“Hey, this might look cool.”

Mel shook off her recent memories and looked over at Stuart who was sitting next to her. He was wearing one of his nerd t-shirts again, this time with the logo “Light Squared” and a tiny blue cartoon robot, and an unzipped black leather jacket. He was flipping through one of the magazines he had bought at the newsstand in the New Halis train station. *The New Halis Times*. *The Cordon Quarterly*. *The CompTech Mag*. *Movie Digest*. And *The Quizzler*, a lurid tabloid. Cautiously, she looked over at the page he was indicating. It was a movie review of the latest docu-drama by a famous director.

“I didn’t know you went for that genre,” she said.

He shrugged. “I like the spaceships and explosions like the next guy, but that doesn’t mean that’s the only thing I watch.”

“Huh.”

“Wanna go?”

She looked up from the review she had been skimming. He had never asked her out to a movie before. They were just lunch buddies. A reporter and a photographer who happened to work well together for *Hot Tread*—at least so far. She hadn’t yet tried to actually strangle him like her previous partner, ditz Glenda.

Stuart cleared his throat. “Uh, when we get back from Gavot. I doubt the town is big enough for a movie theater. But I totally understand if you can’t make it.”

She sat back and took up her history book. “It sounds interesting from the review. Sure, why not?” A faint, wry smile flickered across her mouth before she turned to the train window. “It definitely looks like we’re out in the middle of nowhere now.”

“So found anything interesting in that?” he said, inclining his head toward the history book.

“I have to admit, I’ve been bad. I’ve only looked up Gavot in the index and read the referred pages.”

“That’s not bad. I haven’t been doing any research at all, just reading movie reviews.”

Mel tugged the magazine out of his lap revealing a large tome opened to a chapter entitled, *The Political Founders of Gavot and Callas*. “So what’s this?”

“Er, some light reading?”

“Really.” She held up her own book which was a third its size. “And what do you call this?”

“Being sensible?”

If he had been Glenda, she would have already given into her impulse to bean him with the book. But he was grinning and she felt her temper, which to her consternation had the bad habit of flaring up due to anything, ebbing away. “Okay, so I’m being sensible. But you’re not fooling me.”

“But I haven’t even started.”

“That’s page 372.”

“It’s just opened to that page.”

She raised an eyebrow and then said, “I hate it when you do that.”

“Well, you look better annoyed than, whatever you were before. You know and I know that Mad Dog won’t get any better if we end up moping around.”

Mel sighed. “Right.” She opened her book but didn’t read it. “I’m just not the person who has the patience to molder around in books. I just hate the thought that he’s being fed through tubes. I’m itching to do something, Stuart.”

“We’re doing something right now. We’re going somewhere.”

“That’s obvious. But what does a tiny farming town out in the middle of nowhere have anything to do with it? I’m tired of reading about histories. What do any of those old facts have to do with anything happening now? Those natives who got foisted off the land by the farming founders? The politicians from centuries ago who were more concerned with issues concerning survival and religion? What do they have anything to do?”

“There are the beads.”

Mel stopped short. “Ugly things, aren’t they?”

“Hm.”

“Mad Dog wasn’t wearing them before the vacation. I wonder where he got it.”

“Probably some touristy shop that sells junk,” Stuart replied. He flipped a page from the book in his lap. He made a whistling sound through his teeth. “Well, look what’s here. A little chart of the people who’ve been mayor of Gavot that goes back three hundred years.”

“Oh yeah, and that’s going to help.” Mel turned back to her own book and for a little while, both of them just read.

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Chapter 2 – When Architects Go Bad

The timbre of the engine deepened as the train slowed. The spotty brown line bordering the crop fields became a discernable fence. The crops themselves gave way to a lot of green-yellow weeds and oak trees crowned in yellow and orange and red. Mel closed her book as the station came into view, an unattractive concrete building that rose from the weeds like a squinting gargoyle. She reached overhead to grab her tote bag and took out a manual photographer’s camera. She placed it to her eye and took a shot of the station through the train window. It was bad architecture, she mused, even if the design was several decades out of date.

She followed Stuart out of the train with her own bags in tow. The smell of diesel and exhaust outside the train and on the station platform was heavy. Her nose stung, but she didn’t have any free hands to cover her face. She took quicker steps and reached the interior of the station in a few moments. It had

been cool outside, but the station itself was colder. The floor was a dirty concrete worn away by the shuffling of many years worth of shoes. The chairs in the waiting area were neon orange and empty. The counter selling train tickets had an equally garish yellow sign slapped above it. There was still a tinge of exhaust in the air but it was overpowered with something more pungent—a mixture of cigarettes and body odor.

Stuart was ahead of her and had quickly inquired about car rental at the information booth. The tired middle-aged man with a ragged moustache working among the brochures and maps said something that she didn't catch and then waved vaguely in a direction away from the station. Mel grabbed a couple of the brochures and a copy of the town map and stuffed them into her tote before she once again took off on a sprint after him.

"I know this is important, but I didn't think we were in that much of a hurry," she huffed.

He stopped. They now stood on the opposite side of the train station. There was a tiny parking lot in the front which contained ten cars. To the left of the parking lot was a smaller and newer building with a green sign that said "Gavot Car Rental". To the right of the parking lot was a gas station with two pumps and an aging convenient store. From there, a two-lane road stretched into the interior of farm country.

"Sorry. Sometimes I get ahead of myself."

"No. That's not a problem. It's just that, well, you could have at least gotten a map. I'd hate to get lost in the middle of nowhere."

"I have some maps I printed out before we even left New Halis. If you want to look at them, it's in this bag."

"Stuart, you are way too prepared."

"It never hurts to be too prepared."

Stuart had called the car rental company ahead of time to reserve a vehicle. He had only to go into the car rental building to sign some papers and get the keys. They loaded up their bags into the trunk of a small dark blue four-door. When they climbed in and Stuart started the engine, Mel took out the map she had grabbed earlier and squinted at the squiggling lines.

"Where to?" he asked.

"It looks easy enough. We just go down this road and turn right on route seventy-six. Eventually we'll hit the main street."

He nodded and pulled out of the parking lot. Mel looked up momentarily from the map to see a figure coming out of the rental place to see them off. The figure was a long-haired blonde in a tiny pink tube top. Her black miniskirt was even tinier.

"Is that the owner of Gavot Car Rental?" she remarked.

"Hm? Her? I think so. She was real disappointed when I told her I was a reporter and not some hot shot computer programmer. She was hoping I could fix some of her computer problems."

Mel found herself smirking. "I bet."

They first filled the gas tank at the service station across the way before finally taking off. The line of scraggly trees faded away to corn rows as they headed north. The land and sky simply gave way to two bands, one green-yellow, one blue occasionally dotted with white.

"I'm guessing this used to be all forest a couple hundred years ago," murmured Mel, mostly to herself. "A pity that now it's just flat." She sighed, and when her eyes refocused again, something on the horizon made her snap upright. "Stuart! Stop the car!"

Non-perturbed, he pulled the car over to the side of the road and killed the engine. "What is it this time? Don't tell me you're feeling car sick."

"Give me the keys."

Stuart readjusted his glasses and glared at her reprovingly. "You want to drive?"

"What are you talking about?" She pulled her camera out of her tote. "I just want to open the trunk to get the zoom lens." Mel grabbed the keys out of the ignition and climbed out of the car.

He got out of the driver side to peer off into the horizon as his photography partner snapped on the zoom lens to her camera and aimed into the distance. It was rather impressive with the blue sky and straight corn rows, he thought, and there was a single tree out there in the distance, out by itself and made conspicuous by its flaming red leaves. It was a distant fire burning a vast pool of gold.

Stuart's gaze turned back to Mel as she adjusted the lens for another shot. The faintly brisk wind tugged at her loose, black hair. He shook his head a bit to clear it. What had gotten him to ask her to go out with him to see a movie? She seemed like the type to go for artsy fares, not docu-dramas let alone action flicks. And boy, did she have a temper. I'm a masochist, he thought ruefully to himself. But he

couldn't resist pushing buttons.

"Okay, I'm done."

He caught the key she tossed to him. "Next time, a little warning would be nice."

"Gotcha, oh Controller of the Car."

"I'm not that much of a tyrant."

"Oh, I know how it is with guys and their cars."

"This is not my car."

They were back on the road and out of the corner of his eye, he saw her grinning. "But you've got the steering wheel in your hands. However, I have the map."

"Planning on getting us lost?"

"Even if I tried, I couldn't do it. You probably have a global positioning system in one of your bags."

"I may be well prepared, but I'm not that prepared."

A faded sign at an intersection declared the intersecting road to be Route 76. There were a few scattered buildings at the intersection, most noticeably a renovated schoolhouse, Gavot Academy, painted a burgundy red. Some cars were parked at those buildings, but none were on the road. They turned right and headed east. The corn rows became more spotted and the scattered buildings became more frequent. Then a church with a pristine white steeple rose seemingly out of nowhere. Stuart slowed down and Mel peered at the sign post at the intersection.

"I'm pretty sure this is Main Street," she said.

The scattered buildings which had been clapboard farmhouses merged into neat little brick buildings with store front facades. The town square was actually quite round. A fountain and a gazebo took up the center. A roundabout surrounded it. Turning left on Camden Road, the stores disappeared and the houses with still leafy oaks and maples took their place. A bubble pink three story house came into view. A small hand painted sign along the driveway said "Townsend House". In a smaller script were the words, "Bed and Breakfast".

Mel stared flabbergasted at the white trimmed windows and the lacy curtains. It was a life-sized dollhouse in pink. Did the decorator ask a six-year-old girl for advice? "We're staying in that?!"

"The nearest motel is fifty miles away," supplied Stuart. "Although I didn't think you would be so concerned with house style."

"Of course I'm concerned with style. You're talking to a photographer, remember? But I'll have to say, that thing is so hideous, I might as well take a picture. It'll go with that train station. Maybe I'll publish a book of photographs and call it *When Architects Go Bad*."

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Chapter 3 – Cat-Spirits

They could hear voices from inside the house as they lugged their bags to the stain glassed front door. There were three of them, a man, a woman, and a child. The adults were talking in lower tones so the exact words couldn't be made out, but the kid was yelping, "Mommy, Daddy! There are two cats scratching on the door!"

"Perhaps they want out," murmured Stuart.

Mel set down one of her bags on the doorstep and twisted the knob. The door swung inside revealing an old fashioned foyer trimmed in dark wood. A thin brunette in a yellow sweater dress and a stout balding man in a burgundy vest stood near the stairs that disappeared toward the second floor. A little tow-headed boy, perhaps four or five years old, in a green shirt and blue corduroy pants was tugging on his mother's dress and pointing toward the door. Mel and Stuart found two short-haired cats, one black and one orange, staring up at them from the welcome mat.

"I don't think these kind of cats want out," said Mel.

"Mommy, Daddy!" said the little boy again.

His mother made a shooing motion. "Not now, Peter. Your imaginary cats can fend for themselves. Why don't you go to the living room and watch some television? Mommy and Daddy are busy at the moment."

The boy stopped tugging on his mother's clothes and instead of going to the living room, cautiously approached the two strangers who were busy hauling the bags into the foyer. "Here, kitty,

kitty,” he called out. The two cats took one look at the boy and skittered into a hiding position behind Stuart’s legs.

“Whoa.” Stuart nearly fell over backward. “What’s wrong with you guys? That’s just a kid.”

“Maybe they’re just afraid he’ll pull their tails,” said Mel, amused. She squatted to the eye level of the little boy. “One word of advice, uh, what’s your name, kid?”

“Peter.”

“I’m Mel. That’s Stuart.”

He grinned. “I’d wave hello, but my hands are full at the moment.”

“One word of advice, Peter. Never call a cat-spirit a ‘kitty’. They hate that word.”

“Mommy and Daddy just call them imaginary cats. And they tell me to stop making stuff up.”

“Well, they’re not exactly imaginary,” replied Mel. “Not everyone can see them, though, because, well, you can just tell that they’re not regular cats, you know what I mean?”

“I guess so.”

“So best keep that fact to yourself.” She furtively glanced up and relieved that Peter’s parents were taking no notice of them, she continued, “They understand you and me when we talk, you know.”

“Oh,” said the kid, wide-eyed.

“And if they want to be petted, they’ll definitely let you know.” She straightened up. “So you know where we check in?”

Peter pointed through an open doorway. “Mommy and Daddy checked in with Mr. Townsend in the parlor.”

Mel nodded. “Thanks.”

“Thanks, Peter,” Stuart winked as he made to follow his partner. “And another little hint about the cat-spirit. They’re total gluttons for sweets. At least most of them are. But never give them bubble gum. It gives them tummy aches.”

“Peter,” called out the boy’s mother as Stuart stepped towards the parlor. “What did I tell you about speaking to strangers?”

“But they wanted to know where to check in!” her son replied.

The two cats tagged along the heels of the new guests at the bed and breakfast to the converted parlor which had been converted into a sort of receiving room. Tall windows decorated by white lace curtains overlooked the front yard. Mahogany chairs and tables stacked with magazines took up most of the space in the tan painted room. A bored teenaged girl in a gray sweatshirt stood at the check in counter that had been installed at the end of the room flipping through a dog-eared romance novel. A black and white spotted cat-spirit sat next to her elbow reading along.

“Hello?” said Mel.

The girl put down the book. Her companion cat-spirit meowed in protest. “Hello. Do you have a reservation?”

“Yes. It’s under Ang. Mel Ang.”

The girl flipped through an appointment book. “Ah yes. Here you are. I have you down for one person though.”

Stuart cleared his throat. “Uh, I’m actually on a separate reservation. It’s under Roubere.”

“Oh. Okay. Separate rooms, huh?” The girl scribbled diligently into the appointment book. “It says here that you already have the rooms booked and paid for till the end of the week. Guess you’re visiting for the Harvest Festival, hm? Well, you’re lucky you did all of this in advance. The rooms are always booked up at this time of year. Last minute vacations, I guess.”

“Sorry, but we’re not exactly on vacation,” said Mel. “We’re reporting on the festival.”

“So you’re from the *Callas Post*?” said the girl brightening. “One of the reporters got here yesterday. He had a tape recorder and everything.”

Mel shook her head. “Nope. We’re from *Hot Tread*.”

“Really?” The girl leaned forward excitedly, nearly pushing the romance novel she had been reading off the counter. The black and white cat-spirit pounced on the book before it went flying off the edge and meowed disapprovingly at the girl. She ignored the cat-spirit. “I read the latest issue at the library. They’re the only ones who subscribe to it, really. Most of the people around here think it’s too frivolous and ‘hoity-toity’.”

“That’s too bad,” Mel replied. “Maybe they’ll change their minds once they find out we’re doing a story on the Harvest Festival.”

“Maybe,” the girl replied doubtfully. She handed them the keys to their rooms and said, “By the

way, I'm Rebecca. My uncle and aunt actually own this place. I just work here after school and on the weekends." She walked around the corner. "Let me take some of the bags and I'll show you where some of the rooms are. And you," she said to the black and white cat-spirit. "You're in charge of the desk until I get back."

The cat-spirit gave a dutiful mewl. But when the three humans exited the parlor, the two other cat-spirits that had been following the journalists leaped onto the counter and helped the black and white cat-spirit turn over the abandoned romance novel. The three of them swished their tails in amusement as they read about heaving bosoms and turgid kisses.

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Chapter 4 – The Painter

Heavy floral drapes had been pushed aside revealing a pane of window overlooking the backyard. Mel had been given one of the corner back rooms on the second floor. The room itself was decorated in a gaudy dark red and gold with flowery trim. The bed, a queen sized affair on a gleaming brass frame, was overlaid with a flower patterned cover. There was a desk, a chair, a lamp, and armchair, and a tall oak bureau. A small door at the end of the room led to the bathroom. Mel had dumped her bags onto the bed, scattering five sleeping cat-spirits. After Mel took out her camera, they had repositioned themselves back on top of her bags and gone back to sleep.

Mel felt a small shiver as she stared out the window with her camera weighing coldly in one hand. The backyard of Townsend House was a bit of grassy land except for one tree in bright red foliage. A thin, dark figure stood beneath the tree looking up at her. She raised her camera, brought it into focus, and took a shot. When she lowered her camera, the figure was gone.

She went back to the bed and pulled out her tote from underneath a yawning tabby. She took out the plastic bag of gray beads. The beads clacked softly as they shifted position with the swing of the bag. The tabby opened one eye and then another.

"I don't suppose you know a hiding place?" said Mel, half to herself.

The cat-spirit stretched before jumping off the bed. It waved its tail back and forth like a metronome's needle as it padded toward the bureau. It stopped and tapped its paw on the wood flooring.

She walked over. "One of these drawers?"

The tabby meowed and tapped the floor again.

She knelt down and closely examined the floor. One of the planks had a barely discernable notch on one side. She dug her fingernails in and pulled the plank up. "Ah. Clichéd, but I think it'll work—unless you tell someone else about this."

The cat-spirit gave a disbelieving snort and headed back to the bed.

Mel glanced at the small cubbyhole in the floor, about the size of a shoebox. It was empty. She stuffed the bag of beads into the hole and let the wood plank fall. A really determined person might find the beads but in the meantime, she was going to make it a little more difficult than a riffle through a suitcase.

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Stuart softly closed the door as to not wake the various cat-spirits that had taken up residence in his room. He spotted Mel down the hall, camera aimed down the stairwell. He tucked his hands inside the pockets of his leather jacket and ambled towards her. She didn't appear to notice him approaching her.

"I see you're busy," he said.

Her camera clicked. "Yes I am. I was hoping to get some pictures of the house while there's some daylight." She slung the strap of her camera over her shoulder and proceeded down the stairs without looking at him. "I'm going to take a small stroll down the street and take some shots from there."

"All right. I'll loiter around here for a bit and maybe get a hold of one of the owners. We could meet back in the foyer in a couple hours and head out to dinner. I thought I saw a couple restaurants and diners on the main street when we were driving up here."

Mel nodded. "I'll probably be back in about three hours." She left through the front door and Stuart found himself alone in the foyer.

He looked through to doorway on his left which led to the parlor. No one was there except

Rebecca and the three spirit-cats reading. Not wanting to disturb them, he sauntered to a doorway on the right which led to the living room.

The living room was decorated in soft muted colors, warm and cozy. A fireplace was located at the end of the room, covered by glass screens and flanked with canisters of fire pokers. Fluffy beige couches decorated with white lace doilies ringed the fireplace in a somewhat lopsided semi-circle. An uninteresting landscape hung above the mantelpiece. There were armchairs scattered throughout the rest of the room as well as an entertainment center with a television, video and DVD player, and a stereo system. Like the reception room parlor, there were curtain-covered windows facing the front yard.

At the moment, a thin, middle-aged man with salt and pepper hair in jeans and lumberjack shirt had pushed away the curtains to one of the windows and was wiping the dust from it. A fluffy white cat-spirit lounged on the back of a nearby armchair, watching with sharp yellow eyes. At the sound of Stuart's footsteps, the middle-aged man turned his head and nodded.

"Afternoon. Doing all right?"

"Pretty good," Stuart replied. "Although I was wondering how I could meet the owners of this place."

"You're looking at one of them. Jed Townsend."

"Stuart Roubere. You have a wonderful place. Very homey."

"Thank you. You're lucky you booked early. The Harvest Festival brings in a lot of business and almost every year we get booked up. Of course, it'll probably change in the next couple of years."

"Oh? Why's that?"

"They're building a new motel down on Route 76," Jed said darkly. "I heard it was going to be a franchise of one of the bigger chains down south. They figure they'll get more business as the town is growing. More and more young people are turning away from the traditional jobs to go into those new-fangled areas." His eyes lowered, catching sight of the logo on Stuart's shirt. "Like computing."

"I think there will always be a market for your kind of business," Stuart said mildly. "The quality of a bed and breakfast is completely different than that of a motel."

Jed grunted. "True, but we'll see when it gets built."

Stuart watched the man continue rubbing the window. Past the glass, he saw Mel's figure across the street, hand over her eyes as she gauged one of her shots. "I actually have a couple questions about the history of this place."

"What, you're a reporter?"

"I work for Hot Tread."

The owner of Townsend House snorted. "Never heard of it. But I suppose any kind of publicity would be good publicity for the business."

"Do you mind if I use a recorder?" he asked, taking a hand-held one out of an inside pocket of his jacket.

Jed waved a free hand. "Go ahead. It's not like I'm spilling state secrets."

Stuart smiled as he pressed the record button. "So this was named after your family."

"Yep. For the past two hundred years, actually. But this house wasn't always owned by the Townsends. It was built three hundred years ago by one of the founders of Gavot, Cyrus Pendington. He chose this spot because of some occult mumbo-jumbo about energy lines and such. He said this was a place where a person could commune with the spirits."

"I see."

Warming to the subject, Jed continued, "Besides as being one of the town council members, Pendington was also known as an alchemist and crackpot. His whole family was a little strange, if you know what I mean. And then it passed on to the Townsend family."

"Your family bought this?"

Jed shook his head. "No, we inherited it. The last surviving Pendington, Victoria Pendington, who happened to be Cyrus's great-granddaughter, had taken a liking to a little boy who often came by to deliver some home-cooked food from his mother who worried over the aging lady. In her will, Victoria Pendington left the house to my ancestor, Walter Townsend, because as she stated mysteriously that, 'his talents so closely mirror mine that he was like my own son.' I think she believed that Walter was also into this crazed 'communing with the spirits' thing, but from all accounts, my ancestor seemed fairly normal."

"Huh," remarked Stuart. "That's interesting. Ever get ghost hunting guests or the such?"

"Sometimes. This isn't a secret story, you know, so the tale gets around the paranormal community. Two months ago one of their paranormal researchers stayed a couple days. He set up his

instruments all over the place.”

“Did he find anything?”

“Nothing. I told him the builder of the house was probably just some crazy old man who made stuff up, but the paranormal researchers never listened to me.”

“So what made you decide to change the house to a bed and breakfast?”

Jed chuckled. “Oh, it wasn’t my idea. Actually it was my grandfather, Donald Townsend, who set the whole thing up. You know, around that time, farming techniques had started improving and not so many people had to work the fields to get the same amount of crops. So he decided to sell off the farmland and start a new business. It was risky at the time, but it made a living.”

Stuart nodded. “So this is a family business, huh? So when you retire, you plan to turn this over to your children?”

The man sighed with a tinge of resignation. “Ida and I don’t have any children. But I do plan on turning this place over to my niece Rebecca—so far she’s been the only one of our nephews and nieces who’ve shown any interest in Townsend House.”

* * *

After Mel took a picture of the quaint little street Townsend House was located on—a little street, she thought, that could typify any little town if she chose to take it at a certain angle—she noticed the curtains to one of the front windows in the bed and breakfast pulled back. It looked like Stuart was in deep conversation with an older man who appeared to be washing the windows. She turned her back on that and walked around the pink house, towards the back. But before she could turn the corner into the back yard, she walked into something.

Make that someone, she thought as she rubbed her nose and looked up. The man was tall, although not that tall, she privately amended. He couldn’t possibly be that much taller than Stuart. His long dark brown hair was tied back in a pony-tail. He had a rather attractive rounded face, clean-shaven, and he wore a black turtleneck and a pair of black jeans. He must have been the figure she spotted earlier from her bedroom window.

“Sorry,” said the man. “I didn’t see you there.”

“That’s all right. These kind of mishaps happen all the time.”

He held out a hand which she cautiously shook. “Laurent. I’m staying over at the Townsend House.”

“I’m Mel. I’m also staying here.”

“You’re a photographer?” he asked, gaze sliding down to the camera in her hand.

“Another reporter and I are doing a story on the Harvest Festival. You are here on vacation?”

He glanced back up to her face, blue eyes piercing. “Unfortunately I’m on business. I’m visiting some potential customers to negotiate prices for some of my paintings.”

“Ah.” Was she imagining it, or did he lean in closer? She caught a whiff of strong cologne and fought the urge to take a step backward.

“I’m sure you’ve never heard of me before. I’m just starting to get known by some contemporary collectors.”

“That’s great. Good luck on that then.”

“Yes. Nice meeting you.”

When he finally departed, she let out a silent breath and ventured to the backyard and found a small deck protruding from the backside of the house. A couple chairs and a picnic table were placed to a corner. She sat down at one of the chairs and took a deep breath of cool air. A sudden thought struck her. Just when did collectors of paintings come to live in a small community like Gavot?

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Chapter 5 – Plans

She was frowned in thought, not noticing that the sky had deepened into a purplish-salmon color throwing the single tree in the back yard into dark relief. Mel was startled by the sudden rattling of the back door. She fumbled with her camera as it nearly fell from her fingers. The air was calm so something on the other side of the door must be jerking on the knob. Then the door burst open and it slammed into the

house as if a great pressure had made it explode outward.

“Oops.”

Mel forced her jaw to unclench. “Oops? All you can say is oops? You scared me half to death.” Stuart lounged in the doorway looking boyish and unrepentant. “Well, what do you want me to say?”

“Hm, somewhere along the lines of begging me for forgiveness.”

“Tough luck, Mel. I don’t do any begging.”

She shook her head as she got up from the chair. “Oh, so you’re one of those macho guys.”

“You don’t like macho guys? I can do sensitive if you like.”

“I’d hate to see what you come up with.”

“What do you mean? You think I can’t act? At least I thought about majoring in drama when I was in college.”

“Thought, being the operative word.” She made to go inside, but Stuart was still blocking the doorway. He was looking down at her, his dark eyes behind his glasses inscrutable. “So do I have to answer a riddle to pass?”

“No riddle.” He stepped aside so that his back was to one side of the door. “Although next time, you might not be so lucky.”

“I’m so scared,” she said blandly. Mel stepped into the doorway but made no move to pass the threshold. She was perhaps a foot away from the reporter. Her fingers involuntarily tightened around her camera. “So did you get to talk to the owners?”

“One of them. Jed Townsend. Apparently this house was built here because there are so many cat-spirits.”

“Hm, that is interesting.” She was hardly listening because she had just noticed an odd fact. She was at eye level to his mouth.

“Did you get a chance to get all the shots that you wanted?”

“I got some. I might take some more later.”

They moved at the same time, and the strange tense air about them broke as they stepped into a room at the back of the house that contained a dining table, a set of chairs, and a ticking grandfather clock with a glass front. Stuart jammed his hands into the pockets of his jeans and gave the photographer a slanting, sideways look. “I’m starving. I hope there’s a good diner or restaurant on Main Street.”

“I think we have plenty of time to sample all the places,” she replied, peering into the face of the grandfather clock before looking at him. The numbers on the face of the clock were inlaid with an oddly familiar gray material.

“You want to visit all the restaurants today?”

“Hah. I mean for the rest of the week.”

They headed toward the front of the house.

“I’ll wait while you put your camera back,” said Stuart.

“Actually, I was planning on taking it with me. Just in case something catches my fancy.”

A dark figure stood by the staircase, one hand on the banister. It was the man she had met outside, Mel realized. Laurent. His eyes were on her and his mouth was curved upward in an odd little smile. His gaze then moved to settle on her companion. Only the faint flickering of the eyelids betrayed the fact that the black-clothed man was assessing the other more casually dressed one. His smile widened a fraction.

“Well, I see I’ll have to change tonight’s plans.” It wasn’t clear whether he was speaking to Mel, Stuart, the both of them, or just himself. But after those words, he turned to climb the stairs.

When Mel and Stuart finally closed the front door behind them, she said, “That was rather enigmatic.”

Stuart grunted. “I thought the signals were rather clear.”

“What do you mean?”

They got in the car and he started the engine. He seemed more focused on the road than on the conversation. “Some guys like to get people interested in them by acting all mysterious. He had the advantage of being dressed like a beatnik too.”

Mel stifled a sudden chuckle. “Maybe you’re right. I saw him walking outside of the bed and breakfast earlier. He said he was a painter.”

“Real painters have the confidence for not acting pretentious and secretive,” said Stuart, mouth curving. “And I would think that they needn’t be dressed in mourning clothes. I bet in reality he’s just a cube worker.”

“Cube worker?” Mel imagined the painter stuck in a cubicle, scowling. “It could be, although he said rather emphatically that he wasn’t on vacation when I asked.”

“That’s interesting. I wouldn’t put too much stock into him though. It’s usually the ordinary seeming people who have the most secrets to hide.”

“I think you’ve watched too many murder mysteries.”

“Maybe. But I really didn’t like it when that guy smiled at me.”

Mel turned to look at him. Stuart wasn’t smiling. Instead, he was frowning as if someone had told him he was going to get chopped liver for dinner. “Why?”

“I don’t know. Gut feeling. I just didn’t like it.”

The car turned on Main Street. At the corner was a small restaurant with a glassed front and a neon sign shouting “The Corner Diner.” Mel suggested they try the place and Stuart maneuvered the car to an empty parking space on the side of the street. The sky had bruised into a dark purplish-blue, the perfect time for dinner, but there were few people on the street.

The door to the small diner clanged as they entered. Inside, the lights were a warm yellow glow. Tables were surrounded by long red vinyl seats and arranged into booths to grant the diners a semblance of privacy. A waitress, an older woman with frizzy hair tied at a knot at the nape of her neck and clad in a white dress uniform and apron approached them and waved toward the booths.

“Two? This way.”

When Mel and Stuart were seated with the menus, the waitress whipped out a pad of paper and pencil from a pocket in her apron.

“I’m Angela, so if there’s anything you need, just give me a holler. So you folks new to the area?”

“We’re just visiting,” replied Stuart.

“On vacation, hm?”

Still looking at the menu, Mel said, “Not exactly.”

“I see,” said the waitress, not really seeing at all. “So are you ready to order?”

When the waitress left, taking the menus and their orders with her, Mel put her elbows on the table and leaned toward Stuart and said in a mock whisper, “You know what I think?”

The glare from the overhead light obscured his expression. “What?”

“This town is a cliché.” Mel sat back.

“I admit, it doesn’t seem that different from other towns, or at least nothing has been that surprising. Except maybe the bed and breakfast.”

“Even that wasn’t too surprising, despite the bad taste in paint color.” She made a brief face thinking back to the pink house. “Well there’s tomorrow.”

“Do you have any definite plans?”

“I take pictures. I have no plans.” She linked her fingers together as if bored. “If something strikes me as interesting on the other hand...”

“Gotcha. You go where your muse goes.”

“Muses are for writers,” she grinned. “Short attention span is more to my liking.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. I was thinking of contacting some people—mostly the organizers for the festival—for some interviews. Maybe get some history of the place.”

“I’ll take a walk around town then and maybe take a few shots of the festival preparations. The map of Gavot—I saw some places on it that I might go check out.”

Their conversation broke when Angela came back with trays of dinner. When she left, there was a moment of eating in silence before Stuart picked up where they left off.

“The beads,” he began, “we should look into that some time.”

Mel chewed, thoughtful, and swallowed before saying, “Yes. Any ideas on where to start?”

“I’m not sure what Mad Dog did when he passed through here. Or who he met. Where he stayed. I could start asking people if they met him. In this kind of place, especially, he would be hard to miss.”

“Hm.” Mel absently studied Stuart’s fingers which were wrapped around a fork. “I’ve been wondering what those beads were made of.”

“I’m not well versed on rocks.”

“A jeweler might know. Or a geologist.”

“I doubt there’s anyone of either of those professions wandering about these parts.”

“I’ve also been thinking about the bed and breakfast.”

Stuart grinned. “You can’t let that go, can you? You’re going to call city hall to bulldoze the pink monstrosity?”

“Stuart! Pay attention.”

“I’m always at attention.”

“You sound like a guard dog. Or a randy schoolboy.”

“You think so?”

“Humph. Anyway, remember the dining room?”

“Yeah. What about it? I recall you were taking an inordinate amount of interest with that grandfather clock.”

“I have a hunch about it. When we get back, I’ll show you.”

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## Chapter 6 – Night Things

She had shown Stuart the numbers on the clock face and he had only replied, “Maybe we could get one of the owners to tell us.”

When they got back to Townsend House, night had finally descended onto Gavot like a blackout curtain. The almost full moon hung in the sky like a gleaming bead lost among drapes of dark velvet.

After Mel got finished brushing her teeth and changing into a set of fuzzy flannel pajamas that had worn out into a dull yellow, she found herself standing in front of her bedroom window again, staring out. The cat-spirits of her room had decided to finally get out of bed. They prowled around the room, lazily, occasionally twining themselves around Mel’s legs, meowing at her, telling her to get some sleep.

In the dark, the back yard of the bed and breakfast looked like nothingness. The moon was weak—all she saw of the singular tree was a black blob.

After a hard minute of staring and wondering to herself what she was looking for, she pulled the drapes across the pane, turned out the lights, and went to bed. The cat-spirits settled at the foot of the bed like a line of watchful sentinels. With Mel asleep, they were the only ones that noticed the rain starting to pound the window.

\* \* \*

He suddenly awoke, feeling a slight pressure on his chest. In the darkness and without his glasses, everything was only a blur, even the two glowing eyes watching him. He fumbled with the stand beside the bed and grabbed his glasses and his watch. He shoved the glasses to his face and blinked at the cat-spirit on top of him, tapping a paw and twitching its whiskers.

“What is it?” he asked gruffly, his mind still sleep addled. He looked at his watch, a digital one with a button that lit up its face. “This better be good. I don’t get up at two in the morning for nothing, you know.”

“The cat-spirit meowed and jumped off the bed as he flung away the covers. He could hear the heating system throughout the house grumble lowly and rain on the window sill, but it was still cool and his skin prickled. Two other cat-spirits were sitting at the foot of the door, waiting to be let out.

Stuart grumbled incoherently and opened the door. The three cat-spirits rushed out into the hall and made loud hissing noises that could only be heard by people who could see them. He walked out into the hall to see what was getting them worked up.

A human-shaped shadow hovered in front of the door at the end of the hall. Mel’s room. The shadow didn’t appear to notice the cacophony the cat-spirits were raising.

“Hello?” Stuart called out.

The shadow suddenly moved and Stuart could hear the squeak of the floorboards as the figure hurtled down the stairs. Instinctively, he took off after the intruder, the cat-spirits leaping just ahead of him. The shadow crashed into the front door as the cat-spirits leapt upon it, scratching and hissing. The cat-spirits prowling the first floor of the bed and breakfast emerged from their corners and joined their comrades in the free-for-all. Stuart stumbled down the stairs after them, cursing as he stubbed his toes on unseen edges and corners before he belatedly turned on the light at the foot of the stairs.

The foyer light suddenly flooded the room. The cat-spirits didn’t seem to notice the light, but the shadow—which he could now clearly see as a dark inky film which had curled itself into a ball—visibly shrunk back at the light. It was then that he noticed that the thing was escaping through the crack in the door.

The cat-spirits chorused in frustrated yowls as the thing got away.

Stuart leaned back on the wall and let out a break. What the hell was that thing? A small part of him was glad that he didn't have to confront the thing himself. It was one thing if that had been a human intruder. But it was quite another if it was that.

"I thought I heard a noise."

He turned his head and spotted Mel a few steps down the top of the stairs. Her black hair was mussed like a cloud and she was rubbing her eyes from sleep. Two cat-spirits were tugging at her pajama bottoms, trying to get her back into her room.

"Ah, nothing," he said. "I just went to the kitchen to get a drink of water. Sorry to wake you."

Mel nodded, not noticing that the crowd of cat-spirits at the front door had dispersed as soon as the shadow thing disappeared—except for the three that had originally come with Stuart. "Maybe you were making too much noise. The cat-spirits certainly seemed agitated."

"Sorry about that."

After making sure Mel had gone back to her room, he went back to his and tried to settle back to sleep.

"Do me a favor and wake me at six," he told the nearest cat-spirit that had made itself a bed at his feet.

The cat-spirit yawned, briefly showing its teeth, and it made no indication that it heard him except for the twitch of its ears.

\* \* \*

Fresh from a morning shower, Mel dried her hair and tied it back. She had donned jeans and a blue sweater, ready for an outside hike around town in search for the perfect shot. Momentarily, she glanced at the spot on the floor in front of the bureau. No one had touched the area, but nonetheless, she went over to retrieve the plastic bag with Mad Dog's beads and stuffed them into her tote bag along with her camera and equipment. The cat-spirits took over her unmade bed and watched her silently when she left.

The hallway on the second floor was empty, but at the foot of the stairs, she encountered a short plump woman with brownish-blond hair dressed in a turquoise jumper and holding a coffee pot. The woman was perhaps in her late forties or fifties judging from the ill disguised lines crinkling at the corner of her eyes and mouth. One glance at the parlor told Mel that the woman had served coffee to the man that Stuart had been talking to the previous day—Jed Townsend—who was at the moment manning the reception desk and reading the morning paper.

"Good morning," chirped the woman.

"Morning," Mel replied politely.

She motioned toward the back of the house. "Breakfast is this way, in the dining room. Pat has outdone herself this morning."

"Pat?"

"The cook," the woman clarified. "By the way, I'm Ida Townsend."

"Pleased to meet you. Mel Ang."

Ida nodded. "You're a photographer? My husband saw you taking pictures yesterday."

"Yes." She followed the owner of the bed and breakfast toward the dining room which was filled with morning light. "The outside of this house is quite unusual," she added tactfully. "I hope you don't mind that I take some pictures. There is a possibility that those shots might end up published with the story that my partner is doing on the Harvest Festival."

"Oh no," Ida laughed. "Any publicity would be good publicity for this place. So you and your partner work for a newspaper?"

"A magazine. *Hot Tread*."

"Sorry. I haven't heard of it. What is it about?"

"It's based in New Halis and I heard from your niece, Rebecca, that the Gavot library carries a subscription. The public relations people bill it as a cultural magazine. Mostly it's stories and photography of different places and events with some fashion and media reviews as well as interviews with well-known people thrown in. It has a fairly large distribution in the metropolitan places."

"Huh. Well, Gavot is a small place. We're not used to all the stuff the city folks bring in. Are you sure doing a story about Gavot and its small little Harvest Festival won't make the sophisticated

readers of your magazine bored?"

Mel grinned. "It's our job to make things interesting. Besides, our editor actually passed through here earlier and thought this would be a neat place for a story."

"Your editor passed through Townsend House?"

"He might have. His name is Ralph Bartlett."

They had arrived at the threshold of the dining room. The table was already occupied with a young couple dressed in matching purple windbreakers, an old yet spry old man in spectacles, and the painter, Laurent, who was dressed again in black. Mel glanced toward the front of the house and spied Stuart just rounding the corner of the stairs.

"Sorry," said Ida. "I don't recall that name."

"Some people call him by his nickname, Mad Dog."

Out of the corner of her eye, Mel saw the painter slightly hesitate before buttering his piece of toast. She pondered that action, but then dismissed it as a coincidence.

"Ah, Mad Dog," the plump woman said, recognition dawning on her face. "He's hard to miss. He was staying with a friend of his though at Grandbury Farm."

"Grandbury?"

"It's a couple miles north of here. I recommend visiting their orchard at this time of year. They have the best apples. If you stick around tonight for dinner, I'm making apple pie out of them."

"Did someone say apple pie?" a masculine voice interrupted them.

Mel turned her head and found herself inches away from Stuart. He smelled fresh from a shower. She smiled, but took a step back. "Morning."

"Good morning Mel. Morning ma'am." Stuart's dark hair glimmered, wet. He was wearing his leather jacket again but his shirt this time was a bright blue one with an abstract logo that looked like a hatched square with a smiley face. Mel assumed it was probably a representation for a computer company or a video game. But she was drawn more to his face. There was something odd about his expression. Noticing her stare, Stuart pushed his glasses up his nose with a finger in an effort to hide his eyes.

Ida Townsend greeted Stuart and babbled about making apple pies for dessert and something about how her husband told her all about his interest in the history of the bed and breakfast before ushering them into the dining room and offering them coffee.

Stuart and Mel took the two closest empty seats which happened to be the ones across the young couple in the windbreakers. The couple completely ignored the journalists as they crooned to each other and fed each other bits of omelet and toast. Mel fought the urge to roll her eyes. Crazy honeymooners, she thought. Stuart forked some fruit onto his plate from the family style setting of the food at the center of the table. Then he leaned toward Mel's ear and whispered.

"There ought to be a law banning public displays of affection just to prevent morning indigestion."

Mel chuckled. "If you pass by city hall, you might want to suggest that to the mayor."

"There's an idea."

The other occupants at the dining table did not appear to be the chatty morning types. The old man seemed to be taking his time about his food, concentrating as he took each mouthful. The painter had muttered a brief greeting but other than that, he seemed to be content to be just watching. When the other guests at the bed and breakfast left the table to go about their day's business, Ida Townsend bustled back into the dining room with a fresh pot of coffee and inquired if they wanted anything else. Stuart shook his head and complimented the breakfast before saying that he was fine.

Mel accepted another cup of coffee before she said, "I was admiring your grandfather clock."

Ida glanced at the clock across the room and twittered as if flattered. "Jed and I got it last year. Grand old thing, isn't it?"

"I'm not all that familiar with antiques but it does look like an impressive piece," Mel said, seemingly concentrating on sipping her coffee. "I was looking at the clock face yesterday. Are the numerals really made out of mother-of-pearl?"

"Oh gosh, no. At least I don't think so. The dealer would have told us if it were true." Ida tapped a finger on her chin, thinking. "We actually didn't get it for quite so much, to be honest. If it were mother-of-pearl, the price would be higher, wouldn't it? I don't know. We just got it because we thought it would fit in with the décor. Perhaps Wally would know for sure."

"Wally?"

"Wally McNab," she clarified. "He owns the furniture store on Main Street."

"I see."

The owner of the bed and breakfast nodded before turning back to Stuart. "Coffee?"

"Uh, no thank you. I think I've had enough to get me through the day."

As Mel and Stuart got up to leave the house, they encountered the older couple and their young son Peter in a yellow jumpsuit coming down the stairs. Peter's parents briefly greeted the journalists before turning toward the dining room for breakfast. Their son lingered behind with a small golden cat-spirit at his heels. At the sight of the two adult strangers, the cat-spirit skidded to a halt and cautiously approached them to sniff their pant legs. A moment later, satisfied that the journalists weren't a threat, it sat down on the welcome mat and began to wash its paws.

"Hi Mel. Hi Stuart."

"Good morning, Peter. How are you today?" said Mel. "I see you've found a friend."

Peter grinned. "I'm doing great! I saw Nemo trying to get into the house last night and I let him in. He's followed me ever since even though I don't have any candy with me." At the word 'candy', the cat-spirit perked up its ears and meowed.

"You've named him?" Stuart said, surprised.

The little boy shook his head. "Nemo told me his name. Anyway, mommy and daddy got mad when they saw me opening the window to let him in, but that's okay. He's really glad he's inside now since it was raining outside."

"That's nice of you," Mel replied.

"Well, later then," Peter said waving. "Maybe I'll see you at dinner. Mrs. Townsend told my parents yesterday that she was going to bake her famous apple pies tonight."

"Famous, huh? I'm a sucker for pies," said Stuart.

Peter nodded and giggled before he ran down the hallway for breakfast. Finally finished grooming, Nemo bounded after the boy to catch up.

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Chapter 7 – Scaffolds and Furniture

Outside, Mel looked up. The sky was a lurid blue mixed with gray. Perhaps it might rain. Perhaps it might not. The rest of the neighborhood was looking drenched. It might dry out by the middle of the day if it didn't rain again. Absently, she patted her tote, glad that she had an umbrella. Stuart tucked his hands into his jeans pockets and whistled tunelessly as they took the car downtown and found a parking spot in a small alleyway next to the local bank.

"Did you keep Mad Dog's beads back at the bed and breakfast?" Stuart asked as they got out of the car. They stood at their respective doors, feeling somewhat reluctant to part ways, to work on what they were supposed to come to town for.

"Actually, they're with me," Mel replied. "Should I have left them back there?"

"No. It is probably a good idea to bring them with you. Do you think you'll be visiting that guy Ida Townsend said sold her that clock?"

"Maybe, if I have time. Are you thinking of checking this guy out?"

"If I have time. Although if you get to him first..."

"Yeah." She frowned and looked down Main Street. A few people were out walking down the streets, going to the stores. A few tourists took pictures of something that she couldn't quite make out. She felt hesitant to really say what they were planning to do. Perhaps the problem was that they were too much out in the open. Anyone could eavesdrop. "Maybe I'm too paranoid," she said finally. "Maybe we could talk about this further tonight. I wonder if the bed and breakfast has a private study or something."

"Or if all fails, we could use my room," Stuart grinned.

Mel found herself laughing softly. "Maybe I should have expected you to say that."

Stuart walked off, heading south to the squat white building next to the church, the city hall, to see if he could reach any of the organizers of the Harvest Festival.

She took out her camera. It felt comfortable in her hand as she strolled down the sidewalk, passing a small café filled with patrons in overalls and plaids, an office building with all the blinds drawn, and a craft store with dolls in frilly costumes dominating the front window. Up ahead was the town square. The Gavot Square wasn't really square. It was actually round. At the center was a grass island decorated with a white-washed gazebo that was built in a plain design. Around the grass island was a road, a roundabout, in which the occasional car circled like a lazy vulture.

The square wasn't empty. At the edge of the road, half lying on grass and sidewalk concrete, were the beginnings of stands for vendors. White canvas and metal poles laid strewn about seemingly in random patterns. A group of burly workers in dirty jeans and ripped shirts labored across the street putting up a tent. Even from where she was, Mel heard them grunting and cursing. At the round grass island, there weren't any signs of white canvas although there were plenty of metal poles. The beginning of a scaffold was growing from ground up, covering the front side of the gazebo.

An old man sat in the gazebo, looking out and yelling directions to a second group of men working on the scaffold.

Mel took a few pictures although she wasn't sure if they would turn out that interesting. If Mad Dog saw them, he would throw them out, she thought. With that rationale, she didn't have to take the pictures. But if she didn't, Mad Dog would chew her out for not taking them. Sometimes, she had the impression that Mad Dog actually *liked* throwing out the pictures she took. She took a deep breath trying to steady her temper. Of course she got mad whenever he did it. But getting mad now did no good, especially with the fact that the editor of *Hot Tread* was lying comatose in the hospital.

Eventually, she made her way toward the gazebo, narrowly missing a speeding white truck carrying a load of lumber. She made a wide circuit, though, avoiding the sweaty men lugging the metal poles. They didn't look like the types who would welcome any interfering visitors, let alone a photographer, into their working space. From the opposite side, she approached the gazebo and walked up the stairs. From a corner, she took a picture of the old man directing the workers from behind. Her camera only emitted a soft click. The old man was still too wrapped up in his work to notice her.

Finally he lowered his hands, seemingly satisfied on the current phase of the work. Mel coughed to get his attention. "Excuse me, sir?"

He turned around. He was bald with tufts of gray hair sprouting from a place just above his ears. His nose was large and hooked and he squinted at her as if she were a tiny obnoxious beetle that had just landed on his dinner. He was wearing a pair of overalls, worn white at the shoulders and knees. He crossed his thin arms. "Yes?"

"I'm Mel Ang," she began. She held out her hand for a handshake. The old man just stared at her fingers as if the beetle on his dinner had just turned a vivid shade of purple. "I'm a photographer working for a periodical in New Halis, *Hot Tread*."

"Littleton," the old man replied in a clipped voice. "Ron Littleton. And I've never heard of *Hot Tread*. What do you want?"

"I was wondering about all this construction. Is it for the Harvest Festival?"

The old man let out a string of expletives before he said, "Of course it's for the Harvest Festival. It's done every year so I don't see why we have to build and tear everything down each year. Just leave the whole damn thing up year round." His face was getting red as he puffed, "Stupid pagan festival. Church is good enough for me. It's that stupid mayor, you know. I'd just like to throw the book at him."

Mel stepped back, astounded by the old man's sudden vitriol. "I had the impression that the Harvest Festival was a local tradition. Doesn't it help increase business in the area?"

"You sound just like him!" Littleton yelled.

There was the pounding of footsteps on the gazebo stairs before a voice said, "Cool it, Ron. I think you're getting sunstroke. And didn't your doctor tell you to watch your blood pressure?" One of the construction workers had arrived at the gazebo, a sheaf of papers and a tape measure in hand. He nodded at Mel. "Morning, ma'am. Don't mind Ron. He's like this every year. You can take pictures wherever you like."

"Thanks," she said. "I was just curious as to what the scaffold was for."

Littleton wiped his face with a red handkerchief he pulled out of his pocket. He sighed, trying to calm down his breathing. "The damn thing will be a platform. It's where the Horned King and his consort is going to preside at the last day of the festival."

Mel's eyebrows knitted in thought. "Horned King?"

"It's a contest," the worker supplied. "Well, it's actually several competitions starting on the first day of the festival which is tomorrow. The man who wins most of the contests gets to be crowned the Horned King. And then he chooses a woman to be his consort. They sit on top of the scaffold at the end of the festival to preside over the dancing and everything." He flexed his muscles trying to show off. "I'll be in the contests, although the past two years *he* has won."

"Who?" she asked.

"Him," the worker said, indicating another worker at the scaffold, who happened to be the largest

and burliest of the bunch.

“Huh.” The past winner of the Harvest Festival competition looked up and waved at the people in the gazebo. Mel took a picture.

Littleton swore again and yelled, “Get back to work! I haven’t got all day.”

“Ron, what did I tell you about your blood pressure?”

“You sound like my wife,” the old man snarled. “So what is it that you wandered up here all the way for?”

The worker held up the sheaf of papers. “I think we’re short on lumber for the east end. You want me to go up to Callas to see if we can round up some more.”

The old man took a deep breath. “Do whatever you want. But you’d better run that through Lloyd first. He’s in charge of the money.”

The worker said something, but Mel wasn’t paying attention. She had worked her way down the gazebo and made another circuit around the square. Everything’s under construction, she thought. Will it be done by tomorrow when the festival was going to start? Will the workers be able to round up enough lumber in Callas?

On the opposite side of Main Street now, she passed the local library—a brick-fronted and brass-knobbed—and a tiny sweet-smelling bakery. Intrigued, she stepped into the bakery to look at the cake and scones and muffins displayed in neat rows on the counter. The woman at the cashier inquired if she needed any help. Mel only shook her head and just replied she wanted to take a picture. After fifteen minutes of finishing half a roll of film and thinking that all she had accomplished was to satisfy her obsession with organized food (Mad Dog would certainly laugh at her if she ever told him that), she sauntered back out of the bakery and spotted a sign.

McNab Furniture Emporium.

She stopped in her tracks. Would there be any answers at that quarter, she wondered. And suddenly she felt the beads weighing heavily in her tote bag.

The front of the furniture store was painted in a dark green, chipped and scrubbed away from the weather. The windows in front of the store were subtly caked with dirt giving the place a grimy, abandoned look. In display was a desk with a rolled top, two chairs carved out of a strange yellowish wood, and a chest of drawers with wrought iron handles in the shapes of snakes. There was a red open sign hanging on the door.

Mel pulled open the door and a small bell attached to the corner chimed softly as she stepped through into the dim interior. For a moment, she stood at the entrance, letting her eyes adjust. Tables and bureaus and desks and chairs littered the open floor in a haphazard fashion. Mel thought of the furniture showrooms back in New Halis. Those places were meticulously swept and well-lit, organized. Salespeople always greeted a customer at the door asking if they needed help. And besides from being organized, there were props on the display furniture like vases and dining placemats and fake cardboard televisions. The McNab Furniture Emporium was the exact opposite. Scattered. Dingy. Every single piece of furniture was bare of anything that would have made them look homey. Instead, they looked lonely. And where was the salesperson?

Gavot is a small town, she finally remembered. They probably didn’t get too many customers at a time here.

At the end of the showroom, Mel spotted a counter. Someone was lounging behind it, head buried in a graphic novel featuring superheroes in tight spandex. She walked over to the counter. The person didn’t budge, perhaps too engrossed in his favorite comics. She hit the shiny service bell sitting on the counter. The ping, unlike the front door bell, cut through the stale air.

The person behind the counter suddenly sat up and the graphic novel flew out of his hands and landed on the floor with a thunk. The teenaged boy, curly dark hair and gangly frame, momentarily gaped at her in a daze before he managed to close his mouth. “Er, hello ma’am. Is there anything I can help you with?”

“I’m looking for Wally McNab.”

“Ah. Mr. McNab won’t be coming in today until close to closing time.”

“When’s closing time?”

“Five, ma’am. Are you here about a delivery?”

Mel glanced around the furniture store, noting that there was a darkened hallway on the right side of the store leading off to what she assumed to be an office at the back. “No, I’m not here for a delivery. I just have a couple of questions concerning the furniture he sells here.”

“Are you looking for anything in particular?”
“It’s a piece Mr. McNab sold about a year ago,” she replied nonchalantly.
The boy’s face fell. “Oh. I just started working here about six months ago.”
“I’ll come back,” Mel said. “Hopefully I can catch him before the store closes.”

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Chapter 8 – The Bingo Club

City hall was like a chunk of ill-cut Styrofoam super-glued to the sidewalk. Another picture for Mel’s collection of bad architecture, Stuart thought to himself amused. He entered the building and found himself in a front room that was remarkably small and claustrophobic. The walls were painted in a mind-numbing beige and the carpet, the same color. The walls themselves were bare except for a round-faced clock with hands pointing at the wrong time. After a few moments, Stuart realized that even the second hand wasn’t moving.

To the right were three beige plastic chairs and a small wooden table, scratched at the legs, topped with magazines and a copy of *The Callas Post*. At the far end of the room was the entrance to a hallway leading to another set of rooms. To the left of the reception area was a desk. A middle-aged woman, graying hair pulled back severely at the nape of her neck, with a beige pullover sat at the desk typing something on an electric typewriter. The steady ping of the typewriter keys sounded like the clacking of train wheels on metal rail. Wherever you are, bureaucracy looks just like my idea of purgatory, Stuart thought.

The ping of the keys suddenly stopped and the secretary peered up at the stranger standing in the reception area. Her mouth pinched into a sour expression as she took in the strange man’s leather jacket and unorthodox t-shirt. The men in Gavot usually wore plaid work shirts and heavy boots. And they were always a little dirty. This man looked like he actually took a shower in the morning. And his short choppy hair and glasses screamed, “City geek!”

“May I help you?” the secretary said through her pursed lips.

Stuart had the impression that she wanted him to go away. He glanced at her desk and there was a small plaque that said, ‘Belinda Montgomery, City Clerk.’ He gave her what he hoped to be a benign smile. “Good morning. I’m a reporter from *Hot Tread* and I was wondering if I could find out the organizers for the Harvest Festival. I’m doing a story on it.”

“*Hot Tread*? What’s that? Not a newspaper around here, is it?”

“It’s headquartered in New Halis.”

The secretary gave a grumpy snort. Just as she expected, a city boy. “It’s beyond me why you city folk suddenly find little Gavot so interesting. The mayor is going to be at the starting ceremony tomorrow morning. If you’re looking to interview him, you’ll have to wait until this afternoon. A reporter from *The Callas Post* is with him right now.”

“I see,” Stuart said smoothly. He kept his benign smile pasted on his face. “If it isn’t too much trouble, could I make an appointment with the mayor for this afternoon?”

The secretary finally smiled back, crafty. Elwood Hinton hated interviews because it interfered with his time in the office playing computer games and surfing the internet. “Sure,” she replied. “I’ll put you down for this afternoon at 1:30. His calendar is free then.”

“Thanks.”

Belinda Montgomery’s smile widened which startled Stuart. “If you want to interview the real organizers though, you might want to check the Community Center. It’s across from the church.”

“Is there anyone I should ask for specifically?”

“The Bingo Club,” she replied. “Old Petunia Granger is the head of the club, but pretty much all the members pitch in for the Harvest Festival. They hold their bingo tournaments in the church basement every Thursday, but all this week they’re at the Community Center. You can’t miss it.”

Stuart nodded. “Thanks.”

The secretary got out a schedule and marked him down for his appointment with the mayor in the afternoon. “Actually, now that I think about it, the Bingo Club probably knows a lot about what’s going on in the Harvest Festival. They’ve been in charge of it ever since I’ve moved here.”

“And how long was that?”

“Twenty years ago,” she replied blithely.

He finally stepped out of city hall and blinked in the outside light. The clouds had finally cleared

and the sky was a bright blue, almost as bright as his shirt. The only clouds about were faint white wisps. A small breeze brushed dried brown leaves around his feet. After a few steps toward the church, he spotted the community center. He waited for a white truck filled with lumber pass the street before he crossed to the other side.

The community center appeared rather modern in style with its sleek black steel facade. At the most, it was probably built ten years before. A sign sporting the words “Gavot Community Center” was staked out in front surrounded by orange mums. In the front window was tacked a paper sign with blocky handwritten words, “Harvest Festival HQ.” He peered inside seeing figures sitting at tables cutting bits of paper and gluing together strange twisting sculptures. Stuart opened the door and went inside. He coughed at the sudden smell that hit him—a fake floral odor most frequently found in craft stores.

And suddenly, he found about fifty pairs of eyes trained on him.

The Bingo Club consisted of ladies approximately fifty years old and up. The previous conversations and their decorating efforts abruptly halted. Their eyes glimmered taking in the solitary male that had appeared on their doorstep. Taking in his un-Gavot-like attire, some of the ladies in the Bingo Club started smiling.

Stuart felt like he was a plump pig that had just stepped up to slaughter. His throat felt suddenly dry. He felt like calling for help but his mouth moved on its own, “Uh, is this the Bingo Club?”

The nearest lady, a lumpy seventy-year-old grandma in a floral tent dress, grinned showing her fake teeth. “You found us. Thinking of joining?”

“I’m sorry, no. I was directed here because I heard that you ladies were in charge of organizing the Harvest Festival?”

“That’s right,” spoke up someone from the back. Stuart turned his head toward the voice. This lady was perhaps twenty years younger and she had a pudgy look, not unlike a snowman. Her hair was short and permed and her lips were painted fire engine red. “I’m Petunia Granger, president of the Bingo Club. Is there anything we can do for you?”

Some of the ladies snickered.

Stuart took that as a cue for his introduction spiel, informing them that he was doing a story about the Harvest Festival and subtly implying that he wasn’t there to help them cut out paper decorations or gluing together strange sculptures that looked like strange animals with too many horns sticking out of their heads.

“Sit down, sit down,” implored the first old lady who had spoken to him. “You’re probably giving half of us neck trouble looking up at you.” Obliging, Stuart took a seat next to her and wondered what he was getting into. The old lady smelled strongly of old mothballs and liquor. He glanced at the cups of refreshment on the tables which were filled with a strange yellow liquid and bright red chili peppers.

Petunia Granger got up to get a glass and a clear-colored beer bottle. She poured the liquid in the cup and handed it to him with a loopy smile. “I bet you’re thirsty.”

Cautiously, Stuart took a sip as most of the old ladies went back to their work and their loud conversations. The liquid smelled like rotting vegetables and beer. He took a sip and felt it burn his tongue and his throat. He took a breath and the rotting vegetable taste and smell suddenly overwhelmed him and he had to put the cup down and found himself hacking and coughing like an untried adolescent.

The seventy-year-old lady pounded his back with surprising force. “Take it easy, dearie. That stuff is an acquired taste.”

“What *is* that stuff?” Stuart wheezed.

The president of the Bingo Club grinned, showing lipstick stained teeth. “It’s Gavot’s own home grown Chili Beer.”

“Isn’t it a bit too early in the day to be liquored up?”

Petunia Granger took a hearty swig from her own cup and gave him a leering smile. “It’s never too early to be liquored up.”

If the seventy-year-old lady hadn’t clamped her wrinkly claw-like hands on his wrist, he would have shot out of his seat and dashed out of the community center.

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## Chapter 9 – Mostly Harmless

Mel found herself back outside and glanced at her watch before she continued back down Main

Street, heading south. She was a bit disappointed that Wally McNab's teenaged assistant was on the job instead of McNab himself, but she consoled herself that it would have been too easy if the furniture salesman had been there when she first visited. But who was she kidding? An easy and fast answer would have settled her mind by now.

She passed a couple more stores, the Corner Diner which she and Stuart had stopped by for dinner the night before, a restaurant that appeared to be a family kind of establishment, and an insurance office that had pasted decorations of colored leaves and horned animals on its front window. A block further down, she finally found herself across from city hall and the town's only church. She took a picture of city hall, amused with its rather ugly boxy style and considered heading toward the building in search of her reporter partner. But then she noticed the community center on her side of the street and the handwritten sign on the window declaring it the Harvest Festival headquarters. Glancing inside, she saw a crowd of old ladies working on decorations. The ones that were standing up and moving about weaved about with no coordination. They needed canes and walkers and medication, she thought.

Mel made her way inside the community center and found herself inside an open communal space with tables filled with decorations and chairs filled with older women. Immediately, her eyes were drawn to the closest table where she found Stuart in a plastic chair and held in place by a ghoulishly grinning woman in a floral dress who was old enough to be his grandmother. Several other women in similar dress at his table were hovering over him. A rather pudgy middle aged woman had managed to wedge her way on his other side. The middle aged woman was waving around a paper cup, her bright red lips perilously close to his cheek. The expression on Stuart's face, revealed by his glasses which had slipped down his nose, was half horrified, half repulsed.

Mel raised her camera to her eye and took a picture.

"What? Who?" The middle aged woman whipped her head around at the sudden flash.

The old woman who was holding Stuart down glared at Mel with slitted eyes.

"Hi Stuart. Fancy finding you here."

"Mel!" Relief tinged his voice.

The old woman retracted her claws. "Is he yours?"

The photographer fought a smile. "He drives the car. Don't mind me, ladies. I just saw the sign saying this was the Harvest Festival headquarters and thought I'll just take some photos of you all hard at work."

The middle aged woman waved her cup around again, looking a bit unsteady. "Go ahead. We'll love to be pictured in the paper." Mel didn't bother to make the correction that she worked at a magazine and not a newspaper; instead she discretely sniffed the air and thought she detected alcohol. Were all these women drinking themselves under the table before noon? She shook her head and began making her way across the room, snapping pictures of glassy eyed women cutting autumn symbols out of construction paper and gluing together prefabricated pieces of wood into strange sculptures of mythical animals that she had never heard of.

Stuart cleared his throat nervously as he watched Mel leisurely make her way around the room. She must be enjoying my discomfort, he thought. So much for rescuing a guy in distress. "Uh, Ms. Granger?"

"Yes?" slurred the president of the Bingo Club.

"You said something about how you organized the Harvest Festival?"

"Ah! The perfect question," she said loudly, putting a fleshy arm around Stuart's shoulders. No one else in the room paid any attention to the obviously drunk woman except Stuart who cringed. "The Bingo Club has organized the festivities ever since it was founded. Before that, it was more of a town effort. Of course, Gavot had a smaller population then, too, so it was easier to get everyone together too."

He discretely checked the recorder in his pocket to make sure that it was on. "So what does the Bingo Club do for the festival besides making decorations?"

"Oh, we organize all the events. The first ones start tomorrow. We'll have some entertainment at the square, singing, dancing, bands. We'll have some booths set up with local craftsmen. And every day until the last day of the festival, we have competitions at Derry Pond. There are three competitions." Petunia Granger ticked them off on her thick fingers. "Swimming, running, and climbing. The person with the best score from the combination of the three is crowned the Horned King—some people say the Horned King is so named after a god in the pagan religion of the old country. He gets to preside over the festivities on the last day and pick a consort to preside with him."

"So the Harvest Festival is based on a pagan festival?" Stuart asked.

The woman shrugged and nearly toppled from her chair. "Gavot has had a Harvest Festival ever since it was founded, ever since the founders kicked the natives out and took over the land for farms and houses. I don't think anyone remembers exactly where it came from."

Mel finally finished her circuit around the room. "Well, I'm done," she announced.

The reporter shot out of his chair in a flash before any of the other ladies of the Bingo Club could get their hands on him. "Thanks, Ms. Granger. That was very informative."

"Any time," the drunk middle aged woman purred. "So are you going to participate in the competitions, like swimming?" she leered.

"Stuart is an excellent swimmer," Mel said seriously.

The women of the Bingo Club whooped at the idea that they might see the reporter shirtless. Stuart's face turned a beet red. He wanted melt into the floor. The photographer simply gave her partner a mischievous grin and waved a goodbye to the bingo ladies before taking his arm and steering him outside.

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"You are evil." Stuart said this mildly as if the statement was the most natural in the world. "You're throwing me to the wolves and you actually find it humorous that I'm going to be torn to bits."

"Those women are harmless," Mel replied flippantly. "You can't fault them for wanting to have a little fun."

"Fun? You call that fun?"

"It's not every day that they can get their hands on young nubile men, you know," she said in mock seriousness. "Most of the guys around here are probably old and married."

They were heading back north on Main Street having decided to go to the café for lunch. Stuart pretended to be miffed at Mel's statement. "No they aren't. Look at those guys," he said indicating the workers at the construction site of the festival scaffolding. "We should drag one of them to the Bingo Club."

"Aren't they a bit too sweaty and dirty?"

"But they can lift heavy objects. Doesn't that impress women? I'm just a skinny nerd."

"You might be a nerd, but you aren't skinny."

"You think I have a beer belly?" he said surprised. He suddenly stopped and lifted his shirt and gave Mel an eyeful of muscled flesh. He patted his stomach. "Maybe you're right. I've been sitting around playing video games too much."

She slapped a hand on her eyes and groaned. "Good God, Stuart, put your shirt down. I didn't know you were an exhibitionist."

"Sorry."

When Mel peeked at him from behind her fingers, he didn't appear sorry. "The next time you try flashing me, you're really going to be sorry."

"Am I going to get spanked?"

Mel desperately tried to squash the image that he had planted into her mind. "Stuart?"

"What?"

"Shut up."

He wasn't smiling, but his eyes which were glinting behind his glasses were certainly amused.

Nearing the town square, many of the tents for the Harvest Festival vendors had been put up while they had been busy at the community center. They were still empty, though. It would only be the next morning when the vendors themselves would arrive with their merchandise and props to fill out the rest of the street.

The café that they had agreed to have lunch at was a narrow slice of the street—merely a room within a larger building complex that sprawled down the street for five businesses. The front of the café had a small green awning with the name painted in front. The Lela Café. What or who Lela was, Stuart and Mel had no idea. But a few yards away from the café, the front door opened revealing a group of leaving patrons. One person in the group was strikingly familiar in his long tied back hair and black clothes. It was the painter who was also staying at the bed and breakfast. At the moment, however, he appeared to be in deep conversation with another man in a business suit and he did not notice his fellow guests coming up the street in the opposite direction.

They made their way inside the café which was filling up rapidly as the lunch hour wore on. The first seats they spied open were a couple of rotating stools at the lunch counter which was manned by a thin

man in a pristine white apron. Mel took in the menu—which was handwritten in chalk on blackboards that were mounted overhead—and quickly ordered a chicken sandwich and a vanilla shake. Stuart decided on a burger and fries combo and a fountain drink. While they waited for their orders to be filled, Mel propped her elbows up on the counter and put her chin in her hands. Her line of sight was on a shelf filled with condiments and pre-cut cake under glass, but she wasn't examining those.

"Mad Dog would have called us by now to check up on us," she said.

Stuart put an arm on the table and turned toward her. The stool squeaked. "Yes." He grimaced. "And then you would have told him about how horribly I interviewed the Bingo Club about the Harvest Festival. He would have chewed my ear off."

"You think I'm a tattletale?"

"You can do it and totally get away with it. I wouldn't want you mad at me."

"Mad?"

"I've seen you in action. You really put Glenda through the wringer before Mad Dog decided you two didn't suit."

"Was I that bad?"

"That and worse."

She hunched her shoulders. "My stupid temper always gets me in trouble."

"Hm."

"You know," she said musing, "I was on the verge of getting fired from *The New Halis Times* before Mad Dog found me."

"Fired?" Stuart looked startled. "Weren't you their star photographer and for some reason or other the owner of *Hot Tread* managed to steal you away?"

"Oh, it was pretty easy for *Hot Tread* to steal me away, especially since at the time I was getting into daily spats with the editorial department of the *Times*. It had nothing to do with my photography, of course."

"What do you mean, 'of course'? Wasn't it some sort of conflict with your style?"

"No. It was something rather out of my hands, of course. You know Steve Pallard?"

"I don't know of him personally, but I've heard of him. He's the head editor for the *Times*, isn't he?"

"Yes, well at the time, he was sleeping with this girl who had just gotten out of art school and she was looking for her big break. It wasn't a secret that Pallard wanted to give her a spot in the *Times*. But if she got a job, someone else had to go. And that someone was going to be me. Mad Dog heard about it from the grapevine and made me an offer I couldn't refuse. I owe the old biker my career."

"That's the first I've heard of the story."

"And it will be the only time," she added. "Mad Dog and I agreed that we wouldn't let the little tidbit that Pallard was practicing favoritism to get out."

"Why not? It's unethical to do that! You worked for the position. You should not have been pushed over for a little nobody willing to spread her legs to climb up the ladder."

She responded with a crooked smile. "Thanks, but things aren't so black and white, Stuart. If the fact got out, Pallard would do all he could to destroy my own reputation as well as lodging some hits at Mad Dog. The editor of the *Times* has his fingers in a lot of places."

"Geez. And you would think people working for newspapers would at least try to be impartial."

The thinning man manning the lunch counter finally slid their orders in front of them. Mel sipped her vanilla shake before taking a bite out of her chicken sandwich. Unlike the usual fast food places in the big city, the sandwich tasted rich and moist reminding her of mushrooms and sautéed peppers instead of caked grease and fake oily cheese. Perhaps, she theorized, less pressure to serve more customers equaled an increase in food quality.

"My own experience in joining the magazine isn't as exciting, I'm afraid," said Stuart in between bites of his hamburger. "With the burst of the internet bubble, the gaming magazine I worked for also folded. Mad Dog had actually read my articles before so when I applied, I got the job."

"Huh. I'm surprised he didn't put you straight to work on field testing the latest games."

"That's what I thought too. But for some reason, he thought I might do as well in the more serious stuff. Well, as serious as a cultural magazine can get. I suppose in a newspaper like the *Times*, they would consider the kind of work we're doing now as fluff pieces. But it's a big step away from game reviews."

"We're not doing fluff," Mel pointed out. "And in a way, Mad Dog helped your career out too. He gave you an opportunity to expand your writing."

Stuart was silent for a moment, seemingly concentrating on his lunch, before he replied, “Maybe you’re right. But you’ve got to admit, sometimes he can go about doing things in a rather roundabout way.”

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## Chapter 10 – Interviews

The mayor preferred to have the interview at his office. The room at the back of city hall was closed off to all natural light—the blinds on the windows at the side of the office were closed and the drapes drawn. An infinitesimal amount of florescent light from the hallway leaked in through the door crack. There was a lamp in the office, a squat ugly thing that had been relegated to the corner. It was visibly unplugged.

Mel and Stuart had arrived at the mayor’s office promptly, according to the chiming of the church’s clock next door. Mel had followed Stuart with the intention of getting some photographs of the mayor but at the sight of lumpy bulk occupying the mayor’s chair, she had balked. There was no way she would be able to take a flattering picture unless the whole point was the portray Gavot’s fearless leader as an oozing blob.

Calling the mayor a fat man, or even an obese man, would have been a sad understatement. Elwood Hinton was a squat toad in a vaguely humanoid form. When the journalists were waiting in the reception area for the mayor to come back from his own lunch break, the city clerk, Belinda Montgomery had given them a brief summary of Elwood Hinton’s genealogy. Hinton’s father, grandfather, and great-grandfather, and so on had all served as mayor of Gavot at one point or another. Not so subtly, Belinda Montgomery implied that the general ineptitude of mayor-hood was due to inbreeding. “His grandfather married his first cousin. So did his father. And predictably, Elwood Hinton continued that tradition,” she said. “I don’t mind saying so, but the latest in the Hinton line isn’t too bright either. But I wouldn’t be surprised if in fifteen years or so he will ascend to the seat of mayor. Gavot isn’t too fond of change even if the current direction is driving it down the drain.”

Elwood Hinton had sort of rolled and oozed in through the city hall doors and gave the journalists a rather clipped and cryptic greeting. They couldn’t tell if he was annoyed with them or simply didn’t care. Mel had inquired about taking his picture. He only gave her a beady eyed stare and said that she had better photograph him in his natural environs—at his desk, in his office.

So they found themselves in the mayor’s office. Mel not so discretely wrinkled her nose at the strong ripe banana smell which permeated the entire room as she raised her camera to take a couple shots of Hinton at his desk and computer. The glow from the monitor gave the mayor a strange slimy appearance. It was in mid-picture that Hinton caught sight of Stuart’s t-shirt under his leather jacket. He made a strange surprised gurgle.

Mel grimaced. No doubt, when she developed the pictures, that one would look like a bloated fish corpse. Stuart was busy fiddling with his recorder and getting out a pad of paper and a pen to notice.

“Emoticon Systems makes the greatest games,” blabbered the mayor. “I just got their newest release of ‘War Dunes’ yesterday.”

The reporter looked confused for a moment before glancing down at his shirt. “Ah, that’s nice,” he replied vaguely. “I got this as a gift for play-testing and reviewing one of their games about two years ago. I’m afraid I’m not so much in the loop of the industry these days, though. I changed genres.”

“Huh?” Apparently Stuart’s explanation was too complicated for the mayor’s brain to process.

“Never mind,” the reporter said quickly. “So mostly we have some questions about the Harvest Festival. You know, about organization, history...”

Hinton waved a pudgy hand, cutting him off. “I’ll just tell you what I told that reporter from *The Callas Post*. The basics.”

“Okay.”

“Every year, the mayor—who happens to be me—gets to start off the Harvest Festival with an opening ceremony. I make a speech and do some ribbon cutting and that’s about it. You should come tomorrow and see it. It’ll be spectacular.”

Mel sat back in one of the cold plastic visitor seats at the side of the room and wondered how a speech could ever be ‘spectacular.’ She hoped the interview would be relatively short as Hinton was obviously quite dim on the light bulb department.

“We’ll be there,” Stuart assured him. “So do you help organize any of the other events in the Harvest Festival?”

“The Bingo Club does all of that. Those old women in the club have plenty of time for that since otherwise they would be stuck at home. My wife says she would like to be in the Bingo Club but I tell her not until Junior is grown. We wouldn’t want Junior to be stuck home alone.”

“Hm.”

The mayor’s beady eyes suddenly lit up. “Have you seen Junior? He makes his old man proud. He’s both class president and football quarterback at Gavot Academy.” He opened a drawer in his desk and took out a picture to pass around. “Cute kid, isn’t he?”

Stuart looked at the photo and made some agreeable noises before he handed it to Mel. The kid in the photograph was a miniature version of his blobby father. She only gave the mayor a weak smile before sliding the photograph back on his desk.

Taking the journalists’ silence as agreement, he boasted, “All the kids look up to Junior. I wouldn’t be surprised if he decides to run for mayor when he grows up.”

Stuart coughed, looking a little queasy at the parental gushing. “Uh, Mr. Hinton, so the Harvest Festival. Everything’s done by the Bingo Club? How do you finance the event every year? Does the Bingo Club raise proceeds to help fund it?”

“The city’s financial director, Lloyd Fenster takes care of that. I have no hand in it. You might want to contact Lloyd if you want to know more about that kind of stuff. But knowing Lloyd, you might not get too far. Gavot is a small town with a small budget, but nonetheless, Lloyd keeps a tight reign on the books, if you know what I mean.”

“You know how we can contact Mr. Fenster?”

“Belinda has that information,” said Hinton. “But now that you mention Lloyd, he really does have some good ideas for Gavot. Ever since I’ve come to office, he’s been the best advisor a man could ask for. Some of his ideas are for sprucing up the place and bringing revenue. His latest idea was to sell a bid to a motel chain to build one of their motels down on Route 76. It’ll bring in more visitors to our little town. And you know how tourists are,” he winked. “They’ll drop money on any little thing.”

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Stuart staggered out of city hall, trailing Mel who had stopped just outside on the sidewalk. The city clerk gave the journalists a sadistic grin before she resumed her typing. Mel was leaning against the side of the building with her eyes squeezed shut, her fingers kneading her temples. Stuart felt a little dizzy and had to support himself temporarily by placing a hand on the wall. He sucked in a lungful of crisp air, trying to clear his mind.

He had finally asked the mayor if he knew about the history and the origins of the Harvest Festival. Instead, the man took the liberty to delve into his family history. For two hours straight.

They had managed to escape when Mel said something about having an appointment. Stuart had hastily agreed and before Elwood Hinton could tell them how his grandfather had contracted the skin infection that eventually led to his slow and painful death, they were out the door.

“Never again,” muttered Mel. “There should be a rule about little town blabbermouths.”

“That they shouldn’t say a single word?” suggested Stuart.

“Yeah.” She finally lowered her massaging fingers and opened her eyes. “May I suggest something?”

“Hm?”

“Next time, for one of your interviews, we bring a roll of duct tape. I hear they work wonders on mouths.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” he said seriously. Stuart straightened up from the wall and glanced down Main Street. Most of the tents for the vendors were up now and the scaffold—or at least the main supports—had been finished. The workers were beginning to board it up with plywood now.

Mel let out a breath and looked up at the sky. It was clear and darkening. She looked at her watch. It was ticking down towards five. “I wasn’t completely lying when I said I had an appointment. The guy I have an appointment with doesn’t know that he has an appointment though.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“I took a look around the McNab Furniture Emporium earlier today. The boy who worked there said Wally McNab was going to be in near closing time.”

The two journalists made their way down the street in a leisurely fashion, occasionally passing other tourists, last minute shoppers, and locals on their way to dinner. Stuart observed the photographer from out of the corner of his eye, his indirect gaze fixated on her hair and the smooth skin of her throat which disappeared beneath the neck of her blue sweater. If he were a photographer, he mused, he would take her picture, just like that—striding confidently down the street. He forced attention away from her and concentrated on the sidewalk just ahead.

Other than the dim light, the furniture store looked like it was abandoned. The teenaged boy who Mel had met earlier was nowhere to be found. Instead, a gaunt man pattered on the other side of the counter at the end of the room. Wisps of white hair decorated his scalp and his face was so full of wrinkles that the skin looked like it was in danger of flaking away. He appeared to be clad in a bright red jogging suit which had pockets for the hands at the belly and black and white stripes running down the sides. It fit him like his skin—saggy and too big for his frame.

“May I help you folks?” His voice was reedy thin and ended on a high note. The man unconsciously licked his sunken lips. He didn’t have any teeth. And perhaps he didn’t care to put in fake ones either just for the sake of appearances.

“We’re looking for Wally McNab,” said Mel.

The man smacked his lips loudly. “That’s me.” And then he turned his head off to one side to succumb to a fit of coughing. “Don’t mind me,” he finally continued when his hacking subsided and he had wiped his mouth with his sleeve. “It’s just that darn time of the year again when my allergies flare up. So what are you looking for me for?”

Mel glanced at Stuart. He had his hands in his pockets again, his lips in a faint semblance of a smile. He seemed content to let her take up the questioning. “We just have some questions concerning a clock,” she said.

“Clock? I have plenty of clocks for sale. Tall ones. Short ones. Cherry, oak, maple, ebony.” He walked around the counter and ambled toward one corner of the showroom where a couple of grandfather clocks were stashed. “If I don’t have one that you’re thinking of, I can probably custom order it for you.”

“Actually it’s a clock that you’ve already sold. It’s at the Townsend House bed and breakfast.”

Wally McNab snorted. “So?”

“We were examining the craftsmanship and we were really curious about one thing—the numbers on the clock face. They looked like carved stone of some sort. But we’re not geologists so we were hoping you could help us figure out what it is.”

The furniture store owner scratched his head. “I don’t know anything about stones. And I don’t remember precisely which model I sold to the Townsends.” He pointed to the closest clock. “The faces look all the same to me.”

Mel and Stuart peered at the clock he was pointing to. The numbers on it gleamed in the same queer waxy way that the gray beads did. Mel felt something rise in her throat. “Yes, that’s what the Townsend’s clock looked like. What are the numbers made of? Surely not mother-of-pearl?”

McNab guffawed. “I don’t sell that sort of fancy stuff. All of these are from local craftsman. This particular one is out of oak. From what I remember, the pendulum and hands are brass. The numbers on the face, well, it sort of looks like horn silver. Not real pure silver, of course. That stuff is scarce.”

“Horn silver?” Mel repeated.

“It’s a sort of ore or something.” McNab shrugged. “There’s a horn silver mine a couple miles away from here, north of the Grandbury farm. You’ll have no luck getting there though. It’s been closed down for years. Most of the horn silver is probably from elsewhere.”

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## Chapter 11 – Dinner Conversation

When Stuart parked the car in the driveway of the Townsend House bed and breakfast, Mel noticed a figure standing in front of the house, the glow of his cigarette a tiny beacon in the evening. When they got out of the car, the smell from the curling cigarette smoke hit them—it was a combination that smelled like cloves and burnt leaves. The figure turned toward them as they approached the front door. He was a compact man, rather short, wearing a jacket of brown with thin black stripes. His face was smudge-like and his shifty dark eyes darted toward the two guests who had just arrived. His hair was covered with a cap, one of those with a front brim, a cap that a golfing caddy would wear in an attempt to ward off the

midday sun.

The man took one more puff on his cigarette before throwing it on the ground and crushing it beneath his heel. Three other cigarette butts littered the ground before the house.

"Evening," said the man. "Are you staying at the Townsend House too?"

"Yes," said Stuart as Mel nodded at the same time.

"Pretty place," he remarked. "The wife would have liked it if she was here. Name's Albert Smith. Everyone calls me Al."

They murmured their introductions as well before Stuart asked, "Are you visiting the Harvest Festival?"

"You could say that. I'm doing a story for *The Callas Post*. Not much going on at the moment, I'm afraid, but tomorrow's going to be a big day."

"Really?" said Mel. "We're also doing a story on the Harvest Festival."

"You two must be from that city magazine, *Hot Tread*," replied Al. He fumbled in his pockets and pulled out another cigarette, but he didn't light it. "I heard you arrived yesterday."

"That's right," Stuart confirmed.

"Don't know why you two came all the way down here for this thing. I don't even know why I'm here. Callas the nearest big town, you know, and there are plenty of events to be covered there. Unfortunately my boss is mad at me at the moment and decided to assign me this fluff piece."

Mel made a sympathetic noise. "Why's your boss mad?"

"He's just like that," Al replied, not wanting to elaborate on his professional problems. He put the cigarette back into his pocket. "The Townsends told me that they were going to serve dinner in a little bit. They said something about apple pies."

The three went inside which was noticeably warmer. They hadn't noticed earlier that a cold front had moved in. Clouds had also moved into the area obscuring the moon and the stars. When they shut the front door as they walked into the foyer, a few of the street lamps on Camden Road flickered as a shadow passed them.

Mel went upstairs to her corner room to wash up. The cat-spirits in the room were uncharacteristically alert as the five of them were clustered around the window looking out into the night. After washing her hands and brushing her wind-swept hair once, she took out the plastic bag of beads from her tote bag which weighed heavily on her palm. Horn silver glinted dully in the bedroom light. She put the beads in her pocket. The furniture store owner, Wally McNab, had said that it wasn't real pure silver. So what was it?

A knock sounded on the door, which made Mel jump. The cat-spirits didn't pay any attention to the noise. Their attention was still trained to the window, watching some invisible lurking outside. Tentatively, Mel opened the door and discovered Stuart standing on the other side, looking at his watch.

"Are we late for something?" she asked.

He looked up and his eyes locked on hers. For a moment, it was as if there were no lenses in the frames of his glasses. It was as if there was no barrier between their gazes. She felt as if he were really seeing her for the first time and that made her uncomfortable. What if he didn't like what he saw? Stuart lowered his head so his face was just inches away from her, but instead of doing what a small part of her had wished he would do, he raised a hand and with one finger traced the curve of her jaw. His eyes then moved past her shoulder, breaking the moment.

Mel let out a breath, the skin along her jaw tingling. "No, we're not late for anything. Except maybe for dinner. I wonder what's keeping them interested?"

Was he asking himself why he was interested in her? She turned her head to see the cat-spirits that he was indicating. "I have no idea."

Something flickered across his face. Mel nearly missed the expression. Did he look worried? Why was he worried about the cat-spirits? They were rather fickle creatures that sometimes did irrational and inexplicable things. And sometimes, and she couldn't help but admit, they knew things. One just didn't know when they would do something vague or something purposeful.

"Well, I'm starving," he announced, turning back toward the hall and stepping aside to let her through. "I think it was nice of the Townsends to cook dinner for their guests. This isn't called a bed and breakfast *and* dinner, you know."

Mel shut the door behind her and walked down the stairs with him. "Perhaps they should start calling this place that."

"But that seems like so much of a mouthful. Isn't there like an actual term for it? Not exactly like

hotel, but perhaps a hostel?"

"Hostel always makes me think of little cheap places in the city for poor traveling students to sleep during the night. Not a home where you get a nice comfy bed and meals."

"Maybe you're right. Perhaps we should make up a name. What's one more word in the English language?"

"Too many words if you ask me," she replied. They had reached the edge of the dining room and Mel could already smell the odor of cooked food. Her stomach embarrassingly rumbled in response. "I guess I'm starving too."

The rest of the guests at the Townsend House bed and breakfast were already seated—the just married couple, the old man, the painter in black, the reporter from *The Callas Post*, and Peter and his parents. Jed and Ida Townsend were busy placing the last platters of food on the table. Their niece Rebecca briefly came out to tell her uncle and aunt that she was going to eat with the cook, Pat, since the dining table couldn't fit any more people. Stuart and Mel squeezed into the two empty seats between Al and Peter. The little boy gave Mel an impish smile as he pointed to a spot on the rug underneath her chair.

"I think Nemo likes that spot."

She took a look and found the golden cat-spirit staring up at her from the floor. "Perhaps he thinks it's a hiding place," she suggested.

"Please, please, dinner is finally served," announced Ida Townsend. She and her husband had taken up the chairs at the opposite ends of the table. "Go ahead, dig in. None of it will bite, I promise you."

While everyone was filling their plates with ribs and chicken and mashed potatoes and salad and Pat's special cucumber and dill casserole, Peter took a chicken leg and placed it on a saucer he took out from underneath a coffee cup at his place setting. When his parents weren't looking, he slipped it to the floor where Nemo promptly pounced on it and began devouring.

As the guests began eating, they expressed the appropriate murmurs of gratuities and compliments which made Ida Townsend beam, proud. Jed Townsend merely grunted, somewhat embarrassed. "Some of the thanks will have to go to Pat and Rebecca," he finally said. "Pat made the casserole and Rebecca helped with the mashed potatoes."

"Of course!" laughed Ida. "Pat is absolutely amazing in the kitchen. And aren't we glad that Rebecca is taking lessons from her?"

"I hope it wouldn't be too much trouble if I asked your cook for the recipe for the casserole?" inquired the woman of the young couple who was named Candice. Everyone had introduced themselves while they were passing the platters around. "It is absolutely fabulous."

"Oh, I don't think Pat would mind. Not unless you're planning to start a bed and breakfast of your own," said Ida.

Candice's husband, Tom, just grinned and said, "You won't have to worry about that. Even if we wanted to start a bed and breakfast, we're both too addicted to our careers."

"Sorry," said Al, his nosy reporter side coming out, "I didn't catch what you did?"

"I'm the head manager of the sales department of Rollings Mutual. It's an insurance company," said Tom.

Candice nodded. "And I'm at Orbits Accounting. That's how we met, actually. Orbits and Rollings have offices in the same building and we just bumped into each other one day. Tom asked me out for lunch and the rest is history."

"Love at first sight," sighed her husband.

Laurent, who was sitting next to Tom, stifled a snicker.

"Are you all right, lad?" the old man sitting next to him said loudly. The man's name was Willard Kingston and he had made a vague reference about being in Gavot to visit an old friend of his.

"I'm all right," Laurent said smoothly. "I just accidentally inhaled instead of swallowed."

Kingston pounded the painter on the back making him cough for real. "You're lucky I know the Heimlich maneuver."

"I once took an emergency health class," chimed in Peter's father, Harold Lane. "I too know the Heimlich maneuver."

"Me too!" chirped up Candice. Tom beamed proudly at his wife.

The painter shook his head violently. "No, no, no. I'm all right really. Otherwise, I wouldn't be talking to you."

"He's got a point," said Stuart.

Laurent grinned at him. Stuart didn't like the glint in the painter's eye. "Thanks for backing me up. Just for you, I'll make sure I'll swallow instead of inhale." The comment went right over everyone's head except Stuart who frowned fiercely and Mel who momentarily gaped at the innuendo before she quickly shut her mouth and turned her attention to her own food.

"Guess where I went today!" said Peter with a mouthful of mashed potatoes.

"Peter!" exclaimed his mother. "Don't talk with your mouthful."

"Sorry mommy." The boy gulped down his food and repeated to Mel, "Guess where I went today?"

Finding herself amused by Peter's bouncy attitude, she said, "Oh, where?"

"You have to guess."

"Hm. Did you go to a store?"

"No." He grinned. "We went to the Granbury Farm. They had lots of stuff for kids. There were games and hayrides and everything."

"Wow. Too bad I didn't know about that. Otherwise I would have gone too."

Peter laughed. "You're not a kid."

"I think I'm a kid at heart," Mel replied. "So did you have fun?"

"Oh, did I ever! They had races and bobbing for apples and I even got to ride on a horse!"

"That's great."

The boy lowered his voice to a loud whisper, "And Nemo tagged along too! He didn't like the hay that much but he loved the candied apples."

"I'm sure."

The rest of the dinner, the conversation was mostly dominated by the chirpy couple Candice and Tom talking about how wonderful their life was and how wonderful their jobs were and how wonderful they found the little town of Gavot. Mel found herself tuning them out. Being so happy about their lives seemed a bit insincere to her. No one could be so perfect—so what were they hiding? But she was no gossip columnist so her curiosity at a possible ulterior motive was tucked away to the back of her brain. Peter seemed content to chat to her even though she was mostly just nodding her head and saying, "That's nice." His parents were talking to Kingston who was reminiscing about the good old days when his friend used to live where he lived and he didn't have to come up to Gavot to visit him.

After Mel took a drink of water, she looked up to see that the painter was grinning at her. Stuart was right, she thought. The guy was a little slimy in an indefinable way. "So how did your painting sales go?" she asked, wracking her brain for something neutral to say.

"I'm in deep negotiations with the buyers," Laurent said seriously. "Although I am confident that we will reach an agreement before the end of the Harvest Festival, I can't imagine them wanting to miss the finale when the Horned King would be announced."

"Yes!" Ida interrupted. "But the competition for getting to be crowned the Horned King, to me, is actually more exciting."

"But it's just a bunch of races, isn't it?" Peter spoke up. "One of the kids I met at the farms said it was just a bunch of old guys swimming and running without their shirts."

Jed chuckled. "You're right, Peter, but Ida likes to watch old guys running about. And they're not all old guys." His wife turned red in the face.

"Yes they are," argued Peter.

Kingston had a glint in his eye. "I believe little Peter means that anyone over the age of fifteen is considered quite old."

The little boy agreed with a bob of his head. "Fifteen is *ancient*."

"A competition, hm," said Candice. "Why Tom, you could enter. It'll be fun!"

"But I don't have any swimming trunks," her husband said.

Candice leered. "Who says you need any swimming trunks?"

"Candice, honey, that's a public gathering!"

"I have quite a few swimming trunks that you can borrow," Jed announced. "As visitors to Gavot, you haven't tried anything until you've tested yourselves against the Harvest Festival competitions."

"Hey, daddy, why don't you try?" said Peter. "Maybe you can win first place!"

"I don't know, son, I'm a bit out of shape," Harold Lane said wryly. "But why the heck not? It'll be nice to get some exercise."

"When is this swimming competition?" Laurent asked Ida.

"Tomorrow at eleven, just before the barbecue that the Bingo Club is catering," she replied. "Are

you thinking of joining in?"

"Why not," the painter said. "I don't have anything urgent to do until the mid-afternoon." His eyes then landed on Stuart who had been studiously ignoring the present conversation by concentrating on cutting up pieces of chicken. The painter smiled, a goading lilt tipping his mouth. "So how about you? Are you going to join in the festivities?"

"Um," the *Hot Tread* reporter replied.

"Come on, it'll be fun," said Al. "You two look to be about the same build. It'll be interesting to see who will win."

"Well..."

"What he means is that he'll do it," Mel cut in.

Stuart gave her a scathing look, but said nothing.

The painter looked like he could rub his hands in glee. "Great."

"I brought my own shorts, thank you very much. And they're orange," announced Kingston. "The Bingo Club will be much obliged to that."

When the others at the table turned toward the old man to ask him why the Bingo Club preferred men in orange swim trunks, Stuart turned to Mel and whispered in her ear. "You are going to pay for volunteering me for that fool competition."

"I thought you were good at swimming," she replied. "Besides, you have to beat *him*."

Stuart's gaze briefly flickered towards the painter. "I can beat him. There's no question about that. But you probably don't want to see me in swimming trunks. Skinny geek and all that."

"Now's not the time to be insecure about your body," she admonished.

"Well, I'd like to see how it would be if you were the one wearing swimming trunks."

She blinked. "What do you mean? I'd be half naked."

"That's the whole point."

Mel stared at his cheeky grin and slowly counted to three in her head before she foolishly gave into the impulse for taking the bowl of mashed potatoes in front of her and dumping it on his head.

"I know you're this close to snapping," he said cheerfully, "but not in front of everybody okay?"

"I'm always this close to snapping," she replied.

"Dessert!" Ida proclaimed. In the midst of their conversations, the hostess had made her way back to the kitchen and had retrieved a large, round, and steaming pie. The guests made the appropriate oohing noises as she set it down on the table with a stack of plates. She began cutting the pieces and putting them onto the plates to be passed around. Mel noticed Peter sneaking one plate to the floor for Nemo who was as ravenous as ever. "What makes it so good are the apples," Ida said as she served. "They're from the Granbury Farm. It's a mix of Macintosh and Granny Smith and Golden. The mix of the flavors is the key to making a good pie."

Mel forked a bite-sized portion of the pie into her mouth. The apples and crust melted against her tongue in a swirl of sweet and tart. "This is amazing," she told Ida. "Do you have any idea if the farm will be open tomorrow?"

"It's open the entire week of Harvest Festival," said their hostess. "You can go there to pick your own bushels of apples or perhaps buy some of their homemade produce which is always good. The Granburys are excellent farmers—that's one of the reasons why they never sold out their farmland like the rest of Gavot. They are good at what they do and they manage to make a profit. They also have hayrides every evening during the festival as well. And afterwards, they let the local star watching club use their back field for astronomical observations. I'll have to warn you though, it gets cold this time of year so if you're thinking of doing the hayride or star watching, you'll have to bundle up."

"Huh," remarked the reporter of *The Callas Post*. "Sounds interesting, but I don't think my editor would go for it."

"Ours would," said Stuart.

Al gave him a questioning look.

"Mad Dog, our editor, is like that," he explained. The painter seemed to jerk in his seat at the mention of Mad Dog, but no one noticed it. "He's into the really niche or the really provincial. He seems to think that city people like reading the stuff. Of course, how can I complain? As long as the magazine sells, I still have my job."

"Of course he would have liked it," Ida said. "Mad Dog stayed there while he was visiting Gavot. I mean, I didn't know him personally, but he was the kind of man that everyone around here would notice. He's definitely not your typical farmer. If you like, I can give you the directions to the farm. It's not too

far north of here.”

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Chapter 12 – Justified Hesitation

“I told you we should have taken the other road,” said Mel, her arms across her chest. The slight smile on her lips was a smug one. “Didn’t I say that Main Street was going to be blocked off today because of the Harvest Festival?”

“I meant to drive this way,” Stuart replied defensively. “Besides, I think we should see the mayor open up the festival before we head on over to Derry Pond.”

“Whatever you say. But considering the interview you did with him yesterday, I don’t think the whole thing will be all that interesting.”

“It’ll be more interesting than that swimming competition.”

“You aren’t going to waltz on your promise, are you?”

“You’re the one who promised for me,” he replied as he parked in a side alley beside a hat shop just outside of Main Street.

They got out of the car and Mel tucked her tote bag securely under her arm. “You aren’t scared of that swimming competition, are you?”

“Who, me? No way. I just think reporters should be exempt from all this physical exertion stuff.”

“But then you won’t be able to actually live the story,” Mel replied. “If you experience it all yourself, it’ll be that much easier to write.”

“I don’t need experience. I have a pretty good imagination so I could make everything up and no one would be the wiser.”

“But then that would be fiction, not news.”

“No.” They had walked out of the alleyway and were at the moment standing in front of the hat store. Looking down Main Street, the sidewalks were surrounded by white tents hovering over fold up tables strewn with all sorts of merchandise. The vendors themselves, wearing large pocketed aprons for more efficient money gathering, stood beside or sat under their respective tents, not so subtly eyeing the early festival visitors. “If you know so much about gathering experience and writing news stories, why don’t you just write the article?” said Stuart.

“You’re the one with the writing skills,” she said. She held up her camera which was secured with a strap looped around her neck. “I’m just the one who points and shoots.”

At the town square on the grass island at the center of the blocked off roundabout, the scaffold that the workers had been building the previous day was finally finished. It stretched upward, perhaps a story and a half to two stories tall. The metal pole supports were completely covered with sheets of plywood that had been painted a deep brown. A symbol of a horned animal—a bull or a stag or a ram, one couldn’t quite tell, perhaps it was something else altogether—was drawn at the four sides of the scaffold. There was a ladder leading up to a platform where the Horned King and his consort were to appear at the last day of the festival. A symbolic red ribbon was tied between two poles at the ground in front of the scaffold.

A crowd had gathered around the place, gawking and taking pictures. Mel and Stuart pushed their way through the growing throng of people to secure a place near the front where Mel proceeded to snap pictures. The mayor, Elwood Hinton, and the town clerk, Belinda Montgomery, were at the front near a small foot high platform. Another man was there standing next to the mayor and the clerk, a tall middle-aged man with steel gray hair and thick handlebar mustache. He glanced, bored at the crowd. Hinton caught sight of the journalists from *Hot Tread*, and recognizing them, began preening for the camera.

Despite the growing noise of conversation, the clock from the church at the end of Main Street could be heard chiming the tenth hour. With that cue, the mayor stepped onto the small platform with a microphone in his hand to greet the crowd.

Mel paid little attention to the fat mayor who rambled on about the beginning of the Harvest Festival and how it was a grand annual tradition that went back for ages, back to when the founders of Gavot arrived at the town to settle down. Instead, her eyes were drawn to the clerk and the man beside the podium. The man was whispering into the clerk’s ear. Belinda Montgomery nodded, but her expression remained unreadable. Finally, the mayor stopped his mouth, and from the pocket of his brown jacket, produced a pair of scissors which he proceeded to use to cut the red ribbon at the foot of the Harvest Festival scaffold. When the ribbon fell to the ground, the crowd gave a cheer and the edges of the

gathering began to automatically disperse.

“Well, that was real exciting,” Mel said, deadpan.

“I liked the ribbon cutting the best,” replied Stuart. He shoved his hands into his leather jacket. Earlier in the morning, he had buttoned it up, covering his latest technology themed t-shirt. “So why don’t we go take a look around at what they’re selling at all these vendors?”

“I don’t think so. You’re just stalling. We’re going to Derry Pond now or we’ll be late.”

“Aw, Mel.” But he just sighed and walked beside her as they made their way back down Main Street to the rental car. “I was hoping you would forget about that.”

“Sorry, no. I’m not senile yet. Besides, it’s not like you to drag your feet about something you like. I thought you liked swimming. Granted, I’ve never seen you swimming, but I’m taking Mad Dog’s word that you do it in your free time.”

He snorted. “Free time? I try to make it to the pool at least once a week.”

“Okay, then.” They had reached the car and they got in. Stuart started the engine and a moment after, they were cruising down Camden Road, in search of the small street that Ida Townsend had mentioned that was an alternate route to the pond that was owned by one of the few farmers still around the area. “It is a pond though and not a disinfected indoor pool. You’re not a germ freak, are you?”

“I’m careful about my health,” he said, “but it’s not that. I actually grew up somewhat in the country. One of my uncles owned some land with a pond where my friends and I went skinny dipping.”

“All right. So maybe you are afraid to lose.”

“I’ll probably lose in the whole scheme of things, but I am not going to let that painter beat me.” He said this casually so that Mel could tell that this wasn’t the reason either that he was hesitating about the swimming. “Have you ever gone skinny dipping, Mel?”

“Only in a bathtub.”

He tsked. “You’re missing something by not trying it in a pond.”

“And you’re changing the subject.”

“There’s a reason why I’m changing the subject.”

“Why?”

“Because you’ll know soon enough why I’d rather go shopping on Main Street than going out to this competition.”

She frowned at his enigmatic comment. “Sometimes you’re really complicated.”

“Oh, I’m not complicated at all. I’m surprisingly simple.”

“That’s the most bald, outright lie I’ve ever heard.”

Farmland passed them and soon a couple of trees began to take over the countryside. They arrived at an intersection where a large sign, handwritten in bold red paint, indicated that they should turn right to get to Derry Pond.

“Really, I am quite uncomplicated,” Stuart argued. “If I had a beer, a challenging video game, and a naked babe, I’d be the happiest guy in the world.”

Mel rolled her eyes. “And I suppose this naked babe is serving you the beer?”

“Most definitely. Although she doesn’t necessarily have to like video games.”

“Why not? I thought most people who played any sort of game would like to have an opponent.”

“Yes, but she’d be around for a different reason altogether.”

She sighed. “Well, there’s the pond. It’s rather hard to miss. It’s more like a mini-lake.”

The road they were driving on had petered out into a dirt track and eventually dead-ended into a grassy field where cars and trucks were parked in a rather haphazard fashion. Stuart parked next to a beat up tan car that looked like it only had enough room for a couple of midgets and stretched his legs when they were finally out. The pond itself was across the makeshift parking lot. Under the sky, it was a clear black mirror with a few tall weeds standing at the edges.

A sizeable crowd had already arrived at Derry Pond. To one side, folding tables and chairs were set up, but they were filled with food to be grilled and party supplies. Two hefty middle-aged men in shirts and shorts were preparing two large grills for the lunch time barbecue. Around the rest of the lake, people had spread out picnic cloths and blankets. Some were standing about, mingling and talking. Others were lying on their blankets attempting to get tanned. Mel already had her camera out and was snapping pictures.

Some men were already ready in their swimming trunks, eyeing the edge of the water. One man, short, balding, holding a stopwatch, was instructing some young boys to take their positions around the pond so they could corroborate the winner of the race. Stuart wandered over to a group of middle aged

people standing a little ways from the water. They looked like locals and he had a vague idea for querying them about their opinions on the competition.

“Ooo! Look who we have here!”

Stuart found himself freezing at the sound of the leering feminine voice. An arm slipped around his shoulders and he smelled alcohol.

“Ladies, he made it after all!”

He didn’t have to turn around to know who this was, but nonetheless, he found himself shoved around and suddenly he was in the midst of a hoard of old ladies in out-of-date floral, bottles in hand, clearly drunk before lunch time. He had not noticed them earlier. How on earth did the Bingo Club suddenly materialize in this place? Mel. Where was Mel?

Petunia Granger, the president of the Bingo Club, had her hands on the prize and didn’t want to let go. “I’m so glad you made it to the swimming competition,” she cackled. “My friends and I are so looking forward to it.”

“Uh, yeah.”

The other ladies leered at him and waved their beer bottles around whooping. There should be a law about public drunkenness, he thought. Where was Mel? No doubt, she was probably laughing her head off if she noticed.

“It’s always the same with just the locals,” Petunia pouted. “But it’s nice to see some visitors participate. It spices things up.”

Good grief. He fervently wished that he was anywhere but there, but no one heard his wish.

One of the other old ladies latched onto his hand. “So you decided to come here without your girlfriend, eh?”

He felt himself flush. “Actually, Mel is here. She’s the one who suggested I come in the first place. She should be around taking pictures...” He deliberately failed to mention that technically, Mel was not his girlfriend.

Petunia gave him a lipstick-stained grin. “Too bad and I thought I would have you all to myself.”

Stuart cringed as the president of the Bingo Club moved as if to kiss him.

“Hey Stuart, it looks like you’re quite popular around here.”

He turned at the familiar voice. “I thought you were still taking pictures.”

“I’m saving some for the competitions,” said Mel. “Morning ladies. Are you all here to watch the competition?”

“Of course,” huffed one of the members of the Bingo Club. “We organized the whole thing, didn’t we? So of course we wouldn’t miss it.”

The photographer nodded, seemingly oblivious to the women still surrounding the reporter. Is she going to stand there all day chatting with them? Stuart thought in despair. Mel continued, “It looks like your organization paid off. Plenty of people here. A success, I’d say. A lot of the other guests at the bed and breakfast that we’re staying at have also decided to join in the competition.”

“How nice,” said Petunia, bored.

“Oh, look, there’s Laurent,” said Mel. “He’s a swimmer and a painter.”

Some of the old women glanced where she was indicating and squealed in delight. Wondering what was going on, the rest of the Bingo Club turned their heads to see what was the matter. Petunia Granger slightly loosened her grasp on the reporter. Stuart took the opportunity to slip a couple paces away from her.

“I also heard that he specializes in nudes.”

With that remark from the photographer, the Bingo Club and their president took off toward the figure in black who was chatting with someone near the barbecue grills. At the noise, the painter looked up to see the club bearing down on him. His eyes widened in alarm.

“Of course, I don’t really know if he specializes in nudes or not,” she continued when the Bingo ladies were out of hearing. “He might as well be a post-modern abstract cubist for all I care.”

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Chapter 13 – A Swim

“Hi Mel! Hi Stuart!” From a few yards away, Peter was waving from a picnic blanket that he shared with his parents. The boy’s golden cat-spirit was with nearby, pouncing on imaginary rodents in the

grass. The two journalists turned to wave at the boy.

“That’s the first time I’ve seen a cat-spirit outside before,” Mel remarked. “I wonder how common that is here?”

Stuart looked thoughtful. “I have no idea. Too bad you can’t capture them on film.” He unbuttoned his leather jacket. “It’s a bit brisk out here. I have a hunch that the water is going to be quite cold.”

“All the more reason to win,” she said. “The faster your time, the faster you can get out of the water.”

“You have a point.” He shucked his jacket revealing a black t-shirt with a pixelated logo that said “Wetware Co.” and tossed it to her. Mel caught it with one hand and folded it over her arm. “But I’m not here to win. As you said earlier, I’m here for the experience.” He took off his glasses and handed them to her.

Carefully, she put them in her tote bag so they wouldn’t get lost. Under lowered lashes, she watched him pull off his t-shirt, revealing sinewy muscle and skin lightly dusted with dark hair. “And you were saying before that you didn’t really want to do this swimming competition. Although with those ladies from the Bingo Club around, I guess I wouldn’t blame you.”

“Well, thanks to you, they’re preoccupied with something, or shall I say someone, else now. I’m all yours.”

“Oh?”

He gave her a saucy grin, unzipped his jeans and pulled them off.

She suddenly laughed. “That’s real cute, Stuart. Swimming trunks with cats?”

“Why not? It’s no more ridiculous than hearts or smiley faces.”

Mel shook her head. “Get your butt over there before they start the race without you.”

* * *

The line of men on the far shore of Derry Pond, was to say the least, diverse. Short, tall, thin, stout, hairy, hairless. Stuart stretched momentarily to warm his muscles. The air was cool—not really his ideal temperature. He blinked and peered covertly at the other men and silently cursed himself for being somewhat blind without his glasses. There were a few muscle-bound men who would most likely beat him. Construction workers and farm boys. He spotted the long-haired painter a couple paces away. Apparently he had somehow managed to get away from the Bingo Club to get to the starting line.

Soon, everyone was lining up at the shore, feet and shoulders tense as they readied to dive into the black pond waters. The spectators stood at the side of the pond, eyes wide, expectant. Some of the bingo ladies hollered and whistled. A small short man stood on a rock near the pond, his hand holding a small gun. He fired it into the air and with a collective splash, the swimmers dove into the pond—some as graceful as arcing fish and others as uncoordinated as a mishandled bowling ball.

The water was cold and heavy. Stuart raised his head taking a breath and with automatic training, his arms moved and his legs kicked. Once in the water, he didn’t care about the other swimmers floundering in splashes and curses. He didn’t care too much about winning either. All he could see was the other shore—without his glasses, it was merely a brown green blur at the edge of the black pond. No one said anything about the type of swimming stroke to use so he did the usual freestyle that he practiced on his time at the pool at home. Straight as a torpedo, legs as propellers, arms to guide him.

Dimly, he registered the other men. Some of them were ahead, some of them behind. He added a bit of energy to his muscles, warming them up despite the cold pond. He shot ahead. Whenever he came up for a breath, the shore seemed a bit closer. In the waters, he could see two figures cutting through the darkness. They weren’t that far ahead though and if he tried, perhaps he could also beat them. But those two men were not ones he recognized. So he kept his pace, making sure he did not get ahead or fall behind.

All too soon, his feet touched the bottom and he took one last heaving breath before he stood up, letting the water stream down his body. He looked back at the pond with a wistful glance. A majority of the men were still floundering in the middle of the pond—they were the ones who were sadly out of shape, the ones who had stayed on the couch drinking beer the rest of the year. A few others were catching up to him, including the painter who was still yet a couple yards from the shoreline.

He felt a hand touch his shoulder. He tensed. Not the Bingo Club again, he prayed. But the hand didn’t feel thick, papery, or weighty. It was light, almost a feathery touch. Was he imagining things? The hand was then released from his shoulder and the fingers slightly caressed his arm, following the path of a

drop of water. He hunched his shoulders, trying to suppress a shudder of pleasure.

“You came in third,” said an amused voice close behind him.

He cursed his sudden reaction at Mel’s voice. It’s the damn adrenaline from the swimming race, he berated himself. “I hope you have a towel. I’d hate to go around dripping wet the rest of the day.”

There was a rustling as Mel opened her tote bag and pulled something out. “Here. But I think as a swimmer, you would be used to walking around wet.” He grabbed the blue towel that she held out, cursorily wiped his chest and arms, and wrapped it around his waist before he turned around. She was standing perilously close to him, her mouth upturned in a laugh, “I wouldn’t mind.”

“I hope you still have my clothes too.”

“Oh, don’t worry. I haven’t burned them.” She handed him his glasses which he quickly put on to bring everything back into focus.

The pond water at the shore frothed as the swimmers finished their lap. Some of them made noises about the temperature of the water. The short man who started the race with his gun announced the winner, another man who was heavily muscled from construction work. The short man also announced that it was the fourth year in a row that he had won. As a prize, he pulled out a necklace of gray beads from his pocket and looped it around the winner’s neck. Mel and Stuart watched the announcement, silent and frozen, attention fixed to that necklace.

“Perhaps Mad Dog won something like that,” she mused.

Before he could reply with a similar sentiment, a commotion some ways away diverted his attention from the winner of the swimming competition. The Bingo Club had finally swarmed over to the edge of Derry Pond. Laurent, the painter, had just gotten up from the water. Spying the old ladies, he let out a yelp before hurrying away in the opposite direction. The rest of the finishing swimmers, spooked from the way the drunken ladies were giving them suggestive leers and wolf whistles whether they were attractive, dumpy, or even halfway decent followed suit. Only the old man, Willard Kingston, another guest at the Townsend House bed and breakfast stood fast at the Derry Pond bank, proudly showing off his assets in his bright orange swimming trunks.

Some of the bingo ladies stuck out their tongues at him.

Stuart grabbed Mel’s upper arm and steered her away from the bank, toward the more benign looking group surrounding the winning swimmer.

“Ow! What the crap do you think you’re doing?”

“Trying to save my hide.”

“You don’t have to be so obvious about it.”

“Well, it’s not like I’m seeing anyone else be subtle either.” He let go of her arm. “Come on, let’s congratulate the winner and maybe I can get some quotes that I might be able to use.”

They eventually made their way toward the small group of people crowding the winner—a tall muscled man with brownish yellow hair and a face of granite—giving him handshakes, high fives, and slaps on the back. A slim woman with a tiny mini-skirt had wrapped her arm possessively over the winner’s torso. She looked familiar, he thought.

“Isn’t that the woman from the car rental place?” the photographer mused, her voice only carrying so far to his ear.

“Only two more competitions to go,” said someone to the winner who they soon found out was named Johnny. “You think you’ll be up to them?”

The man shrugged. “Sure, although I’ll say there’s some pretty tough competition this year.” His gaze went to Stuart. “That was pretty good that you came in third. If I didn’t know better, I’d have thought you were just pacing yourself so you wouldn’t get ahead.”

“But you won,” Stuart said simply. He held out his hand to shake Johnny’s hand. “Fair and square, I’d say. I’m just a recreational swimmer. And I don’t think I’ll be doing any of the other competitions.”

“Really.” Johnny didn’t sound convinced.

“I’m just an out of town reporter writing a story about the Harvest Festival. So how does it feel to be the four-time winner of the swimming competition?”

“I guess the competing for me never really gets old. I’m imagining that the competitions next year will feel just as exciting. Is that right, Heather?”

The woman in the mini-skirt at his side just purred. “It’s always exciting.”

“Just one question about the prize, though,” said Stuart. “Is it traditional for you to receive a necklace? It seems, well, quite unusual. One would expect a medal, a ribbon, or some sort of trophy.”

“This thing?” The winner tugged on the gray beads around his neck absently. “It’s traditional. They give a strand of horn silver beads to the winner of each competition as well as to the Horned King who’s crowned at the end of the festival. I have no idea how it started but I’m sure there was a reason. I don’t think anyone really remembers why any more. Perhaps you could ask some of the older folks.”

“That’s interesting,” replied the reporter. “Are those beads specially made for the festival or are they fairly commonplace around here and that they only take on a special significance at the Harvest Festival?” He noticed that the winner’s girlfriend slightly narrowed her eyes at his question.

“They’re only given out during the festival,” Johnny said blithely. “They’re made especially for the festival too. Lloyd Fenster, the guy who helps fund this whole thing, specially orders them from some guy down south who makes jewelry for a living.”

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## Chapter 14 – Vegetable Sale

Mel stood just outside of the Townsend House on the lawn a few yards away from the front door. She had been wearing a thin dark sweater, but as it was getting cooler, she had taken her jacket with her, a ratty woolen wrap the color of cucumber rinds. She had gotten it back in her college days thinking that it was the greatest fashion. Now it was out of fashion, which was just as well. The only fashion she cared about these days was her photographs.

The afternoon sky was a turbulent gray—the wind was frisky, trying to tug at her hair which she had pulled back into a ponytail. The days were getting shorter. Time was getting shorter. She hugged her tote bag to her. A little earlier, she had phoned back to the office at Hot Tread asking Mad Dog’s secretary if there had been any progress. No, she had said, the doctors still couldn’t figure out why he was still in a coma. Mad Dog’s sister was still out of the country and no one could reach her. The editor’s fate was still in limbo.

There had been an itching at the back of her mind. Yes, the hospital was at a stand still concerning Mad Dog’s welfare, but there was something else. It was just one of those things, like cat spirits and real cats. You just knew what one was when you saw them. And she just knew that if she and Stuart didn’t solve whatever it was that drew Mad Dog’s attention to this little farming town before the end of the week, Mad Dog might never wake up again.

“It’s too bad that whenever we look back at childhood, it’s always through nostalgic rose-colored glasses.” Stuart stepped out of the bed and breakfast, quietly closing the door behind him. He stood at the doorstep, an eye on Mel’s back. His hair was wet, after a brief shower, and he had changed into a fresh pair of jeans and a plain beige long-sleeved shirt. “One forgets how scummy and brackish pond water is.”

“I’ve never gone swimming in a pond.” Mel turned her head to glance at the reporter. “I only took lessons at the local community pool when I was younger. But my parents didn’t let me become too serious about it. They made me take ballet lessons.”

“Did you like dancing?”

“I was horrible at it. I’m a complete klutz about that kind of thing. I can’t be graceful no matter how hard I try.”

“You could have fooled me,” he murmured.

The edge of her mouth curved. “Perhaps you don’t know me all that well after all.” She turned to walk toward the car. “Ida Townsend said we are to take State Road north for a couple of miles if we want to get to Grandbury Farm. There’s supposed to be a big red silo at the intersection we have to turn at.”

“She also said that Mad Dog stayed at the farm while he was visiting Gavot,” he said. “I wonder why—are they his relatives or friends? It doesn’t seem like Mad Dog to suddenly take to the country.”

They got in the car and Stuart drove. In the darkening afternoon light, the fields of wheat and corn looked like pale hairs rising from the ground. In the wind, the plants waved and bent like a thousand grasping fingers. The two journalists didn’t talk during the drive. Stuart kept his eyes on the road, expression slightly frowning. Mel stared out the passenger window not really seeing the outside scenery at all. She wasn’t thinking much at all either except for the fact that the clouds overhead looked like ghosts trying to claw their way back to the earth.

Then, as Ida Townsend had said, a red silo rose from the fields like a bloody finger pointing the way down the crossroads. After Stuart turned onto a bumpy, cracked, little-used road, Mel leaned back in her seat and momentarily closed her eyes.

“What is the connection between being chosen as the Horned King and receiving a string of horn silver beads?” she asked.

“Perhaps it is the name,” he replied. “Horn silver seems like an appropriate thing to give a horned king. But that’s just words.”

She breathed out, feeling dejected. “No one around here seems to know why any of their traditions started. Is no one proud of their own history anymore? And even if they aren’t, why aren’t they remembering for posterity?”

“Maybe we’re just asking the wrong people. There’s always the library.”

“What’s the chance that it’s open during the holidays?”

“We can always call up the librarian.”

“Yes. I’ve seemed to have forgotten that you call people up for interviews for living.”

Both of them lapsed into silence, feeling disinclined to talk. Perhaps it was the weather, Mel thought. The sky didn’t look particularly happy. It didn’t look like the morning which had been all blue and sunny. At least Stuart wasn’t talking either. It was a somewhat comfortable silence—which frightened her a little. She had never had remotely comfortable silences with men before. It was either filled up with chatter or stonewalled silence because her temper was acting up.

A few miles more, the fields momentarily gave way to a two story stone house with light blue shutters. A sign was staked out on the road. “Grandbury Farm.” Pictures of apples were painted under the name like a stenciled border. Several other cars were parked in a small part of a nearby field which had been cleared out. They stopped there. From the parking, they could see the backyard of the house where tables were set out displaying fresh produce, jams, and pickled vegetables. Pumpkins and squash of all sizes and colors littered the ground around the tables. People were milling about looking for the best fruit.

Mel inclined her head toward the makeshift produce sale at the back of the farmhouse. “I’ll meet you there in one hour. I’m going to try to get as many pictures in before the light fades too much.”

“Good luck.” He tucked his hands into his jeans and watched her briefly as she made her way to the front of the house. He turned and walked to where all the people were milling about.

Stuart plunged into the farm’s backyard bazaar, among the patrons dressed in overalls and jackets with tractor logos. The men were the burly types—either bald or mullet-haired and thick facial hair with long side-burns. These men liked to joke about the produce which they kept a somewhat disinterested eye on. Whose pumpkin was larger than the others? Or whose zucchini was bigger for that matter? And then the men would let out loud guffaws and slap each other on the back.

The real customers doing the produce picking were these men’s wives and girlfriends—women with frizzy hair and too much make-up, too tight jeans on either a bony frame or a chubby frame. There were no women of in between size. They would brutishly touch the vegetables and make either an exclamation of disgust or a self-satisfied snort. Some of them would gossip—none too softly—and then laugh like their husbands—car horns all of them.

He knew he stuck out from the backwater crowd like a target, just waiting to be hit. But what could he do? He would have to endure the sly looks for about an hour until Mel arrived. He scowled, feeling not as subtle stares prodding at him, asking why a nerdy looking city boy would dare penetrate their little enclave.

An older woman stood at the end of one of the tables with a battered tin cash box in front of her. She wore a thin jacket the color of wild raspberries and a shapeless floral dress. Her hair, gray-streaked brown, was tied back in a bun. Her face was lined and she wasn’t smiling as she watched the redneck patrons milling about with a dark gaze.

“Good afternoon, Ms...” began Stuart.

“Hannah Grandbury,” the woman replied. Her eyes narrowed slightly. “You’re not from around here, are you?”

He gave her a deceptively lazy smile. “No.”

“Are you just a visitor taking a look around or are you going to be buying anything?”

Stuart shook his head. “I’m a reporter from *Hot Tread* doing a story on the Harvest Festival. I heard about you place from some of the locals.”

“*Hot Tread*, huh?” The expression on her face relaxed a bit. “You don’t happen to know someone named Ralph Bartlett, do you?”

“In fact, yes. He’s the head editor of the magazine. He assigned the Harvest Festival to me and a photographer.”

“We called him Mad Dog,” she informed him. “It just seemed to suit his personality better, you

know? He came down here to the farm not so long ago to visit.”

“He’s a friend of yours?”

She chuckled. “It’s a convoluted relationship, I’m afraid. He’s my husband’s uncle’s sister-in-law’s cousin’s nephew.”

Stuart blinked. “I see.”

“Our family occasionally has a really large reunion down in Callas. Pretty much anyone of any relation is invited. Last year, we had around three hundred people attend the reunion. And I tell you, it’s quite difficult to keep everyone straight in your head.”

“I bet.”

“My cousin Carl has taken it upon himself to map everyone onto a family tree. He has it privately published and he’s in the process of printing up some copies to distribute to everyone.”

“But excuse me, Mrs. Grandbury, I had the impression that Mad Dog had very little in the way of family. He only has a sister.”

“His only closest relative, you mean,” she said. “Well, I bet Mad Dog is out working in the big city. How is he?”

Stuart shuffled his feet, but he met the woman’s eye. “He’s not doing so well, I’m afraid. He collapsed about a week ago and had to be taken to the hospital.”

“Mercy!”

“He’s in a coma.” He swallowed but his throat was dry. He watched the woman’s face twist in what looked like shock. But her dark eyes remained cold and dull. “The doctors are doing whatever they can to help him.”

“I hope his sister has been contacted.”

“She has, although she’s overseas.”

Hannah Grandbury sighed. “If it weren’t the Harvest Festival and the height of the fall season when we sell the most produce, I could probably spare a day to go out to the city to see him. But as it is,” she shrugged, “perhaps we can contact someone else from the family to go out there.”

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Chapter 15 – Paul Grandbury

The stone house was an interesting piece in the middle of the crop fields. It was a squat cairn in the middle of nowhere, directing to no place in particular. Mel took care to frame a couple of shots and took a couple photographs of the surrounding countryside as well.

The sky was getting darker and all of the windows of the house were shuttered. When she turned her back to head over to the produce sale in the back yard, she did not notice the drapes of one of the upper story windows lift to reveal a pair of narrowed, watching eyes.

She noticed the patrons of the Grandbury farm vegetable sale, milling about, examining vegetables, and putting the ones they wanted in bags and baskets. When they were done choosing their bounty, they would come up to an older woman with a bun in her hair and a cash box in hand to pay for their purchases. Stuart stood a little to the side and he appeared to be interviewing this woman. Mel stood a little apart from the small crowd to take pictures. No one noticed her as she stood in the shadows of the house. Eventually, she finished her current roll of film and with a practiced hand, she changed the film to a fresh roll and slung the camera across her shoulder. As she stepped out of the shadows, she felt the eyes of the vegetable sale patrons flicker toward her, judging. She was obviously different and they said nothing, but she knew they were wondering where she had appeared from.

“Hey Mel!” Stuart had spotted her approaching the vegetable stand and was waving her toward him. Was it just her or was there a relieved tone in his voice? She walked over to him making sure she gave a wide berth to the stumbling bearded men in overalls with leering eyes and the catty women with big hair. “I want you to meet the owner of this place, Hannah Grandbury. She’s, uh, a distant relative of Mad Dog, actually.”

She shook hands with the older woman who regarded her passively. Hannah Grandbury seemed amazingly uncurious and unsurprised. Her gaze missed nothing, but it was more automatic than indicative of an active intelligence behind them. Hannah Grandbury was on autopilot. Mel wondered if her impression was because the woman was bored with everything—after all, the sale and the visitors with questions probably came every year. And if she knew Mad Dog, she probably already knew all about the

magazine that they worked for.

The older woman turned away for a moment to take payment from one of the customers before telling them, “When Mad Dog stayed with us recently, all he talked about was how Gavot would make it to his magazine. He wanted to do a big story on it, devote an entire issue to the town. He was going to have several reporters, actually, to come here. I suppose he only spoke with you two before he, uh, fell ill.”

Stuart nodded. “He only spoke to us about his desire to do a story about this town. I could understand him wanting one article on Gavot, but an entire issue? He must really like this place.”

“Perhaps,” Hannah Grandbury replied. “I told him that it was rather ridiculous to do an entire issue. There simply isn’t all that much here, you know? It’s just a farming town. If you want to know more about Mad Dog’s plans on Gavot, you might want to ask my husband. Poor fellow, he had to endure Mad Dog’s non-stop chatter about it while he was here. You two can take the back door to the house—it’s open—and he should be in the kitchen working on the cider. Tell him that I sent you.”

“She’s a rather odd woman, isn’t she?” said Mel as the two journalists trudged past the milling patrons of the vegetable stands to the back of the stone farmhouse. “I had the feeling that she was expecting us.”

“Of course she was expecting us,” Stuart replied breezily. “Mad Dog was the editor of a magazine and he told her he was going to send reporters to the town to do a story. If there are reporters, some of them would be bound to find their way here.”

“I suppose so.”

The back door to the farmhouse was actually two doors—first a screen door before the actual red-painted wood door with a tiny window and white curtains. Stuart opened the doors and motioned for Mel to go ahead of him. She stepped into a noticeably warmer room with a stone floor, fireplace, and kitchen counters. Copper pots hung overhead. A thin older man with steel gray hair, green cap, and a checkered red and blue shirt, perched atop a stool next to a counter. On the counter looked to be some sort of equipment—perhaps a harness. In one hand, he held a rag which he was wiping over the harness. Next to the harness was a canister of polish oil. He looked up as the two journalists stepped into the kitchen. His face was dark and expressionless.

Mel coughed. “Good afternoon. Hannah Grandbury sent us here to talk to her husband.”

“That’s me,” the older man drawled. “Name’s Paul.”

The two journalists introduced themselves and Hannah Grandbury’s husband invited them to pull up stools to sit down.

“So you’re from Mad Dog’s magazine, huh?” said Paul Grandbury. “Fancy that. But I suppose in a way, it’s not so surprising. So I guess you want to know about the farm, eh? Well, let’s start all the way back in the beginning. You know when Gavot has been founded?”

Stuart nodded. “We read up on some of the town’s history before coming up here.”

“Good, good. So I won’t have to repeat all that boring history stuff for you. Well, Grandbury Farm has been here ever since the town has been founded. My ancestor Edgar Grandbury staked out the land around here and ever since then, this whole property has been in my family. And so far, it has always been a farm. I’d say that we’ve been really lucky these past, oh, fifty years or so. Many of the families around here had to sell their lands because of the new farming techniques that have been introduced. It makes it hard for a farmer to compete with the large corporations these days, you know?”

“It looks like you’ve been doing well so far,” said Mel.

Paul Grandbury nodded. “We’ve been real lucky. And so far, it looks like the farm’s going to continue on, at least for the next generation. My son and his high school sweetheart are both at college now, but once they graduate, they’ll be coming back here to help with the farm. I guess when I retire, he’ll be taking over. I’m real glad he’s majoring in agriculture. A lot of my friends’ kids these days would rather do communications or history or even physics!” The older man shook his head at the thought of the kids’ strange interests. “Now I tell you, what good is a physics degree? You can’t do anything practical with that!”

“You could work in the government’s energy or defense program,” Mel said.

The farmer snorted. “That’s not practical.”

Stuart sighed, wanting to get the conversation back on track before it devolved into a physics bash-fest. “So, Mr. Grandbury, your family has pretty much kept the farm going throughout the generations?”

“Oh yes. We’re quite proud of that. All our names are written on the back pages of Edgar Grandbury’s first book, an almanac that he bought from the grocery store that was first built in Gavot. It’s

sort of a family tradition to write down our names as well as the birth and death dates. It's sort of like a private genealogical document. It also comes in handy when we try to contact everyone for the family reunions."

"I see."

"At any rate, the line's been pretty much unbroken. But knowing Mad Dog, he'd probably want you to write about what we do at Grandbury farm. It's pretty much like any other farm. We have the wheat and corn—I manage that with the tractor and plow and such. You can probably read up on the hows and whys in agriculture books. It's pretty much the same elsewhere."

"And what about the vegetables that your wife is selling out back?" said Mel. "You keep a vegetable garden too?"

The older man chuckled. "Oh, not me, actually. Hannah actually takes care of that as well as our daughter when she's not in school. She usually has pumpkins and squash and zucchini and things like that. She grows plenty of gourds, ready for the Harvest Festival. If you didn't know, a traditional dish most people around here like to make for the Harvest Festival is squash soup. It contains all sorts of squash and pumpkins and gourds—sort of like a stew—along with seasoning. The seasoning can vary; it depends on the cooks taste. I like my squash soup with plenty of parsley and pepper. You should try some if you want to have the whole Harvest Festival experience. You know the food vendors down on main street?"

"Yes, we've seen some of them," said Stuart, "but we haven't really stopped by any of them."

"Well, you should. Different vendors have different kinds of squash soup. All I'll recommend is to stay away from anything that is labeled squash-all soup."

"What's that?" Mel asked.

"I'm not quite sure myself," the farmer replied, "but I'm sure it has plenty of onions and hot peppers and other things besides. It's only for those who are not faint-hearted and who possess cast-iron stomachs. The thing burns in your mouth and belly."

Mel smiled wryly. "We'll keep that in mind."

"We also grow some fruits: peaches, strawberries, currants. We actually sell some of those to the local grocery store, fresh, during the summer. Around this time of year, Hannah makes preserves out of the stuff that's left. We sell about half of it here at home and about half to the stores. If you have a chance, you should try it, it's good stuff. A lot of people also come here for apple picking. We have an apple orchard out back, you see. People can pick their own bushels and do whatever they want with the fruit they pick. You know Ida Townsend?"

"Yes, we're staying at the Townsend House," said Stuart. "She was actually the one who mentioned your farm to us. She uses your apples to make some excellent pie."

"Absolutely. Unfortunately, she won't share her trade secret with anyone. At any rate, most people I know love to make tarts and applesauce with their pickings. If you'd like, you can go out an pick some if you want."

"No thanks. We're just visiting. I'm not even sure if they let us bring food on the train," said Mel.

"Well, too bad then. Around this time of year, we also let people use our property for various things. Some people like to hold parties and such." Paul Grandbury patted the equipment he was wiping down on the counter. "I do the hayride every weekend in the early evening. Since you both work at Mad Dog's magazine, I'll extend an invitation for you for tonight's hayride. It's a shame for you to work during the Harvest Festival—you should take some time out to relax."

The two journalists murmured their thanks.

"Besides, you might want to stay over for the evening too since the local stargazing club will be here with their telescopes and all to look at the stars and planets. They're a nice group and Hannah and I like to cook up some hot cider for them as they discuss astronomy."

Mel and Stuart simply nodded.

"The local stargazing club is actually for all ages although pretty much all the members are of the older sort. About half of the members are from Gavot. Some of the others come to the stargazing club somewhat infrequently since they live all the way in Callas."

"That sounds interesting," Mel cut in. "So I heard that Mad Dog stayed at your place not so long ago."

Paul Grandbury scratched his chin. "That's right. It's a distant relationship—you could say he's a distant cousin if you don't want to be confused—but it's our policy to let any of our family stay over if they need to. We have plenty of room to put up visitors. Mad Dog was on vacation and he decided to drop in

and see us. He seemed really excited about Gavot, although I don't see it. Perhaps I've lived here so long that everything has just become routine to me."

"Was there anything in particular that Mad Dog was excited about?" asked Mel. "He just gave us the assignment to cover the Harvest Festival in town and didn't say specifically what he wanted us to focus on." She did not mention to the farmer that Mad Dog didn't tell them any details about their assignment because he had a seizure before he could say so.

He shrugged. "I don't know, to be quite honest. Mad Dog was just jabbering on and on about how he was going to do an entire magazine issue on the town that I just sort of tuned him out, you know? But you know, I'm not so sure his enthusiasm for Gavot was really spurred on by the town itself, if you know what I mean. He met some people here."

The two journalists exchanged glances. "What kind of people?" Stuart asked.

"Oh, that's Mad Dog. He likes meeting people and such. He ran across some creative types. Some of them are from Gavot, but they're just amateurs taking this art class that was being held by the community center and sponsored by the local bingo club. There was this one artist, a painter I think. He had some fancy name or another. He became really, really good friends with Mad Dog."

"Really, really good friends?" echoed Mel.

"To be blunt about it, they were lovers. I didn't figure Mad Dog to be attracted to that kind of person. Complete opposites."

"You know what they say," Stuart said. "Opposites attract."

"At any rate, I think Mad Dog was just crazy about Gavot because he was conducting an affair at the same time. Hormones and rose-colored glasses. I told him Gavot wasn't worth writing about, but he didn't listen to me. And it's obvious he still wasn't listening when he hired you two to do a story about the Harvest Festival."

"I noticed that he was wearing a new piece of jewelry when he came back from his vacation," Mel said slowly. "He seemed rather attached to it. Did he get it here?"

Paul Grandbury huffed and began polishing the harness in front of him in quicker strokes. "That ugly thing? As far as I could tell, he got it from that painter friend of his. When he was still here, my daughter was asking him about it and he said something about it having some sort of folklore associated with it about giving him strength or some such nonsense. I think he was just trying to be amusing."

"Wasn't it made of horn silver?" Stuart prompted. "There's a horn silver mine around these parts, isn't there?"

"Frankly, I'm not sure what Mad Dog's necklace was made of. But yes, there is a horn silver mine around here, about a couple miles north in fact. If you just take Main Street and drive north, you'll probably get there in about half an hour. There's a sign, you can't miss it. But if you want to take a visit, I'll have to warn you that it's not all that interesting. That mine has been closed for several years now."

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Chapter 16 – The Farmer's Daughter

At that moment, the door of the far side of the kitchen that led off to the rest of the farm house burst open revealing a young girl in jeans and sweater. With her blonde hair so light that it was almost white and wide blue eyes, and delicate face, she looked like a pixie in modern human clothes. She frowned at the adults in the kitchen and pointed a finger at Mel.

"You were taking pictures of our property."

Paul Grandbury had the audacity to chuckle at the girl's imperious tone. "Ah, Elsie, these are the journalists from Mad Dog's magazine. They're doing a story for Gavot so of course they're taking pictures."

The girl was still frowning. "Journalists?"

"Mr. Roubere, Ms. Ang, this is my daughter Elsie. I told you before that she helped my wife with the vegetable and fruit plots. Last year she entered one of the pumpkins she tended to a contest in Callas and won first prize."

The journalists just nodded as the farmer's daughter still looked rebellious. "Mad Dog has an unhealthy obsession with his magazine," she declared. "When he was staying here, that was all he talked about. Besides his boyfriend."

Mel wondered how she would ask about Mad Dog's "friend"—it would seem untoward if she

pried into the editor's private life at this juncture even if she needed answers to the person who gave him the horn silver beads. Perhaps if she took the girl aside she might spill something, but from Elsie Granbury's combative stance and her hard gaze, it would be hard to get anything out of her unless she made the girl trust her.

"Well, are you done working on that thing?" the girl asked her father. "I have to start making dinner and preparing the refreshments for the astronomy club."

"Sure dear," the farmer replied obliviously. "You know," he told the journalists, "My daughter makes the best pot pies."

The girl's cheeks pinkened. "Father!"

Paul Grandbury picked up his harness and headed out to the door. "I'll be out in the barn brushing down the horses then. Feel free to look around and take your fill of pictures."

Stuart immediately got up from his stool. "If you don't mind, I'd like to see the horses. Being a city dweller, I've never had the chance to really visit a farm up close and personal."

The farmer nodded and as the reporter followed him out of the farm house and the screen door slammed shut behind them, Mel realized that she was finally alone with the girl who was busy rummaging through the refrigerator and pulling ingredients out onto the counter.

"So are you making pot pies for dinner?" Mel asked as Elsie pulled out dough that had been pre-rolled and wrapped in saran wrap.

"Yes," the girl replied grudgingly. She still eyed the photographer suspiciously. "So you work at Mad Dog's magazine, *Hot Tread*?"

"That's right. But I wouldn't say that he is obsessed with the magazine. He's more like incredibly dedicated. But since he's your relative, I'm sure you know more about him than I do."

"Funny you should say that because I would say the same thing for you since you work with him. Mad Dog only comes around here occasionally. The last time he was here, well, he wasn't really here. When he was here, he was talking Dad's ear off about his magazine."

"What do you mean? I assume that if he was here, you saw him the whole time."

"I was at school most of the time or helping Mom with the garden," she replied as she rolled out the dough. "But even then, he wasn't here all the time. He was hanging out with the creative types at the community center."

"Creative types?"

"Mostly this painter guy. I never really caught his name though although I remember his name sounded sort of fancy. He dressed all in black like one of those stereotypical arty types you find in the big city, you know."

"Hm," replied Mel.

The girl sighed as she began putting the dough into round tins. "So are you going to stick around and watch me bake?"

"Sure, why not. I've never made pot pies before. I'm not a very good cook, actually. Living in a city with many restaurants sort of spoils you, I suppose. The only pot pies I've seen before were the frozen kind in the grocery store."

"Well, watch and learn then, because this will be nothing like the store bought kind. I take it that you will be staying over for the hayride and astronomy club?"

"Yes, that's what your father invited us for."

"I suppose if he's done that, then you're all right then," the farmer's daughter said grudgingly. "So you were taking photographs of the house. Will it be published in *Hot Tread*?"

"Maybe. I'm taking a lot of photos of Gavot. It will actually be up to Mad Dog and the design editor to actually decide which ones they ultimately want to be featured in the magazine."

"Huh, well there's hoping. It'll be really cool to tell my friends at school that my house is featured in a famous magazine."

Mel absently nodded. "I'm sure your friends would be impressed."

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## Chapter 17 – Hayride

As the last stragglers of the vegetable sale paid for their purchases, Hannah Grandbury, the farmer's wife, packed up the remaining vegetables in cardboard boxes and carted them to the nearby shed.

They would be taken back out again the next day for the afternoon sale.

Stuart had watched and listened to the farmer expound on his chores around the farm as he brushed two large brown horses that he kept in the stable a little ways away from the farmhouse and then hitched them up into a large wagon filled with hay. When he brought the ride around to the back of the farm house, the batch of people waiting for the hayride had finally arrived—a small group of mostly younger people in jeans, sweaters, and light jackets. The older people were similar to the patrons to Hannah Grandbury's vegetable sale—hirsute, beer-bellied men, their loud wives, and grubby kids.

When Stuart stepped out of the stable to watch the riders climb up on the wagon and take the choice seats near the front, just behind the driver, Mel walked out of the back door of the farm house with an impassive eye. He sauntered toward the photographer.

"I had a conversation with the girl," she said without prompting. "She told me that she hoped her house would be featured in the article."

He stood next to her waiting.

Her gaze seemed to be fixed in the distance, thinking. "Mad Dog appeared to have a rather active social life while he was here."

"Seems somewhat odd, doesn't it?" he finally remarked. "You wouldn't think a social life would be possible in this out of the way place."

Her gaze moved to him. "I think you'll have to come up with some questions for the other guests at Townsend House. Particularly for a certain painter."

"Huh. Really."

"I'm sure Mad Dog would be curious about the viewpoint of visitors to the Harvest Festival as well as the natives."

"Hm. Well it looks like the hay ride is mostly loaded up. There might be some room for us at the end."

Sure enough, the farmer in the driver's seat and holding the reins to the horses was calling out to them to get on the hay ride. The rest of the riders were a noisy bunch, but they ignored the journalists who were slowly making their way to the wagon. Mel managed to scramble up to the end of the wagon by using a wheel spoke as a foot hold. With envy, she watched Stuart climb aboard with a seemingly practiced ease. He's taller, that's why it's easier for him, she rationalized.

There was a loud command from the farmer to the horses and the wagon jerked forward. Mel sat at the very edge with her legs dangling down and one of her arms loped to the side of the wagon to keep herself from falling off. Stuart sat beside her, his thigh touching hers. Most of the hay was piled behind them, but as the wagon jerked on rocks in the trail, bits of hay flew out like a scattering of gold dust. The two of them looked back as the farm house retreated from view.

The trail that the hay ride was going through wound into a surrounding forest which in the darkening afternoon light and the mauve sky, looked like a formless black shape against the landscape. Only a lamp at the head of the wagon and one at the end lit the bit of trail that they were on. The air was a little cool and Mel shivered. Stuart responded to her movement by scooting even closer to her, his arm touching her arm. His fingers found hers and twined among them lightly. Mel suddenly found herself feeling a lot warmer and perhaps a little out of breath.

"I suppose one could imagine that it was completely dark," said Stuart. "We could tell scary stories."

"For what?" she replied. "So you could frighten me silly?"

"But then I could comfort you."

"Oh right," she replied in a sarcastic tone. "One of the oldest plays in the book." But she didn't move away from him.

"But if it works..."

"You don't need to use superficial tricks for anything to work for you."

He chuckled. "Oh Mel, you make things to be too easy. Wouldn't it be more fun to play hard to get?"

"That would only waste more time."

"Hm. I can't argue with that kind of reasoning."

She moved her fingers against his, purposefully. He shuddered and she didn't think it was from the chill in the air. "I've never been on a hay ride before. It seems so rustic."

"I've been on a hay ride once, when I was a boy. My parents had taken me to the country for a summer vacation. It was mostly me and a bunch of other kids and we did tell scary stories to each other

and play games like telephone.”

“Telephone?”

“You’ve never played telephone?” he said surprised. “It’s a game where the first person makes up a message and whispers it to the next person. This person tells it to the next, and so on, all the way to the last person. The last person says out loud what he has heard and everyone has a good laugh because the message inevitably mutates into something completely different through the chain of people.”

“Ah. I’ve never heard of the game before. Do you think that has deprived my childhood?”

“Oh definitely,” he grinned. “But I think you still turned out okay.”

“Great, thanks for your vote of confidence.”

At that moment, the farmer uttered a “Whoa!” as the horses turned around a bend and pulled the hay wagon over a large pot hole in the middle of the road. The wagon bumped and jostled making the riders squeal and laugh. Despite hanging on to the side of the wagon, Mel fell over, straight into Stuart’s lap. The reporter chuckled and his free hand wandered over to tangle in her hair. Feeling a blush creeping up her cheeks, she suddenly sat up and scowled at him.

“Don’t get any funny ideas, mister.”

“I always have funny ideas.”

“You could have pretended to at least not have any,” she replied. His hand that had been in her hair withdrew back to his side. His other hand, though, was still touching her hand. She moved her fingers down toward his wrist and began massaging in slow, lazy circles.

Stuart bent his head so that his mouth was near her ear. His breath electrified her skin. “Careful what you do with those fingers of yours,” he said lowly.

“I’m not doing anything,” Mel said in faux innocence.

He turned his head so that his nose was buried in her locks. She heard him breathing.

“What are you doing?”

“Sniffing your hair.”

Amusement laced her voice. “Pervert.”

The other riders on the wagon talked and laughed, but to Mel, their voices were simply low murmurs in the background that she paid little attention to. Her focus was on the man beside her, pressed to her side, hand in hers. His face was in her hair, and he was simply breathing. Was it even possible to be even more aware, she thought dimly. She slowly blinked, trying to clear her head but she struggled. She tried to take in a deep breath and the cool air stung her nose. The darkness in the path suddenly shifted and she bolted upright, her shoulder accidentally hitting Stuart in the chin.

“Ow!”

“Oh, sorry, but I think I saw something...”

He shoved his glasses back in place on his nose and peered into the darkening path. “I hope this is good.”

“Look, there it is.”

A shadowy darkness drifted over the path that was not illuminated by the lantern hanging at the end of the wagon. It laid low on the ground like a crouching animal. Mel had the feeling that the thing was watching them, waiting. Was it waiting to pounce? Stuart tensed beside her, finally seeing what she was seeing. The wagon continued to rumble down the path through the forest. The rest of the riders, oblivious, continued their conversations. And as the wagon moved, the shadow was left behind to blend into the darkness of the forest.

“Do you think the woods have wolves?” asked Mel.

Stuart leaned back on the side of the wagon. “I wouldn’t be surprised.” He casually draped an arm over her shoulders. “We wouldn’t want you to fall out of the wagon now, would we?”

“Somehow, I don’t think that is for securing me to the wagon,” she replied, but she made no move to shake his arm off her. “Besides, this isn’t some date.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Oh? I would say otherwise. I would even go so far as to say that all our lunch appointments were really dates, but I’m interested in what you would call a date.”

She turned her head slightly so he could not see her smiling. “I always thought dates involved kissing.”

“Hm. Well, that could possibly be remedied.”

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## Chapter 18 – Forest Darkness

The hayride rumbled to a stop, back at the farmhouse. The route had taken them through the forest in a rather circuitous path. Mel and Stuart hastily scrambled off the wagon before the rest of the riders plowed through them.

The others soon streamed out of the hay ride in an unceremonious tumble. They were chatting and laughing and not paying very much attention to what was or what wasn't around them as they wandered off to their own cars to drive back home. Once all the passengers had debarked, the farmer flicked his reins and directed the horses back to the barn a ways from the farm house. The two journalists stood where they had stepped off, just outside the pool of light generated by the lights on the back of the farm house. Stuart's arm rested on Mel's shoulder, but for some inexplicable reason, she felt cold and chilled. The darkness around them seemed to be an active thing, pressing upon them like a suffocating and frozen shroud.

She shook her head a little. Was it just her imagination trying to anthropomorphize the darkness and the shadows? Stuart headed toward the lighted area just outside of the farmhouse, slightly tugging her along. She followed, unresisting. It was just the coldness, she thought. There's nothing nipping at my heels, waiting for the moment that I trip up.

The backdoor of the farmhouse opened up, letting out a waft of food. The smells woke up her stomach which began protesting. She had not had dinner yet. The flaxen-haired farmer's daughter stood over the kitchen counter inside, presiding over the small tins filled with bubbling potpies. Her mother was busy setting out pine-colored mugs and pouring hot cider into them, the steam streaming out like tiny little ghosts flitting aimlessly about. The girl motioned for the journalists to join her inside and to close the door. It was getting cold and she didn't want any of the heat to escape.

"The astronomy club won't be here until about thirty minutes from now," said Elsie Grandbury. "So you're in luck. You can have your pick of the pies. I made chicken, turkey, and beef. Oh and there's some vegetarian over in that corner if you're the type. Mrs. Deering just took up vegetarianism because she said it was healthy and the good thing to do. Frankly, I think she's just following a fad."

"Elsie!" exclaimed her mother. "Mrs. Deering is a nice old woman. Don't make fun of her choices."

The girl shrugged. "Whatever, Mom. The last time I asked her about vegetarianism, she didn't have very many good reasons for what she was doing. She just hemmed and hawed and told me that all the experts in the big cities were doing it so it must be right."

"A lemming, eh?" said Mel. She chuckled at her own joke even as the farmer's daughter gave her a confused look. Inside the warm house, she could for the moment forget about the outside and the darkness. Perhaps she had been more spooked than she had realized. She also managed to keep a reasonable distance away from Stuart who had transferred his attention to the sweet smelling potpies. It was one thing to want, she told herself. But she didn't want to need.

Stuart took a sniff of the nearest pies as condensation began to collect on his glasses. He gave a disgusted snort and took them off to wipe the glasses off with the edge of his jacket. "I hate it when it does that," he remarked. "It's the temperature difference when I go from outside to inside or vice versa. Someone should invent glasses that don't condense."

"They already have glasses that wipe condensation off," said Mel blandly. "Haven't you seen them at the geek store? They have little windshield wipers attached to them."

"Very funny Mel. Are you trying to make me into more of a geek than I am?"

"Don't get them," said Elsie, unaware of the joke. "I think they look stupid."

Mel took one of the pies, Elsie had indicated that it was a turkey one, and with a stab of a fork, brought a steaming bite to her mouth. It almost scalded her tongue, but she could still taste the creamy sauce, the chunks of tender meat, and the bits of vegetables—broccoli, onions, carrots. She made the appropriate noises and praised Elsie on her cooking skills. Stuart had picked a beef potpie and from the smile on his face, he agreed with her. The girl blushed and mumbled about making the pies was no trouble at all. The farmer's wife, Hannah Grandbury, plunked mugs of steaming cider in front of the guests and cast a fond eye on her daughter before tapping her foot.

"I wonder what's keeping Paul?"

And then the photographer remembered that the farmer was still outside, presumably putting the horses back into their stalls. He would have to walk outside, in the darkness. Mel managed to suppress a shudder. What was wrong with her? She wasn't afraid of the dark—not since she was a little girl anyway

—and the sudden fear felt rather strange and out of character. It was the ridiculous hormones, she told herself firmly.

The kitchen door banged open revealing the farmer's figure. "Hoo-ee," Paul Grandbury exclaimed. "It's a bit nippy out there. Got any cider, Hannah?"

His wife handed him another mug. "It's getting colder these days," she said. "And is it me, or is it colder this year than the last? I haven't checked up on the weather today."

"Perhaps, perhaps," the farmer said as he sipped his cider. He looked over the rim of his cup at the journalists. "So I see you've decided to stick around to meet the star gazing club after all."

Stuart nodded. "We might as well get the whole experience while we're here."

As the farmer's family grabbed potpies of their own and they sat around the table eating quietly and amiably, Mel could not get the image of the shadows she saw in the forest out of her mind.

"Mr. Grandbury, I am curious," she began. "On the hayride, I saw something in the forest that, uh, looked like an animal."

"Oh?" The farmer looked slightly uninterested in her observation.

"Perhaps it was a wolf?" she blurted out. "Are there wolves around here?"

The farmer's daughter just shook her head and chuckled, obviously amused that the out of town photographer was acting spooked. The farmer's wife smiled and refilled the mugs with more hot cider. Stuart frowned. Perhaps he thought it unwise of her to say anything at all. It made her seem slightly mad to the locals.

"Nope, it can't be a wolf," said the farmer confidently. "I don't keep any livestock around here and I doubt any significant prey live in the little bits of forest around here aside from the occasional squirrel or rabbit. This is farmland country, not wolf country. You'd have to drive a couple hundred miles west of here before you see any of those critters."

Mel was at a loss. "Oh. Then I guess I was just seeing things."

"Or it could have been just some high school kid playing a prank," interjected Elsie. "They like to do that kind of thing around this time of year although they've never done it all the way out here. Not enough spectators, I'd gather. In town on Main Street would be the best place to play a prank. There would be plenty of witnesses to get a good laugh."

"No, it would be quite silly of them to play pranks here," said Hannah. "There was the hayride, but obviously no one else saw what you did."

"Yes, I was just seeing things," Mel murmured, sinking lower into her seat.

Stuart said nothing although he could corroborate her sightings.

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## Chapter 19 – The Astronomy Club

The astronomy club began arriving half an hour later wearing heavy blue parkas and scarves and hats and mittens. With their large bags of equipment, they looked like they were prepared for an expedition for the far reaches of the north in frozen wasteland rather than a star gazing party. They took up position in a little clearing a ways from the farmhouse but surrounded by low growing thicket. The astronomy club was a diverse group. Most of the members were adults, but there were a couple of teenagers, most of them in glasses, braces, or both. The adults ranged in age—some in their twenties all the way to an old seventy-year-old codger who complained about the cold and refused any offer of potpies. He did, however, drink large quantities of hot cider.

Mel found it amusing to watch the astronomy club in their predisposed air and stirring certainty as they peered up at the sky and complained about the cloud cover. Some of them took out their telescopes from their large equipment bags and set them up on tripods before obsessively turning the knobs and tuning them for the night. Someone else, perhaps the farmer since he was not so much a star watcher than a host, had built up a sizeable bonfire which crackled in fresh orange flame. Someone had also passed around skewers and marshmallows. Some of the younger members of the club were busy roasting the sweet treats as their elders pattered around the equipment.

In the darkness, occasionally punctuated by the flickering light of the fire, she could hardly make out the faces of any of the members of the astronomy club. They talked and laughed and generally made the journalists part of their group after they introduced themselves, but she had the impression that she was talking to no more than bundled up shadows. It was her imagination again. She admonished herself. These

were real people, not wisps in the night. One member of the astronomy club seemed awfully familiar though. The older gentleman with the moustache named Lloyd made a memory flicker—did she see him earlier in the day, perhaps at the swimming competition or even the opening ceremony for the Harvest Festival?

“Other than the moon and maybe the North Star, you can’t make out anything at all,” complained one of the members of the astronomy club. “It’s too overcast today.”

“Maybe your eyes are giving out, gramps,” snickered one of the younger members.

“My eyes are as sharp as when I was a young ‘un,” declared the first member. “I can still sharp shoot quite a ways away. It’s overcast, I tell you.”

The older man that Mel thought looked familiar, lit up a cheroot and puffed a stream of smoke into the crackling bonfire. “All’s not lost on an overcast night.”

“Eh? But the weather has rendered pretty much all the telescopes useless! What do you propose, Lloyd—that we go to the nearest city with its own observatory?”

“Sarcasm doesn’t become you, Gary. No, we don’t need our telescopes for this. Does anyone know any of the stories and old myths about the stars and constellations? Since it’s the Harvest Festival, a story relating to it would be appropriate.”

“Hey Lloyd, tell us about the North Star and what supposedly happened in the first Harvest Festival.”

Lloyd was silent for a moment, puffing on his cheroot. The smoke curled up around him, and in the glare of the firelight, his dark eyes gleamed. Finally he said lowly and almost out of hearing, “All right, although I would have preferred the telling in a cozy room instead of the chilly outside. But maybe it is better this way. It’s more atmospheric.”

Mel shivered. Did she want to listen to a story in an atmospheric setting?

\* \* \*

The founders arrived one month after they left the cities. In the early spring, they could see that the land was wide an open, the game was plentiful, and the soil was rich for planting crops. The only problem was that the land was already occupied by the natives. I won’t pretend that our ancestors were nice men. On the contrary, they did whatever they could to take what they thought was rightfully theirs. The historians can tell you all the gory details. All I’ll say is that our ancestors forced the natives off this land by whatever means they thought necessary and then started building their farms and the town centered on their own god.

The natives believed in a pagan deity that controlled the seasons and the harvest. They called him the Horned One—or at least that’s what it’s roughly translated to in our own language. The Horned One had two faces. The lighter side of the Horned One corresponded to the first of the year when it is spring. His power is at the strongest during the planting season and the rains. The natives had held many playful festivities during this time to honor their god and to pray for the fertility of their crops among such things. It was a time for growing and life.

The second face of the Horned One was darker. This manifestation began to grow during the summer and waxed in power at the end of the fall when the harvest had come in. This was the god of the dying things and the underworld. The natives, at the end of the harvest, would burn effigies as sacrifices to appease this dark side of their god. Mostly they said prayers and did rites to ensure that the coming winter would not be an unbearably harsh one. This is perhaps where the origins of our Harvest Festival started from, that the competitions we have for the Horned King is actually a rite to the natives’ Horned One.

One of the natives’ myths about the Horned One involved the constellation that most of us call the Bear. The natives called this the Stag. In their myth, before the Horned One actually became horned, their god was chasing down a magical stag through the forest. This magical stag wasn’t like the deer we know, oh no. This stag was a ferocious beast with teeth as sharp as daggers and dangerous hooves. The stag had red eyes and an awful bellow that made everything around it cower in fear. And it was extremely swift. This malicious stag had killed the god’s firstborn and in vengeance, the god was chasing the magical stag down.

Eventually, the god caught up with the stag and there was a ferocious fight. After a fight that lasted a year and a day, the god won after cleaving the evil stag in half. He cut off the beast’s antlers and put them on his head and the antlers fused to his scalp. These antlers were the source of the stag’s power and personality. Now that the god was wearing the antlers, he also became somewhat like the stag—

malicious and demanding of sacrifice. To immortalize the stag that had given him the dark powers, the now Horned One put the stag's body up as the stars in the constellation.

Before the natives were finally booted from this land, the elders of the tribe put a curse on the founders. For them and their descendants, they would have to endure the haunting of the Horned One during the darkest of the seasons, during the Harvest Festival. The founders would have to offer up some sort of sacrifice or to appease the god at harvest time or they would risk untold wrath. The only way they could tell if the god was appeased was through the constellation of the Stag. If the stars shone at the end of the Harvest Festival, then they would be free for another year.

\* \* \*

“So is the curse true?” asked one of the members of the astronomy club. It was one of the teenagers with coke-bottle glasses. He looked rather bored though as if he could care less at what the answer would be.

Lloyd blew out a stream of smoke before answering. “The first year for the founders was pretty rough. Any historian could tell you that—most of them say that it’s because they were settlers and the first year is pretty much hard on anyone because you’re trying to establish yourself in a new place. There were quite a few deaths and stillbirths and accidents in the first year. But after that, as far as I’ve ever heard it passed down, the nights have always been clear on the last day of the Harvest Festival.”

“Always?” said Stuart. “What about the first year the settlers came to Gavot?”

The older man shook his head. “Yes, it was cloudy that year, but it was just unfortunate for them.”

An owl in the thicket loudly hooted. Mel looked up in the sky. It was a bit breezy and she could see the dark forms of clouds obscuring part of the sky. Even if she could see the sky clearly, she would have never been able to tell which set of stars was the constellation of the Stag. She could still see a bit of the moon though, but if there were any more clouds, even that would be covered up.

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## **Chapter 20 – Door Marking**

Mel woke up and stared at the dark ceiling. A dream had not awoken her, she was sure of that. Perhaps it was the noise, or lack of it. The heaters in the bed and breakfast, at the moment, were not running. Everything was silent. Even the cat spirits, ever present at the foot of her bed, were nowhere to be found. The only thing she could hear was her own breath. And perhaps her own heart, she fancied, if her hearing was that good. She pulled the covers off and stepped onto the cool wood floor which stung her bare feet. She didn’t bother with slippers or a robe. She knew that she had to walk a bit before going back to bed or she would never go back to sleep. She hugged her arms to herself and walked to the window.

The cat spirits were crowded at the ledge, watching the night. They were silent and still, not even acknowledging her. They might as well be decorations and statues. Before she had gone to bed, she had drawn aside the drapes so whatever moonlight could get in through the window and that when the sun rose, she would be awakened by the first rays of the morning. But now, in the dead of night, there was no moonlight. Thick, puffy, navy clouds obscured the sky and she saw nothing—not even the bed and breakfast’s backyard with its solitary tree.

What were the cat spirits looking at? She wondered. Or perhaps they weren’t looking at anything at all. They were just zoned out, half-asleep. She should be asleep, she thought. Mel had left her tote bag on the arm chair in her room. Now, she walked over to that and automatically took out the plastic bag with the beads of horn silver. Even in the dark room, the beads seemed to take on a glimmer of their own as if they could generate their own light. As if they were radioactive. But she knew that radioactive things didn’t glow—only a Geiger counter could really tell for sure.

Mel turned and she noticed that the cat spirits were no longer at their places at the ledge of the window. They were scattered half across the room, silently pacing back and forth, agitated. But they did this silently so that they were nothing more than flitting shadows with bright eyes. Drawn by some inner compulsion, she opened her bedroom door and looked out into the hallway.

It was a long dark corridor punctuated with doors to the other guests’ bedrooms. Nothing looked out of the ordinary. For a moment, she debated on whether or not to take a walk outside, to clear her head.

A faint creak, that sounded like originated from the distant corner of the house, reached her ears.

Before she could wonder what it was or dismiss it as the house settling, the air became heavy and rushed out of her lungs. The dark hallway turned a shade darker. And was it just her own vision or did it seem to shrink suddenly as if some sort of presence had invaded the space? The horn silver beads in the bag burned hot in her hand.

With a noticeable effort, she forced her arms and legs to move. It was as if she was treading through molasses. She managed to get back inside her room and close the door. She turned the lock which clicked softly and began pulling the comforter off her bed. She stuffed the comforter at the bottom of the door to cover the crack. Then she began dragging the bureau and pushed it against the door. The cat spirits climbed up on the bureau and stared belligerently at the door. Mel only sank to her knees, the coldness of the floor seeping through her flannel pajamas. The horn silver beads dropped from her hand with an audible clink. She curled up with her back to the bureau, her blood pounding in her ears.

A harsh scratching sounded at the door.

\* \* \*

Stuart groaned as he felt the cat spirits that inhibited his room jump on the bed. “No. Just fifteen more minutes, please?” He rolled over and covered his head with the pillow.

Undeterred, the cat spirits pounced on his prone form and began yowling loudly in a dissonant chorus.

“All right, already! I’m up, I’m up.”

Reluctantly, he flung the pillow away and stumbled out of bed, wincing as his bare feet touched the cold floor. Dimly, he noticed that the sun wasn’t up yet. He looked at his watch which was laying on the stand beside the bed. It was ten minutes before he was supposed to wake up, but since he was up now, he might as well stay up. He walked to the bathroom and closed the door before turning on the faucets. The cat spirits were still outside, meowing up a storm. What was wrong with them? He wondered as he went through his morning routine. They must be restless after being cooped up in a room for an entire day, he reasoned.

After he was dressed, he opened the door of his room and the pacing cat spirits burst out into the hallway, running in all directions. He closed the door behind him and still in a somewhat sleepy daze, proceeded to climb down the stairs. He stopped at the bottom when he saw Mel standing in front of the living room windows staring outside. Her hair was pulled back in a braid and she was wearing a black turtleneck sweater. She was frowning and there were faint shadows under her eyes.

“Morning,” he said.

She suddenly jerked as if someone had slapped her. She turned her head and her shoulders fell. “Oh, it’s just you. Morning.” She tucked her hands into the back pockets of her pants and took a deceptively relaxed stance.

“Something’s wrong,” he said flatly.

Her gaze didn’t meet his. Instead, she pretended inordinate interest in the bed and breakfast’s front yard. “I saw Ida Townsend just a little while ago. She said breakfast will be reading in about half an hour.”

“Mel, something is wrong.”

She was silent.

“I think you know me well enough to trust me. You can tell me.”

“Stuart...”

His heart pounded and his mouth felt dry. “It was last night, wasn’t it? Just tell me, straight out. I don’t want any sugar-coating. I know I can be really dense at times—it’s me, isn’t it? I should have listened to you when you told me I’m just a big geek who plays too many video games...”

Mel put a hand to her eyes and her mouth faintly curved. “Stuart...”

“You’ve realized that I’m not your type, am I?”

“Stuart!”

“What?”

“You’re so damn insecure for someone who’s usually so sure of himself.”

“That’s what you think,” he muttered.

She sighed and crossed her arms. “Sorry to burst your bubble, but this isn’t about you. It was last night, in the middle of the night. Something woke me. I’m not sure what it was. I’m not sure I can

explain.”

“Was it a dream, perhaps?”

She shook her head. “I’m sure it wasn’t a dream. Maybe if I showed you...or perhaps you would just say that I was too spooked from being out in the dark at the Grandbury Farm.”

“You’re not spooked. I saw that thing too, remember?”

“But you never said anything to back me up when I asked.”

“I can be insecure about that kind of thing too, you know.”

“Well, I suppose I don’t blame you, much. Anyway, come see.”

He followed her back up the stairs and walked down the hallway toward her room. He noticed that all the cat spirits that he had let out of his room were now sitting in front of Mel’s bedroom door looking up. On the door were a series of three gouges which went through the paint and through the wood in the door. Automatically, Stuart reached up to touch the gouges. They were definitely real.

“Who...?”

“I locked the door,” she said distantly. She wasn’t even looking at the gouges. Instead, she had wrapped her arms around herself and was gazing down the hallway. He couldn’t tell exactly what she was looking at. “I showed this to Ida who told me I was just imagining things. She said there weren’t scratches on the door and that maybe I was just exaggerating how the paint strokes looked on the door. So I thought, maybe it’s like the cat spirits. But unlike cat spirits, I haven’t learned how to tell spirit scratches from real scratches.”

“But I can see it. I can feel it too.”

“At least I don’t feel so crazy now. But I definitely think that this has something to do with those beads. They felt hot to the touch last night.”

“Do you have them with you now?”

She pulled the bag of beads out of her pocket and handed it to him. They looked and felt as usual to him, but who knew what they were doing the previous night? He put them in his pocket. “Perhaps if I keep them, they won’t do anything,” he said.

Her mouth twisted downward. “Actually, I think it would be a better idea if we just drove out into a field and buried them there. Then we wouldn’t have to bother with them any more.”

“Not yet. I want to find out more about them first.”

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## Chapter 21 – Dark Chalk

The Harvest Festival was in full swing. Main Street was packed with people—gawking, eating, playing—not to mention dogs on leashes, vendors with wheels, and costumed hooligans wearing antler headdresses. Mel gleefully plunged into the ruckus snapping pictures of everything and anything. Stuart followed more sedately behind soaking up the festive atmosphere, words percolating in his head as he saw, heard, and smelled everything. It was going to be a doozy of an article, he thought. Mad Dog would love it—if by the time the assignment was finished, he awakened from his coma.

He nearly tripped over a line of little kids dressed in native costume, whooping and hollering as they made a beeline toward a vendor that sold candies and soft drinks. Plump people in aprons stood beside white tents hollering their wares. And as the farmer, Paul Grandbury, had mentioned to the journalists, there were squash soup stands in every conceivable nook and cranny of the street. Around noon, Mel decided to take a break and the two of them headed to the nearest food vendor to wait in line to order the festival’s specialty.

“There couldn’t be this many people living in this little town,” Mel remarked as they waited in line, gently being jostled by the passing crowd like kelp bobbing in ocean waves. “Most of this place is farm land, isn’t it?”

“I suppose so. I don’t remember reading the statistics for Gavot’s population, but I would guess it would be far fewer than this current crush,” Stuart replied. “Perhaps most of the visitors to the festival are out-of-towners like ourselves. The nearest large town is Callas. Perhaps the reporter from *The Callas Post* already wired a story to his editor and it got printed up. And now every who’s read it is visiting.”

“Maybe.” Mel found herself at the head of the line and quickly ordered the squash and pumpkin soup. Stuart gave the same order.

“Excellent choice!” exclaimed the rosy-cheeked woman who was giving the orders to the “cooks”

who were merely ladling up the soup into thick white Styrofoam bowls from large industrial sized metal pots that were being heated by a portable stove. “Of course,” she added slyly. “Could I possibly suggest too that you try the squash all soup? It’s Bubba’s special recipe. It’s to die for.”

At the sound of his name, Bubba, a large man in the back of the vendor’s tent waved to the customers, the gap in his two front teeth evident as he grinned.

“Uh, no thanks,” Mel told her, remembering Paul Grandbury’s warning about the incendiary nature of the squash all soup. “Squash and pumpkin will be just fine.”

After they paid for their soup, the two of them ventured toward the center of the town with the roundabout and the large scaffold. No one was sitting atop the structure yet, after all the contestants for the crown of Horned King were supposedly gathered out at the back field of Gavot Academy participating in a foot race. That morning at breakfast, the Townsends had suggested to their guests that they also try out the foot race in order to experience the Harvest Festival. The newlyweds who were visiting immediately took up on the offer, as well as the old man who was visiting his friend, and strangely enough, Laurent the painter. Little Peter’s father declined citing the fact that he was out of shape. Stuart also decided not to go to the second race—he was fit enough, he supposed, and he could do fairly well, but not only did he not want to be swamped with the lecherous bingo ladies, he also had a magazine story to do. He could not very well do what he was paid to do if he was out running around.

Mel and Stuart walked around on the roundabout, which had been blocked off by plastic orange barricades to divert any traffic, to the gazebo which had been built on the town square. There was a sizeable crowd standing around it. They stood near the back of this crowd to eat the soup and to watch the local boys’ choir sing hymns. Even in the din of the festival goers, listeners could hear the soaring soprano of boys’ voices as they sang without any instrumental support. There were microphones rigged near the gazebo and amplifiers placed strategically around the scraggly trees growing on the square which helped the music reach.

“Too bad after a certain age, they would be kicked out and replaced,” said Mel after the choir finished one song.

“Hm.”

“Although I don’t see why they have to use boys. They could have used girls. Their voices don’t change too much.”

“Girls’ voices have a different quality than a boy’s voice,” said Stuart. “I don’t really know how to describe it, but a boy’s voice is—shall we say—smoother?”

“Or it isn’t that so much as the girl’s voice sounding too much like a squeal.”

He laughed. “A squeal? Yes, maybe you could be right.”

As the boys’ choir started another set of songs, the two journalists chucked their soup bowls in the nearest trash can and wandered off towards the crowded sidewalk of Main Street. Mel took out her camera again from her tote bag and looped the strap around her neck. All sorts of people milled around them. Teenagers roamed around in gangs wielding cell phones. Pregnant ladies in sweat suits waddled about chewing on their latest cravings. Families wandered in a haphazard and zigzag pattern—mostly with the parents yelling at their kids to stop horsing around. Couples strolled hand in hand, occasionally pointing and kissing.

Strangely enough, the people avoided one section of the road. As Mel and Stuart neared that section, they realized that people were avoiding that part of the sidewalk because someone was drawing on it. The artist, an older dark-skinned man with dreadlocks, a jaunty gray hat that matched the color of his sweatshirt, and chalk stained jeans, was sitting on the edge of the sidewalk drawing a large epic scene in dark mauves and browns. His box of chalk sat beside him, but the pastel colors were currently untouched. The scene was appropriate enough for the Harvest Festival—or at least to the origins of the festival as the journalists had heard about the night before.

The scene was that of a forest in the night. The background was a thicket of trees reaching out with their bare branches. Men danced around a dark red bonfire. Or what looked like men. In the picture, they were more like waving shadows. The main centerpiece of the whole work was a physical representation of a spirit with the horns of a stag. The Horned One. Bright red eyes, which the artist had already sketched out, stared out at all the passersby with a malicious intensity.

Mel fought down an involuntary shudder and took up her camera to take a picture.

“Well, that’ll fuel the stuff of nightmares for the next week,” remarked a bald man in a polo shirt who stood beside them to admire the artist’s work.

“An intense work isn’t it,” said Stuart.

“You can feel the power radiating out of it,” answered the man. “I’ve heard of the stories about the Horned King and about the origins of the Harvest Festival. It makes one glad that it’s just a bunch of boogieman tales to scare the kiddies into behaving, eh?”

“Just like fairy tales?” said Mel quietly.

The man chuckled. “Actually I would say it is more like folklore, or maybe more akin to a superstition. I’ve heard some people say that the town government likes to hire artists like him to come do drawings of the Horned One around the Harvest Festival. They’re usually out of town artists who don’t really know the significance of all the myths surrounding this. It is, of course, why the mayor and his cohorts would rather leave in the dark. Because all these pictures are part of the old superstition that if you have a likeness of the Horned One around, evil spirits would be drawn to the likenesses rather than the people themselves. I think it originated back to the natives who burned effigies to the Horned One.”

Mel nodded. “Yes, we heard of that one. The natives burned the effigies so they wouldn’t have such a harsh winter. And it’s to appease the Horned One, apparently.”

The bald man agreed and excused himself to see some of the other things around the festival. Stuart watched the artist continue sketching on the sidewalk. But how could the bald man be right? He wondered. How could the artist be in complete ignorance of what he was drawing? There must be some sort of knowledge if the figures in the sidewalk chalk drawing seemed so lifelike, especially the spirit of what was supposed to be the Horned One.

He heard Mel sigh beside him. “I think the picture I took would be enough. But if it turns out, I’m not even sure Mad Dog would want it printed up. It’s too...I don’t know. There’s just something unsettling about the entire thing, but I just can’t put a finger on it.”

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## **Chapter 22 – History Book**

The squat gray building a little ways down Main Street, apart from the main Harvest Festival celebrations, had the appearance of a tired office building. But it only looked like an office building. It was actually the library. It didn’t look like a quaint school house, the mental picture which Mel always had of a small town library, not even close. She took a picture, intent on collecting it for her bad architecture collection. She judged the building to be built no more than thirty years ago—the height of the awful architecture fashion filled with architects whose ideas of progressive design included ugly corners, ugly colors, and ugly aesthetics. Their entire goal for building, as far as Mel was concerned, was to clash with nature and common sense sensibility. They stood out all right, just like an eye sore.

She opened the glassed door and walked in. Stuart trailed behind her and stopped at a bulletin board to squint at all the local announcements. The interior of the library was just as uninspired as the exterior. The carpet was a pink flecked gray which had the effect of being bland and nauseous at the same time. The bookshelves were an unremitting metal with handwritten catalogue numbers on index cards taped to the sides. The librarian’s counter was off to the side—on Mel’s left as she had just walked in from the entrance. The wall behind the librarian’s counter was taped up with copies of popular children’s books and a large banner that said “Harvest Festival Reading”. To the right, past the shelves, she could see that there was a room designed for gatherings. The chairs and tables had been pushed to the side and there was a gray-haired woman with glasses reading a story book to a crowd of small children sitting rapt at her feet. The children’s mothers were browsing the nearby bookshelves.

A librarian was sitting at the counter typing diligently onto a desktop computer. The librarian was a younger woman with brown shoulder length wavy hair that gleamed under the florescent light. Perhaps she used gel on her tresses or maybe hair spray. Or maybe, as Mel shuddered at the thought, she hadn’t washed it in a couple days. She walked to the counter and the librarian looked up, peering up at her over a pair of horn-rimmed glasses that were in danger of slipping down her nose.

“Yes? May I help you?”

“I’m just a visitor,” replied Mel. “I was just surprised that the library was open on a holiday.”

“The Harvest Festival is just a local holiday,” the librarian pointed out. “Of course we’re open today.” She suddenly grinned at a point beside her. Mel turned to see what she was looking at and discovered that Stuart had decided to amble towards her to see what she was doing. “Hello, sir! My name’s Teresa. How may I help you?”

“Oh, I’m with her,” Stuart grinned back, his arm deliberately brushing against Mel.

The librarian's chirpy expression slightly fell.

"Hm." Mel found herself amused. She glanced at a pile of bookmarks on the counter that had the library's hours printed in tiny type. "I see that you have story time today?"

"Oh yes. And since it is the Harvest Festival, there will be a craft hour for the little ones too. You two have any kids yourself? You can bring them in for that—registration isn't required."

"Uh, no. I was just curious," Mel said as Stuart coughed in embarrassment.

"Well, if you need any help finding anything...otherwise, feel free to look around."

Mel nodded and tucked her camera back into her tote bag.

"Actually, there is something you could help us with," said Stuart. "We heard about a horn silver mine just north of here that's closed. You don't suppose you know anything about it or have any books on it?"

"Yes, I know exactly what you're talking about!" Teresa the librarian exclaimed. "The horn silver mine was indeed closed down a couple years ago. I heard it was for health and safety reasons or something like that. The supports keeping the lower tunnels were weakening or something similar. The mine brought a mini economic boom to the town about a hundred and fifty years ago when it was first opened. We actually have some history books about it."

The two journalists followed the librarian as she circled the counter and walked off towards the stacks. She ventured near the back of the library where there were shelves filled with old dusty volumes with fading script on their bindings.

"As you can see, not very many people come back here," apologized the librarian. "Most people aren't very interested in the town's history—it's just too bad that people just fall back on word of mouth. Some of these books can be very interesting."

"I see," said Stuart.

Teresa pointed to some volumes in dark brown binding on a shelf next to them. "These are the ones about the mine," she said. "Most of it is just economic records and some deeds. There is also one volume about who the owners of the mine sold the horn silver to and what the horn silver was then made into. There's some very interesting information and folklore about that."

With that, the librarian left Mel and Stuart at the dusty bookshelves. Mel promptly sneezed and wrinkled her nose. "Well," she said, "I hadn't exactly envisioned spending an afternoon back in this kind of musty place."

Stuart picked one of the volumes and slowly smiled. "Oh, but think of the possibilities. We're in an isolated part of the library. No one's going to accidentally stumble upon this particular stack. And it's just you and me..."

"Yeah," Mel smirked as she took another tome. "And there's no one around to hear you scream."

He just shook his head and opened his book. For the next few moments, nothing could be heard but the turning of pages as they perused the history volumes. Mel was leaning against the hard metal shelf for support as she idly flipped through pages of graphs and numbers. Suddenly she stopped flipping the pages and her hand stilled. She straightened up.

"Hey, look at this."

Stuart looked over her shoulder as her finger pointed to the relevant passage.

\* \* \*

Before the town was founded, the natives used the area which is now the mine as a religious communing place to pray to their gods. They found some of the horn silver on the surface and shaped the mineral that they did find into religious artifacts, mostly bowls and cups for libations, statuettes, ceremonial daggers and knives, and square tiles that they fashioned for mosaics and used for counting, not unlike rosaries.

The area next to the mine was where the natives buried their ancestors in the belief that the area where the horn silver was found was a mystical place, home to spiritual and protection energies which had been imbued to that place by their gods for various reasons. Since the natives used that plot as a burial place for their dead, the founders of Gavot saw fit to leave the place as it was even after the natives were driven out. It is now the Gavot cemetery which now holds the bodies of the founders themselves.

The natives believed that horn silver had many properties as in their folklore, it was thought to be one of the "magical elements" originally made by their god of the cyclical year, the Horned One. Ground into powder, it was added to various medicinal tinctures to cure a variety of illnesses such as cold,

influenza, the pox, arthritis, headaches, body aches, toothaches, the sniffles, allergies, cataracts, and easing pain from broken bones and insect bites alike. The powder was also added to ritual mixtures containing nickel and sulfur which was thrown into the fires along with other hallucinogenic drugs to induce visions to commune with the gods. It was also added to incense and body lotions.

In solid form, the horn silver was used to make various artifacts for self adornment as well as religious and magical purposes. Most noticeably, the natives fashioned the horn silver into beads which were usually strung into a necklace and used as decoration. This native tradition has survived in Gavot's annual Harvest Festival as the prize the winner of the festival competitions receive. On another note, the beads were also used for magical purposes. Depending on the intent of the magician who "blesses" the beads before giving them to the recipient, they can either act as a talisman to ward off evil influences or be a focus to evil influences itself to curse the wearer. In such cases, the curse can only be reversed if the gift is given back to the giver.

\* \* \*

Mel sighed. "Now what? We have no idea who gave those beads to Mad Dog."

"Well, what do we know so far?" said Stuart. "They look remarkably similar to the beads that are given to the winners of the Harvest Festival competition. Perhaps they were made by the same artisan."

"It doesn't matter who made the thing." She closed the tome and slid it back into the shelf. "It's the person who gave the necklace to Mad Dog who counts."

He rubbed his chin. "But we do know who gave it to him. The Grandburys told us. Mad Dog's boyfriend, a painter who wore all black."

"Hm." Her eyes narrowed as her mind worked on the information. "I nearly forgot about that. And we didn't get a chance to talk to the bed and breakfast's visiting artist before he took off to that foot race. You don't suppose he could be? I mean, he just seems to be like a visitor, like us. He told me earlier that he was just here to sell some of his paintings."

"There are probably plenty of painters who wear black," he agreed. "And Mad Dog supposedly was hanging out with the artist commune back at the community center." He winced, thinking of the drunk bingo ladies. "We'll have to go back there, won't we?"

She patted his arm reassuringly. "Don't worry. I'll protect you."

"Really. I had the impression that you wouldn't hesitate at all to throw me to the banshees."

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## Chapter 23 – An Invitation

"Come on, you have so little faith in me?" said Mel. She took another volume of history off the library shelves. "I wouldn't want you to get torn into little pieces by the ravaging hordes. I like you whole."

"Oh?" Stuart stepped toward her so that he was no more than a foot away. Only the large history tome stood between them. "You never said so before."

"I didn't think it was necessary. It should be a given that most people are squeamish about seeing body parts strewn about willy-nilly."

He leaned closer and watched her eyes widen. "Hm."

"What do you think you're doing?"

"What do you think I'm doing?" He bent his head and heard her rapid intake of breath before he kissed her. She tasted of the soup that they had for lunch. There was a loud thump as the book that she had been holding slid to the floor. He placed a smaller kiss on the corner of her mouth before he raised his head. With one hand, he cupped her cheek and caressed the skin under her eye with a thumb, wanting to rub away the tired expression that had not completely faded from the morning.

"I thought that stuff was for dates," she said.

"This isn't a date?"

"In the library? Doing research on a holiday? You've got to be kidding me."

"So this isn't a date. But I've wanted to do that for a while."

She squirmed against him, he couldn't tell if she was trying to get closer to him or just trying to get away. She gazed downward, meaningfully. "Apparently that's not the only thing you wanted to do for

a while.”

He laughed ruefully. “Unless you’re into the public stuff, I guess I’ll have to wait a little longer for that, huh?”

This time she leaned over to kiss him. When she pulled away, she grinned. “Oh, I don’t know. I could be persuaded if we don’t get caught.” But then she frowned. “What’s that?”

He followed her gaze to the floor. The book she had dropped earlier had fallen open to a page covered in an illustration that looked like a reproduction of a print made from carved wooden blocks. The figure in the illustration was that of a strange man and stag hybrid with the antlers filling out a significant portion of the top part of the page. Stuart picked up the book and squinted at the caption.

“A folk carving of the Horned King,” he read aloud. “Here he is depicted in his spring form, the gesture of his right hand indicating a blessing for the planting season.”

“That sort of looks like the figures they painted on the scaffold in the main square,” remarked Mel. “But that would be odd—why would they paint the spring form if it is fall?”

He flipped the page. On the opposite side was another reproduction. The carving this time depicted a strange humanoid form that looked neither like man or known beast. The thing had large bulbous eyes that filled up the head and no nose. There was a maw of teeth, sharp and needle-like and the arms came down to the ground, claws raking the earth. Only the antlers were the same. She shivered and remembered the claw marks on her bedroom door.

He read, “A folk carving of the Horned King. Here he is depicted in his late autumn form. In this form, he is also called the Devourer of Souls.”

She closed her eyes and let out a breath. “The Devourer of Souls,” she repeated.

“Mel, it’s just a myth.”

“If that’s true, then what could it be?”

He shrugged. “A prank, perhaps.”

“Oh right, everything is a prank.”

He put the book back onto the shelf. “Let’s get out of here, maybe the dust is getting to us.”

“You just want me to clear my head of all that nonsense.”

They walked out of the stacks and was about to pass the librarian’s counter when they spotted Teresa chatting with an older man who was leaning against the counter. Mel momentarily stopped, frowning. Indeed, that man was familiar looking. Where had she seen him before.

“Oh!” the librarian exclaimed as she spotted the pair of journalists. “That was a quick one. Did you find all that you were looking for?”

Stuart nodded. “We found some interesting things about the mine.”

“Afternoon folks,” said the older man. He peered at them. “Say, haven’t I met you before? I’m Lloyd Fenster.”

“You were at the Grandbury Farm last night, right?” said Stuart. “You were at the star gazing party.”

“Yep. Unfortunately it was a bit of a bust, wasn’t it? Too cloudy.”

Mel and Stuart nodded.

Teresa coughed to get their attention. “Well, Lloyd, didn’t you know that they were looking up information on the horn silver mines?” She grinned at the journalists. “Lloyd owns the mines, you know.”

The older man watched them speculatively. “Yes, I own the mines. It was too bad that I had to close them down. Fortunately, my income doesn’t come solely from that source so that doesn’t mean I’m totally in a financial pit.”

“Of course not!” said the librarian. “You can’t be since you’re the mayor’s financial advisor.”

Lloyd Fenster shrugged. “Like the big city stock brokers say, diversify your portfolio. I have income coming in from other sources so I’m not in the poorhouse. Not yet at any rate.”

“So are you planning to sell the mines then since you can’t profit from them?” asked Stuart, his reporter instincts kicking in.

“My first thoughts would be no,” Lloyd said. “After all, the mine has been in my family for several generations. It’ll sort of be disrespectful to my ancestors, you know, if I sell it off. But I guess I am thinking of it. One has to be practical, after all. Are you interested in it?”

Stuart nodded. “It does seem to be a unique spot for Gavot, isn’t it?”

“That it is. I suppose you two working for a city magazine, you might be interested in looking around. I don’t have much to do tomorrow since it is the Harvest Festival so I could show you around if you like.”

“Oh if it isn’t too much trouble with you, we’d love to.”

“It would be no trouble at all,” Lloyd Fenster drawled. “Besides, I think it’ll be a fun thing giving a tour. No one goes out that way any more after the mine closed.”

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## Chapter 24 – The Office

The late afternoon was noticeably cooler although the crowd at the Harvest Festival did not appear to dwindle. Above, in the sky, the clouds were a dark gray, stretched out like chewing gum as the wind in the upper atmosphere tugged and pulled. The sun was nowhere to be seen although it was still light out—but everything was cast through a grayish tinge, almost as if everything was slowly turning black and white. Dried leaves crackled underfoot as they were blown around. The scene was showing signs of an older autumn tingeing on winter.

Mel pulled her jacket closer to her, wishing briefly that she had brought a scarf. The winds were like fingers tugging against her skin and hair. Who was to know if the wind had a life of its own? Stuart walked beside her, seemingly oblivious to Mel’s perceived sinister intent of the wind. In the darker light, one could see his eyes clearly through his glasses—his gaze was mostly fixated on the road in front of them although every moment or so, he would flick a worried glance at the photographer.

“They might not keep a list,” she said.

Stuart dodged a small child who was chasing after a poodle on a leash before he spoke, “There might be someone around who might remember who attended the artists’ workshop or whatever it was that Mad Dog went to. And certainly, someone would have remembered Mad Dog. He isn’t forgettable.”

“No. Not by a long shot.” She clenched her fists inside her pockets. “I hate this. This is so stupid.”

“What is?”

“This whole thing. I let that . . . whatever that thing was last night to get to me. I’m not some small child. I thought I put all this bogeymen stuff behind me in grade school. It’s just that I don’t know what the hell that thing is.”

“It’s not a bad thing to be afraid of something,” he replied, “especially if it is something unknown. I mean, look at history and folklore. Humans have always been afraid of the unknown. If it was known, we’d have a notion or at least a perception that we could somehow control it or the situation if something like that arises.”

“You make things sound so rational and uncomplicated,” she said. “Ah, if only one could make a dent with a gun or a knife or even an aluminum bat.”

“You’re beginning to sound like a character in a violent video game. Are you sure you haven’t played any of those while I wasn’t looking?”

“Sorry, no.”

The community center came into view. Plenty of people were surrounding the modern metal hulk coming and going. From the window, they could see that many visitors were milling about in the main room doing some sort of craft work. The journalists blended into the crowd and found themselves swept inside the community center and into the welcoming foyer. A table was set up here and several older ladies sat behind it, writing names down for registering for each batch of craft classes during the Harvest Festival. The line was relatively short so in a few minutes, they were able to ask the registration ladies if they knew anything about previous classes that were held at the community center.

One of the ladies shook her head. “Sorry, we don’t work with those programs and I’m afraid that the person who is in charge of the programs, Petunia Granger, is away today. She’s taking charge of foot races and some of the other activities being held during the Harvest Festival. If you come back in a week, she’ll be here and she might be able to help you.”

“Thanks,” said Mel. Her mouth twisted in thought. “Petunia Granger. Where have I heard of that name before?”

“She’s the president of the bingo club,” replied Stuart wryly. “I suppose it’s just as well that she isn’t here at the moment.”

“I know what you can do, although I’m not sure if it’s all that helpful,” spoke up another older woman. “Petunia’s office is just down that hallway and there’s a bulletin board right outside her door where she posts all the activities that she’s in charge of. You might find something there?”

Mel nodded. "We'll check that out. Thanks a lot."

The foyer of the community center was the hub of the building. To one side was a large door that led to the main room which all the visitors to the Harvest Festival were participating in a craft class. At the opposite side of the main room was a hallway that led toward more rooms, classrooms, and recreation rooms. Straight ahead in a darkened hallway were the offices of the people in charge of community events. This was the hallway that the registration ladies directed them toward. To light their way, one of the ladies flipped one of several switches at the start of the hallway. Every other light turned on—it wasn't as light as the rest of the building—giving the hallway an empty, quiet, and grayed-out atmosphere.

Mel and Stuart walked slowly down the hallway, Mel taking the left side and Stuart taking the right side. They peered at the doors and the bulletin boards beside each door, trying to find Petunia Granger's office. Near the end of the hallway, Stuart gave a triumphant exclamation.

"I think this is it."

There was a plaque on the door with the words "P. Granger" embossed in white. Beside the door, like the other doors in the hallway, was a bulletin board. A couple pieces of paper were tacked on it—a pink flyer for a beading workshop, a white one for a meditation class, a blue one for some sort of church related potluck dinner, and an orange one for a painting class—which was dated for the following month.

"This isn't helpful, is it?" said Mel.

Stuart lifted the flyers to look at the backs. Nothing. "Nope. There might be something interesting in her office though."

"You aren't suggesting?"

"Why not?"

"Isn't that unethical or something?"

"She won't know if we don't tell anyone." He moved passed her and tried the knob for Petunia Granger's office. It was locked. "Do you have any wire with you?"

"Oh great." She rummaged in her tote bag. "If we get caught breaking and entering, it'll be all your fault. And I'm going to say that I don't know you at all."

"Yeah, well, you can't deny that you're being an accomplice since you're here with me."

"Just being here doesn't make me anything. I could just say that I accidentally wandered out this way..."

"Like they'll believe you."

She glared at him with narrowed eyes. "Ridiculous. Here." She held up a bobby pin. "That's all I've got. Will it work?"

"Probably." He took it from her and bent it until it was a straight piece of wire. He stuck it into the lock and twisted and jiggled for a moment. The lock clicked. "Ah."

"If I didn't know any better, I'd have thought you were a professional lock picker instead of a reporter."

"Mel?"

"What?"

"Be quiet. We wouldn't want anyone around hearing us, would we?"

"Fine."

Stuart finally opened the door and the two of them slipped inside. He carefully closed the door and turned the lock so they wouldn't be unnecessarily surprised if Petunia Granger, for some unlikely reason, decided to return to her office. There was a battered oak desk to the left side of the room and the wall behind that was covered with a bookshelf. To the right were two chairs for visitors, a file cabinet, a fake plant, a water cooler, a small fridge, and a small microwave on top of that. At the opposite end of the room was a window with the blinds pulled up. On the desk was a calendar with some hastily scribbled appointments, a desktop computer, and a canister of pens. Mel went to the window and pulled down the blinds in case someone outside saw them. Stuart turned on the office light.

Mel immediately took the drawers at the desk and flipped through various files and looked through mostly future community events. Stuart took the file cabinet. After looking briefly through the top shelf, he determined that everything was filed by date—and the ones on the top shelf were from several years ago. He started on the next shelf. After determining that everything in Petunia Granger's desk was for future events, she turned to the bookshelf behind the desk and began looking through the folders stacked on them.

"Well, well, well." Stuart chuckled.

"What?" She turned to see the reporter peering down at the last drawer of the file cabinet. He

reached in and pulled out a wine bottle. His eyes gleamed.

“Sneaky, huh?”

“A total closet alcoholic, I’d say,” Mel replied, grinning. “You don’t think there would be something similar in that fridge of hers?”

He walked over to it and opened it. “Yep.” He pulled the fridge door wide and stepped to the side so that she could see the interior. Several packs of unopened beer were stacked tightly, filling up the entire space. “But I’d give her a benefit of a doubt. Maybe she’s keeping all this liquor for a future party.”

“Perhaps.” She pulled out another folder as Stuart moved toward the desk and turned the computer on. “But every time we’ve seen her, she’s been as drunk as a skunk.”

“As well as all her other bingo cronies,” Stuart added as he watched the computer go through the routines. “Actually, we should have looked through this computer first. It’s probably much easier and faster.”

“For you, maybe. You’re the computer geek.”

“Hm.”

Mel opened the folder she had in her hands and found herself gaping and blushing ferociously. “Oh my goodness.” She slammed the folder closed and stuffed it back on the bookshelf.

“What?” Stuart suddenly turned around. He took in her pink face and smirked. “What did you see?”

“Nothing for your sensitive eyes.” She gazed at the rest of the folders on the shelf warily. “I’m sort of afraid to touch the rest of those.”

“Come on, what was it?”

“If you must know, it was a bunch of pictures. Of naked guys.”

“Oh.” Stuart turned back to the computer. “So old Ms. Granger keeps a pornography collection in her office.” He sounded amused. “I take it that you disapprove of naked guys?”

“I don’t disapprove of naked guys, per se,” she replied. “I just don’t like to be surprised like that.”

“I see.”

She turned to watch him go through the files on the computer. “So you see anything promising?”

“There’s this folder labeled ‘registration lists’.” He clicked on the icon and a window popped up with a list of files with dates. He picked out a few of them with the dates that matched Mad Dog’s stay at Gavot. He opened a few of the files and ran a search for Mad Dog’s real name, Ralph Bartlett. There was a match on the third file he opened. On that particular file, there were ten names listed.

Quickly, Mel took a blank sheet of paper from one of the desk drawers and scribbled the names on it before stuffing it in her tote bag. Stuart closed the applications on the computer.

“Do any of the names on the list look familiar to you?” he asked.

“Hm, well...”

A sudden thump came at the office door. There were voices. A woman’s voice, slurred, perhaps drunk, said loudly, “Oh honey, lower, oh...”

Mel and Stuart glanced at each other. He quickly turned the computer off.

“How are we going to get out now?” she whispered.

“We could wait them out,” he suggested.

There was some more thumping on the other side of the door. A man’s voice murmured incoherently. The woman chuckled. “Wait, not out here. Let me get my keys. We’ll be more private inside.”

“Crap,” Mel hissed.

Stuart shook his head. “The window.”

The journalists lurched towards the other side of the room. Stuart pulled up the blinds and unlatched the window before pulling the pane up. There was a scrapping from the office lock and more moans from the amorous couple.

“You first,” he whispered.

“What?”

Instead of responding, he picked up the photographer by her waist and shoved her through the open window. There was a muffled shriek as she tumbled onto the ground at the opposite side. Once she was out, Stuart dove out the window and let out a grunt as he hit the ground. When he looked up, Mel was lying a few inches away, giving him an annoyed glare.

“We didn’t have much time,” he said. “It was for your own good.”

“My own good, my foot.” She reached out and grabbed the collar of his jacket. He grinned,

thinking that she was going to kiss him, but instead, surprising for her size, she dragged him toward the wall of the building, out of sight of the window.

They could hear the door to the office bang open and more moaning.

“What’s that window doing open?” said the woman.

“So much for privacy,” replied the man. “Here, I’ll close it.”

Mel and Stuart sat against the wall of the building holding their breath as they heard the pane of the window slide closed and the muffled rustling of the blinds being drawn.

She let out a breath and turned to look at her partner in crime. “You know how when out of all the possible things that could happen, the worst possibility always comes true?”

“Yeah?”

“Well, we just escaped from the worst possibility by a hair. The next time you come up with a stupid idea like this, I’m going to run the other way.”

“Sure, but you’d have to admit, it wasn’t for nothing.”

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## Chapter 25 – An Indecent Proposal

Despite the crowds, the café on Main Street was relatively clear. Mel and Stuart were able to find a small table for two secluded near the end of the restaurant. Mel held the Styrofoam cup of coffee in both her hands. She was staring down at the dark brown murky depths, perhaps trying to scry out the future. Warm steam caressed her nose. She took a tentative sip. It wasn’t too bad, but there was better coffee elsewhere, particularly back in New Halis.

Stuart adjusted his glasses and seriously contemplated the list of names that Mel gave him. His own coffee cup was sitting by his hand, but he wasn’t touching it. “I don’t particularly recognize any of these names.”

“They’re all out of town painters or artists, I’d gather,” she replied. “We could probably look them up, if we had a connection to the internet.”

“No such luck. This is just a regular café, not an internet one.”

“Too bad.” She took another sip of her coffee. “Back at square one, I guess. Unless we want to get back into her office and copy her hard disk?”

“Judging from the kind of computer in her office, that would take a while,” he replied. “Want to break into the community center tonight?”

“No thanks.”

Stuart finally took a sip from his coffee and slid the slip of paper with the list of names back toward Mel. “So any ideas as to where we should go now?”

She took the piece of paper and glanced down at it. “I don’t know. Hm. How about this name?”

“What name?”

“Laurent de Matheus.”

“That guy at the bed and breakfast, you suppose?”

“It would have to be him, even though we never got his last name. How many people do you know are named Laurent?”

“I know plenty of Lawrences and Larrys. Who is to know what their actual variation is? But you’re right, not very many people go by Laurent.”

“And it does seem kind of fancy, as Elsie Grandbury mentioned,” she murmured. “You don’t think he was involved with Mad Dog in any way, do you?”

“At this point, I’m going to try not to be surprised at anything.”

“Wise words.”

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When they arrived back at the bed and breakfast, one cat spirit was on the welcome mat to greet them as they came in. The owners’ niece, Rebecca, was sitting in her usual place at the reception desk, engrossed in another novel. The rest of the cat spirits in the room were sitting beside her looking at the novel over her shoulder. The owners themselves were nowhere in sight. Mel ventured up the stairs to put her tote bag away. Stuart walked into the living room to look out the window. The neighborhood in the

late afternoon was quiet. All the crowds were still at Main Street celebrating the Harvest Festival.

“Back so soon?”

Stuart slowly turned around at the sound of the man’s voice. The painter was sitting on one of the couches in the living room, the black of his close-fitting clothes starkly contrasting with the cream-colored cushions. His arms were spread out like an eagle, his legs crossed in a practiced negligence. His dark hair, which had always been tied back before, was splayed and free, the long locks tumbling around his shoulders. This was a man practiced at seduction. Stuart scowled, thinking how his poor editor probably fell head first into this louse’s wiles.

“The Townsends said that their cook was going to be making dinner today.”

“There’s going to be food at the festival on Main Street too.”

“Aren’t you going?”

“Sometimes I like to be away from crowds.” The painter gave a dramatic sigh. “I suppose it’s my loner personality.”

“Huh.”

The painter gave him a hurt look. “You think I’m just being overly emotional.”

“You’re entitled to feel whatever you want,” he replied coolly. “I heard that you were to sell some paintings while you were here. Make any sales?”

“I got some sold. Which is nice. But it isn’t reliable enough to pay the bills, you know. I also work at an art gallery.”

“Really?”

He smiled, his lips turning up to reveal the gleam of his teeth. “You’re not really into art, are you?”

Stuart adjusted his glasses. “I’m a reporter, first. In my spare time, I’m a computer gamer. The only art I really appreciate is the computer-generated kind.”

“Oh, too bad.” He pursed his lips, as if thinking. “I went to the second Harvest Festival competition today. The foot races. I didn’t see you there.”

“I didn’t go.”

“Afraid that you would be beaten?”

“I’m not the competitive type.”

“Except when it comes to computer games?”

“Well, perhaps that’s an exception.” He crossed his arms across his chest. “I assume the bingo club was also in charge of that competition?”

“Hm. That’s correct. A bunch of drunken old ladies, aren’t they? One wonders if they’re like that all the time. If you’re curious, the same guy who won the swimming competition also won this one. It looks as if he’s going to be the reigning Horned King again this year.”

“Good for him.”

The painter got up from the couch and paced towards him like a sleek panther, eyeing prey. Stuart stood his ground. “If you were at the foot races today, you could have beaten him,” he said, his voice pitched lowly. “There’s still a chance that you can beat him. The final competition is tomorrow, for climbing. The bingo club has hired a company to erect a climbing wall for the contestants.”

“I told you I wasn’t the competitive type.”

“Hm.” The painter was leaning close now, invading his personal space.

Stuart deliberately took one step back. “You know you’re not fooling anyone with your funny poses.”

“I know I’m not,” he grinned. “But aren’t you even a little…intrigued?”

“No.”

The painter gave a pout. “That little photographer is your girlfriend, isn’t she?”

Stuart didn’t reply.

“I knew it!” The painter’s lascivious grin widened and he lunged towards the reporter before he had any time to react. “I have a wonderful proposal for you. A wonderfully indecent proposal.” He whispered his thoughts into the reporter’s ear.

Stuart blanched and managed to peel the painter away from him. “No. Just no. Ask someone else to satisfy your own kink.”

“You just need a little convincing,” the painter declared. “My previous lover was just as hesitant, but…”

“He didn’t happen to be someone named Mad Dog, hm?”

The painter suddenly staggered backward as if Stuart had sucker punched him. “What?”  
“Mad Dog. You know, Ralph Bartlett, the editor of the magazine that Mel and I work at. Obviously, you know who he is.”

Laurent de Matheus grabbed hold of a nearby couch to steady himself. He looked at the reporter warily. “What do you mean?”

“This isn’t the first time that you’ve been to Gavot.” Stuart said it as a statement, in sure, firm tones. Actually, he wasn’t really sure if the painter had been to Gavot before, but sometimes, when one wanted answer, one had to take things into one’s hands.

The painter sank down into one of the couch’s arms. “Of course I’ve been to Gavot before. There was an artists’ workshop at the community center. I met Mad Dog there. He was larger than life. How could anyone not want him? How did you find that out? I thought we were discrete.”

Stuart rolled his eyes. “You can’t be discrete in a small town like this. Everyone knows what everyone else is doing—even if they don’t know what they’re doing themselves. Surely you know that rule about small towns. Or have you been too sheltered by big city life to pay attention to that bit of common wisdom?”

“I’m an artist,” he declared. “I can do whatever I want. Anyways, who cares about my past lovers? Right now, I have my sights set on you.”

“Sorry, but I’m not available,” the reporter replied dispassionately. “I was just curious about you and Mad Dog anyway. Mad Dog was showing off these beads that he was wearing. Did you give them to him? They looked a lot like the ones that are given to the winners of the competition.”

The painter waved a hand. “Pah. Mad Dog probably just got it from a jewelry shop around here. Why on earth would I want to hand out trinkets when I have myself?”

Stuart frowned at Laurent de Matheus’ breezy words, but he didn’t miss the shuttered expression that immediately came over the painter’s eyes when he mentioned Mad Dog’s necklace.

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Chapter 26 – The Kitchen

As Mel came down the stairs, she heard voices drifting out from the living room. She peeked in and saw Stuart standing near the windows, his arms crossed in front of his chest. He was frowning. His glare was directed to the person opposite of him, the painter, who was sitting on the arm of the couch. Was it just her imagination or did the man look a little pale? She shook her head and decided to leave Stuart to his interrogation. He was the reporter after all.

She turned around the corner of the banister and headed toward the dining room. It was darkened and none of the places had been set yet. The numbers on the face of the grandfather clock sitting in the corner of the room gleamed.

“Oof!” A crash sounded in the next room. Curious, she put her ear to the door leading toward the kitchen and listened. There was more clattering and cursing. She pushed open the door and found herself in a large industrial sized kitchen with gleaming marble counters and copper pans strung up on the ceiling. Stainless steel stoves and refrigerators lined one side like smart soldiers at attention. At the back of the kitchen was a door, and it was open. A rather plump woman in a bright red knit hat and a gray woolen dress was backing into the kitchen, attempting to drag in some very hefty brown bags.

“It looks like you need some help,” called out Mel.

The woman raised her head and spotted the photographer standing near the door leading to the dining room. “I should say I do,” she replied.

Mel strolled over to the woman and began scooping up some of the bags and putting them on the counter. “Stocking up on groceries?”

“That and several other things besides,” the woman huffed. “Thanks for the help. I would shake your hand, but mine are full at the moment. I’m Pat.”

“Mel. The Townsends said that you are the cook here?”

“That’s right.” Pat set down the last of the bags on the counter and gave a relieved sigh. “Nice work if you can find it. The hours are a lot more flexible than some other places, I’ll tell you.”

Mel nodded. “I’m sure.”

The cook began taking food out of the bags, putting some in the refrigerator and leaving others out, ready to be prepared. “You’re one of the guests here, I take it?”

“Yes.”

“Why aren’t you back out at the Harvest Festival. I think there are still some events scheduled for tonight.”

She shrugged. “I thought I’d stay in tonight. There are plenty of other things happening tomorrow, right?”

“I heard that the last competition for the Horned King is going to be held tomorrow and the winner is going to be crowned the next day,” said the cook as she pattered around, taking some of the pots and filling them with water. She put them on the stove and turned up the heat. “I suppose if you’re going to really get the whole essence of the entire festival, the crowning of the Horned King would be the thing to go to. It is quite spectacular, even if you’re an old-timer like me.”

“Hm. Yes. My partner and I were planning on going to that.”

The cook nodded as she started to take out the things out of the last brown bag. All of these were pans—or more appropriately, cast iron skillets—which had the bed and breakfast log embossed on the handles. “You’re welcome to stick around and watch although I pretty much guarantee that all this cooking stuff is going to be someone boring.”

“That’s all right. I’d imagine that I might be able to learn something. What are those?” she asked nodding towards the pans.

“Skillets. Actually, we had them specially made. Ida had placed an order with the hardware store and well, I was picking them up. We were going to give to each of the guests when they left, but well, since you’re already here, you can take your pick.”

Mel raised an eyebrow. “Skillets? What an unusual gift. I suppose I could use it to fry eggs or something. That’s one of the few things I can cook without burning hopelessly.”

The cook laughed. “Perhaps your original idea was a good one. If you stick around for the next hour or so, you’ll learn a couple more things to do with that skillet.”

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## Chapter 27 – Skillet Fight

The cat spirits were clawing at the bedroom door. She could hear their claws scratching away. There was noise, yes, but in the morning, even she wouldn’t see any of the marks they made. Some of them were yowling softly. No doubt, they were trying to get her out of bed.

Mel stared up at the ceiling, frowning. She could feel something out there. The air was definitely thicker, but it didn’t have as much urgency as the previous night. Was it just her imagination? She was slightly mad and not a little frustrated at the whole situation. Wasn’t she going to have at least one night of uninterrupted sleep? One of the cat spirits decided to stop his caterwauling and instead jumped on her bed, pouncing on her. Wake up! Get up!

“All right, I’m up,” she grumbled, pulling the covers away. Her feet were bare and once again the floor was cold. Whoever or whatever it was...it was going to get it this time, she thought with determination. Sure, there was a tiny bit of fear niggling at the back of her mind, but she shoved it away, instead focusing on her growing irritation and anger.

Pat, the cook, had given her the choice of skillet. Out of a perverse sense of amusement, she had chosen the largest one—cast iron, square, big enough to house a decent sized plant, if she had the inclination of growing any. It was also heavy, several pounds and to her mind, took way to much energy to lift it. It would take one of those muscle-bound weight lifters to even attempt to use it to cook anything let alone flip pancakes. Stuart had actually laughed at her for picking the biggest one. You’re biting off more than you can chew, he had joked. Well, he wouldn’t be joking now, especially if that thing was doing what she thought it was trying to do.

The skillet was on top of the bureau. With a fortifying breath, she took hold of the handle and swung it around. She winced. She hoped she didn’t pull a muscle. The cat spirits were yowling louder now. They wanted out. And they wanted out now.

Mel blinked, to make sure that her eyes were adjusted to the dark. In her room, she could see the shadowy outlines of the bed and the armchair. A little bit of moonlight streamed through the window. Well, that would have to do for now, she thought. And enough of the procrastination!

She opened her bedroom door and the cat spirits streamed out like silent wisps of steam. They weren’t making any noise now. They were busy stalking whatever it was that was out there in the hallway.

Mel stepped out and she was suddenly struck with the force of the air. To any normal person, or to anyone who wasn't really paying attention, it would have been just the usual—a darkened hallway. But the air was definitely heavier, even heavier than what the air had become in her room. And across the hallway, in front of the door that was Stuart's room, was the thing.

It was a tall black shadow, blacker than anything that she had ever seen. Even though the hallway was slightly dim from the moonlight that came in through the windows in the various parts of the house, this thing absorbed all the light as if it were a black hole, sucking everything in. She could make out the shadow's shape, tall, elongated, slightly humanoid—although she would have been more comfortable just calling it a thing than a person. Something dragged on the ground, it didn't make any noise actually, but just something drew her attention to the thing's feet. Claws tickled the wooden floorboards. She had no doubt now that this had been the thing visiting her the previous night.

The cat spirits that had been lurking toward the thing pounced in a mass of darkly colored fur. The thing stilled, its attention transferred from Stuart's door to the little spirits enthusiastically attacking it. It didn't seem to be bothered by the cat spirits though—it just seemed darkly amused as it looked down at the animals sinking their claws into shadowy spirit flesh. And then, the thing turned and looked at her and suddenly she was frozen, very, very afraid.

The thing had bright red eyes filling what she had thought was its neck. What she thought was its head was actually a spidery network of horns, so dense that at first glance, one would have thought it was solid. The arms reached out, ignoring the clawing cat spirits. It was reaching towards her. It didn't quite touch her, but she could feel the air getting even thicker, trying to crush her lungs.

Her sluggish brain then sparked and automatically, her arms swung up, the skillet heading toward the thing. It's not going to work, she thought. It's just a spirit, it'll go right through.

The skillet hit something solid. It clanged like a gong and her arms wavered from the vibrations. For one moment, the air cleared and everything seemed even more silent and even more still.

Stuart's door opened. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the reporter standing at the threshold in his pink pajamas and mused hair. He had managed to put his glasses on his face, but she could tell from his muddled expression that he was still half-asleep.

"What's going on?" he asked.

"Stuart, shut the door!" she yelled at him.

"Huh?"

The thing, torn between the woman with the cast-iron skillet and the object of its search, decided to lunge towards what it was looking for.

"No!" Mel called up some reserved strength within her and swung the heavy skillet, once again connecting with the thing. She ignored the protest in her arms. As if in response to her battle cry, the cat spirits yowled in union, calling up the rest of their brethren in the house. More cat spirits rushed out of Stuart's room, forming a line between him and the thing and several more leaped up from the lower levels, pouring over the stairs. They launched themselves towards the thing as Mel swung her make-shift weapon a third time.

Stuart's eyes widened at the scene, finally wide awake. "Mel!"

"Shut the damn door," she yelled at him again. "Or are you just going to be stupid and stand there like a chicken out to slaughter?"

The thing retreated, watching her. The Horned One wasn't into retreats, she knew. It was after something, and she was pretty sure what it was. She heard Stuart close the door, but he wasn't safe on the other side. No, the headstrong reporter was now outside in the hallway standing between her and that ancient thing.

"Are you insane?" she spluttered.

"I'm not going to let you out here alone with that."

She glared at him, but at that moment when they weren't watching, the thing leaped toward them, claws outstretched, eyes glowing, and finally, its maw revealed—sharp teeth gleaming like polished silver and emitting a terrible stench, worse than burning sulfur.

Mel wanted to hit the thing again, but the smell was too much and her lungs rebelled, taking her into a coughing fit. She wasn't going to make it, she thought. The skillet was falling out of her grasp.

And then there was a clang. She looked up from her coughing fit and saw Stuart on his knees, his hands holding up her skillet like a shield. The Horned One had rammed its face and its claws into the back of the skillet and there was a hiss that sounded like pain. The cat spirits were now attacking the back of the thing—they were making some progress as bits of black shadow were shredded into ribbons that melted on the

floor.

The thing hissed again and Stuart looked like he was about to faint, his glasses dipping on the edge of his nose. The air grew heavy as it retreated and with one flying leap, flew over them and down the stairs, the agitated cat spirits at its feet.

He let out a breath and the skillet fell from his fingers to the floor in a dull thump.

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## Chapter 28 – Fenster’s Mine

The road heading north of Gavot was a scenic route, lined with golden-leaved trees and rolling hills. It was pretty, picture perfect, and ordinarily, Mel would have made Stuart stop the car and she would have wasted half an hour taking photographs. Instead, she was dully staring ahead of, watching the painted stripes on the road pass by in a speckled blur. She was clutching her tote bag to her chest, not caring that it was now a lot heavier than it was before because she had stuffed her bed and breakfast embossed gift skillet into it. In the morning, to her surprise, she had found the skillet to be free of all scratches.

Stuart was driving, as usual, but he was frowning at the road. He wanted to say something, but after seeing Mel’s mutinous expression, he just pressed his lips together and turned on the car radio to a news station. The announcer mostly talked about the weather and politicians.

Lloyd Fenster had remarked that the horn silver mine was a few miles north of Gavot, perhaps about a fifteen minute drive. “You can’t miss it,” he had said. “It’s off to the side, but the land itself is pretty razed. There’s a sign that says ‘Gavot Silver Mine’ and below that, it’ll say ‘Gavot Cemetery, five miles’ right in front of it. Just take the small dirt road right after the sign, and it’ll be on your right. I’ll meet you at the driveway in front of the main office—it’s just a small brick building with some green shutters.”

“That thing doesn’t like iron,” Mel said suddenly.

Stuart turned off the radio, suddenly relieved that the photographer had decided to break the silence between them. “What did you say?”

“That thing doesn’t like iron,” she repeated. “I wonder why that is.”

“Hm, I don’t know. Although I seem to recall some folklore somewhere, I don’t know if it’s from a completely different culture or what, but they say that spirits or fairies or supernatural creatures can’t stand cold iron.”

“Oh?”

“Maybe it’s something from the earth that they can’t tolerate. Maybe iron takes away their strength or something. The reason is probably far from rational, if you know what I mean.”

“Yeah.” She flexed her fingers, thinking that once she got back home, she would sign up for a weight lifting class herself. “But we do know what it’s looking for. Those beads. And they’re also made of metal.”

“If I remember, horn silver. But doesn’t that have different properties? Not all metal is the same, you know.”

“Sure, but...oh hell. You’re probably right. Metals do have different properties. I think you should start carrying a skillet too.”

“A knife might probably be sufficient.”

“A knife is too flimsy.”

“That’s what you think.”

“A knife isn’t made out of iron,” she pointed out. “At best, it’s probably made out of steel. And isn’t that an alloy of sorts, not entirely the same thing?”

He shrugged. “Maybe.”

The golden-leaved trees soon thinned out and were replaced by flat land, but unlike the rest of the flat land that was Gavot, this wasn’t the farmland with its waving fronds of wheat and corn. Lloyd Fenster hadn’t been kidding when he said that the land around the horn silver mines was razed. The ground was a bleak pebbly gray—sort of like dirty sandpaper which was layered. Perhaps the area had been strip mined at one time or another. The road itself was becoming cracked and the wheels of their rental car began kicking up dust. Mel was glad that the windows were rolled up.

They soon saw the sign in Lloyd Fenster’s directions. It was a beaten up wooden thing nailed to a

stake that had been pounded into the unrelenting ground. The paint indicating the mines and the cemetery a few miles further was faded from too much sun. Stuart turned onto the small road right after the sign and with reluctance, the rental car bumped along the unpaved road. The shock absorbers did not entirely mitigate the pace of the rough road. The car jostled and churned and if the journalists had been prone to getting motion sick, they would have already been. Mel muttered a silent thanks as they soon saw the small office building that Lloyd Fenster would meet them at standing a few feet from the road. Stuart pulled the car off to the side and parked next to a dusty gray truck, which despite its uncleanliness, they could tell that it was the latest model.

“Is he here?” Mel asked as Stuart killed the engine. As if in response to her question, a figure stepped out of the office building.

In the late morning light—which was more faded than usual due to the cloudy sky—Lloyd Fenster looked like he was part of the mine landscape, gray sweatshirt, dusty jeans and boots, a faded cap on top of his head. He wore sunglasses which hid his expression as he watched the journalists get out of the car.

“Good morning,” Stuart greeted. Mel said the same.

Fenster only nodded. “Glad you could make it. Although I would have to say you’re missing some interesting things at the Harvest Festival today.”

“Oh?” said Mel.

“The competitions,” he clarified. “Or the last one anyway. The bingo club hired some rock climbing company to put up one of their fake walls out on the grounds of the town’s school. They’re going to tally up all the scores for the participants later today and announce the winner for the title of Horned King.”

“But isn’t the Horned King going to be crowned tomorrow?” asked Stuart.

“Sure, sure. I suppose if you’re picky about that kind of stuff, tomorrow would be the real day to actually see the festival in action. They’ll be doing the crowning in the morning and then there would be a big bonfire and some traditional dances by some people whose ancestors were once natives that lived on this land. Lucky for us, they haven’t planned on taking the land back—they could, you know, under that law that the state government passed about a month ago.”

“Perhaps they’re not taking the land back because of the curse they laid on it generations ago,” Mel replied.

“Well, there’s that story,” Fenster agreed, “but I’d say that they’re just stories for amusement. Or to frighten children, depending on your temperament.”

“That’s lucky for you then,” said Stuart. “So how long has this building been up?”

“This is actually pretty new,” the owner to the mines remarked. “Compared to everything else, that is. The office building has been built, what, oh, about fifty years ago. My grandfather had it built after he razed the old office building that had been built there a hundred years even before that. I was a teenager back then—I remember it was really, just this old shack—definitely not built to last. One would think that a thunderstorm could have leveled it in one blow.” He shook his head. “Well, my grandfather thought something more sturdy and permanent was the way to go so here it is. Nowadays, I just use it as an office to store old records and the like. Since the mine has been closed, I just haven’t found anything new to do with it.”

“I would imagine that the mines are worth more because of this building,” said Stuart.

“Meh.” Fenster shrugged. “Perhaps. But for any prospective buyer to the place, the first thing they would look at would be what the mine itself would be worth and how much more horn silver one could squeeze out of the thing. Without killing anyone, of course.” The mine owner stepped off toward the bleak terrain and motioned for the journalists to follow him. “There really isn’t that much to see, except maybe the entrance. I can’t take you inside, of course. Too dangerous, even allowing for hard hats.”

As they walked across the pebbly land, the rocks crunching under their feet and the dust getting kicked about their knees, Stuart asked, “So how did the mine get into your family holdings?”

“Ah, that?” Fenster tucked the brim of his cap lower on his head as if to hide the frown on his forehead. “Well, I suppose it was similar to how a lot of people’s families acquired things around here. A long time ago, this used to be a farm, actually. I don’t remember the name of the family who originally owned the land, but nonetheless, they sold it to my family for one reason or another. An ancestor of mine recalled that the natives had used this land to obtain horn silver for their artifacts. He reasoned that there must be a mother lode of the stuff around here and that maybe he could make a profit.”

“Your ancestor was a businessman?”

“My entire family is made out of businessmen and businesswomen,” the mine owner remarked.

“It’s in our blood. Anyway, the horn silver mine soon opened and it was a booming business. It was a booming business until it closed, at any rate. People always want the stuff to make trinkets and inlays and all sorts of things. Most of the horn silver from this mine actually went to some local artists to make all of that.”

“So it was more for artisan type purposes rather than something more utilitarian? To be honest, I’ve never heard of, say utensils, made out of horn silver.”

“Yep, it was mostly for decoration purposes.”

Fenster suddenly stopped and the three of them looked out over the small hill that they had climbed. Below them was a depression—one could tell it was a pit, actually—but the sides had been weathered by erosion. There was a dark hole at the bottom of the valley that looked like the opening of a cave. Broken two-by-fours littered the outside and there was yellow warning tape pinned across the opening. Some of the tape was ripped and it fluttered in the slight breeze.

“Well, there it is,” Fenster remarked. “The opening of the mine. The last time it was inspected, the geologists said that the integrity of the mine wouldn’t last for another six months if the workers continued digging. So, of course for the safety of all concerned, I decided to close it. There are other still operating horn silver mines in the area. I figured a closed one wouldn’t really make that much dent in the supply. It’s not as if there was a huge demand for horn silver artifacts anyway.”

“What about the necklaces?” said Mel. “You know, like the ones they give the winners to the competitions at the Harvest Festival?”

Fenster’s mouth slightly thinned. “Necklaces? Ah yes, that stuff. Well, I’ll have to admit that the ones that are given out for the winners are made of horn silver from these very mines. I do have a bit stockpiled for various purposes. I sent some down to an artist in Callas. Gerald Thompson. Ever heard of him?”

The journalists shook their heads.

“Well, that figures, you being city folk and all. He’s pretty famous around these parts. Anyways, he can make anything out of everything so I sent him some horn silver samples and he made some necklaces for the traditional winners’ gifts. If you see any horn silver being sold around Gavot nowadays, though, it’s probably not from here but elsewhere.”

Mel nodded. “I suppose that explains some things. So you only donate that for the Harvest Festival?”

“Hm.” Fenster appeared distracted, but it was obvious that he didn’t want to say anything else. Perhaps he thought that whoever he gave the horn silver to was none of their business.

“Our editor had a necklace made out of horn silver,” said Stuart, seemingly off-hand. “Perhaps it came from here?”

“I wouldn’t know,” the mine owner said grudgingly. “Horn silver is actually quite a common mineral around these parts. He could have gotten it anywhere.”

Mel took out her camera and began taking a few photographs. “It looks a bit lonely out here. It’s almost as if you’re on the moon instead of here on earth.”

“My thoughts exactly,” said Fenster, obviously relieved that the topic had been changed. “It’s nice to get out here to be alone, if you know what I mean. Sometimes, even in this out of the way place, you don’t want to be by anyone.”

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## Chapter 29 – Dust Devil

A beeping sound penetrated the silence that had descended on the trio overlooking the closed mine.

“Oh, excuse me.” Fenster pulled out a cell phone out of the back pocket of his pants and flipped it open. “Hello?”

Mel wrapped the strap to her camera around her wrist and took another look at the mines. Nope, she had no desire to go down there and investigate, even if the structural integrity of the place was completely sound.

“All right. Okay. Fine. I’ll be right there.” The mine owner flipped his cell phone closed and replaced it in his back pocket. “Sorry folks, but I’ve really got to be going. There’s a bit of a snafu with one of the events the mayor is at. I guess the guys there think I’m the only one who can fix the thing. If

you two still want to take a look around, you're welcome to."

"Yes, I think I'll take a couple more pictures," said Mel.

"Take all the photos that you want. Just don't go into the mines. It'll be my head if you disappear down there, you know."

The two journalists nodded and the mine owner waved a farewell to them as he walked back to his truck at the office building. For another moment, the two of them stood on the hill overlooking the mine, the late morning breeze picking up and whipping their hair. Mel made no move to take any more pictures.

"I wouldn't really say that it's like the moon," said Stuart finally. "It's more like a wound in the earth. Maybe, since the mine is finally closed, it will slowly heal itself."

"You sound like a moody environmentalist," she remarked. "Maybe you should publish some poems or start working for some tree hugger agency."

"Would it be so bad to do that?" But he was grinning. "You know, that guy seemed to have read my mind. I don't even think the structural integrity of that mine is all that bad. I want to take a look around inside. Maybe there's something interesting."

"That's suicidal."

"No, it's just my nosy reporter instincts kicking in."

"Well, even if you wanted to, you'd need a flashlight. And we don't have one. Unless you think you can see in the dark?"

"Okay, so you have a point. We'll just stand out here and stare at the thing and maybe some answers will pop up."

"Hm. So I never got a chance to ask you before—what did you find out from that painter, Laurent de Matheus?"

"He was definitely with Mad Dog when he was visiting Gavot," replied Stuart, "But he didn't want to admit that he gave the necklace to him. I think he's trying to hide something."

"Lloyd Fenster was trying to hide something too." Mel finally put her camera back into her bag and sighed. "And that thing from last night. This is getting weird."

"To say the least." Stuart frowned. "Promise me one thing."

"What?"

"Don't go out alone with someone you don't know. And definitely try not to be alone with that painter guy."

"What are you, jealous?"

"That guy just gives me the creeps. And I'm pretty sure he has designs on your bodily person."

"I sort of figured that out the first time I met him," replied Mel. "Besides, don't you have the same ideas?"

"But I'm not him."

"True."

The wind turned stronger and began to tug at their clothes. The sun overhead was suddenly obscured by a large gray cloud and the air abruptly turned cooler, forcing the journalists to unconsciously hug their jackets closer to their bodies. Bits of rocks rollicked with the wind and made clacking sounds as they hit against each other. The yellow warning tape flapped like bright warning banners.

"Maybe if we walk over there a little ways," began Stuart, but his voice was suddenly cut off by the howling wind which was sucked toward the mine. It was as if the mine had turned into the maw of a vacuum, sucking in everything and anything. The two journalists braced themselves on the hill, perhaps for a moment, fighting what nature was throwing at them.

And just as suddenly, the wind reversed course as if it had changed its mind like a fickle tantrum throwing child and it was blowing towards them. The clacking of rocks grew louder and no longer did the pebbles rustle at their feet. Sand and tiny rocks began hurtling through the air, bouncing against their clothes, stinging their exposed skin. It was as if the vacuum had been turned in reverse and now the mine was belching material back into them.

Mel and Stuart simultaneously took a step back. The howling wind had become a roar and it was as if the land was rebelling against the two humans trying to find out what was happening, what the answers to the questions were, prying into something that they had no business prying into. The wind, or what was creating the wind, was ferociously angry. Larger stones began to pelt them and Mel gave a startled cry as a rock hit her leg with unprecedented force. Stuart grabbed her hand and pulled her away, down the hill. They jogged and then ran as the wind pursued them, throwing dirt and pebbles and small rocks. It felt as if they were running in a dreamscape, never getting anywhere as tracts of gray dirt seemed

endless. The office building near the road seemed forever far away.

But finally, they reached the rental car—but the wind wasn't letting up. Bits of rock pinged against the car doors and the windshield. The journalists climbed in and Stuart started the engine up even before he had time to recover his breath. The car spluttered to life and soon, they were jostling back down the road, heading back toward some semblance of tamed civilization.

Mel looked back as they sped away. The office building was now covered in a gray haze as the sudden dust devil engulfed the land outside the horn silver mine.

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### Chapter 30 – Sculpture Display

A small part of Main Street had been cleared away for an art contest. On the street, metal and plywood scaffolds had been erected as make-shift shelves to display the sculptures that people had made for the Harvest Festival. Some of them were obviously made by children who had participated in the earlier crafts classes—these were the clay lumps with ridiculous nubs sticking out of them as imitation antlers. Some of those childish sculptures were good enough that an observer could sort of make it out as perhaps a deer or a moose or maybe a person with antlers. Others were hopeless blobs. Other sculptures were made by some amateur artists in town—these were, unfortunately, no better than the children's. However, these artists made no bones about their creations. They would unabashedly run up to the part of the scaffold that held their sculptures and regale their friends and family with comments about how hard it was to get it just right.

The photographer for the New Halis magazine, *Hot Tread*, took some pictures of these amateur sculptures, but she knew that the editors for the magazine would prefer photos of the more professionally done creations. Those were the ones that would catch a readers eye and perhaps induce them to buy the magazine. So Mel concentrated on the works that were placed at the very last scaffolds, the ones that showed definitively that there was some talent behind the hands that sculpted them.

These sculptures were of creatures, strange ones to say the least, that no one could actually put a finger on and say, this is what it is. Were these creatures the familiar four legged ones that you would see in the woods, or were they straight out of someone's fevered imaginations? Mel thought it was probably the latter. To her relief, none of these grotesque sculptures with antlers really looked familiar. They didn't look like the thing that had attacked them the night before—they weren't real representations of the Horned One.

“You should try this.”

Mel put her camera down and turned toward her reporter partner who was holding out a Styrofoam bowl of steaming chili. Her stomach growled eagerly. She dropped the camera into her tote bag and took hold of the bowl. After the strange incident at the horn silver mine, they had driven straight back to the center of Gavot and had plunged back into the seemingly benign celebrations of the Harvest Festival. It had been noon when they arrived back on Main Street, but with that incident still fresh in their minds, they had not been in the mood for lunch at that time. It had been several hours since then and Mel had managed to chase away most of that unidentifiable fear with some determined concentration on her work, but now her stomach was catching up with her.

Stuart took a bite of his chili and tapped the spoon against his bowl as he gazed at the sculptures on display. “Ugly things, aren't they?”

“Don't say that within hearing of any of the artists,” Mel replied, “Or you'd be lynched by bruised egos.”

“Torn by the mob, eh?” He examined some of the sculptures. There were tiny paper plaques taped to the bottom of each sculpture with the title of the creation and the name of the artist printed in pencil. Seeing no familiar name, he finally straightened up and turned his attention back to his lunch. “I wonder what all this here is for. Is it just for people to look at?”

“I talked to someone a little earlier who helped put some of these up on the scaffolds,” said Mel. “Apparently they're for an art contest—the theme is supposed to be “Inspiration for the Horned King”—you can see they all have horns. Of some sort or another.”

“Hm.”

“There's a voting booth over there,” she said, pointing her spoon ahead of them, indicating a white tent where a few volunteers wearing puffy blue coats were sitting at a cloth covered table filled with paper

ballots and ballot boxes. “You can vote for your favorite sculpture. Voting is going to close in about two hours and then the votes are going to be counted. The winner of the art contest is going to be announced later tonight at the bonfire they’re holding at Derry Pond, as well as the winner to the Horned King competitions.”

“Did you find out what the winner was going to get?”

She shrugged. “I think it was some gift certificate of some kind to a restaurant or business around here.”

“I’d be more impressed if the gift certificate was for something expensive.”

“Well, judging from most of the entries, I don’t think anybody really put that much effort into the contest to really warrant anything really expensive.”

Stuart walked along the scaffold, scanning a few more sculptures. “Hey, look at this one.”

“What?” She peered at the round lump that he was pointing at. “That really looks ugly. Sort of like some of those fat pagan fertility goddesses that archaeologists dig up from time to time.”

“Right, but look here.” He indicated the paper plaque. “Lloyd Fenster.”

“So? This piece of junk just indicates that this guy is not an artist. In any sense of the word.”

“Yeah, but he calls his masterpiece, ‘The Bead of the Horned One.’”

Mel looked closer at the paper plaque to confirm what Stuart had said. “That’s interesting.”

“Hello. Fancy meeting you here in this crush.”

They turned around to find Albert Smith, the compactly built reporter with a caddy cap from *The Callas Post* standing beside them looking at some of the sculptures. In one hand, he was holding a small writing pad and a pen.

Stuart nodded. “Afternoon, Al. Since we haven’t seen you around the past day or two, we figured you had finished your story and had wired it back to your editor.”

“Who then printed it up and now that’s why there’s so many people here,” Mel added.

The reporter from *The Callas Post* laughed. “You two attribute too much talent to my writing. Yes, I did wire a blurb about the Harvest Festival back to my editor so they could print it up in a timely fashion, but I’m also doing a longer piece for the paper. Actually, there’s always a crowd for the Harvest Festival. People around the area know all about it already.”

“Ah,” remarked Stuart.

“Actually, I think it’s really fortuitous that I bumped into you today,” he said. “I was hoping I might have met you at breakfast, but Ida Townsend said that you two already left.” He smiled. “Was there an interesting event scheduled for the festival that I missed?”

“Oh no,” replied Stuart. “Lloyd Fenster, the guy who helped finance the Harvest Festival was giving us a tour of a horn silver mine that he owns a couple miles north of here.”

Al nodded. “Well, I was wondering if we could compare notes. I like to be rather thorough about my stories and I was hoping I could pick your brain. Of course, in return for the favor, you can ask me anything you’d like.”

Stuart agreed. “Sure. Just fire away.”

As the two reporters chatted, Mel stepped away to look at some of the other paper plaques on the sculptures. She wasn’t really sure what she was looking for. Perhaps she was looking for something that might spark an idea of what to do next? After looking at a lopsided thing that looked more like a three-legged stool than a horned animal, she contemplated a figurine—this one was obviously a figurine as it was one of the more better sculpted pieces—that had branching horns on top of its head. On the plaque was the title “Horned King Standing: Inspired by Gavot Cemetery statuary.” Below that were the initials LM.

“Well hello there.”

Mel straightened up at the voice. She turned around to face the painter. “Enjoying the festivities?” she said blandly.

The painter had tied his hair back again, although this time it was braided. His coat was a shiny black. Something expensive, she thought.

“Excellent taste in sculpture design, don’t you think?” he said. He grinned. The painter was just like a former boyfriend of hers, she thought sourly. He was just like a slimy cad who couldn’t wait to get his greasy hands under your clothes.

“I wouldn’t know,” she replied. “I have no taste in this kind of art.”

“Ah, too bad. Although perhaps I could show you the finer aspects of the genre?” He had taken a step closer to her. His cologne tickled her nose. She wanted to sneeze.

“Is that one of your lamer pick up lines?”

He chuckled. “Oh, how witty!”

“Give me a break. Even a four year old child could tell.”

“Really, I could show you the finer aspects.” The painter’s eyes gleamed. “If you’d like, your cute boyfriend could come along too.”

Boyfriend? Did he mean Stuart? Stuart wasn’t her boyfriend. Well, he wasn’t exactly. But never mind what Stuart was. If this guy was intimating what she thought he was... “Is this some sort of personal art gallery tour?”

“Oh, much more,” he promised. And then the painter leaned over to whisper in her ear what he had in mind, in lurid detail.

Mel felt outrage flood hotly into her, making her grind her teeth. Without even an angry outburst or even a personal admonishment to control her temper, she threw her half-eaten chili bowl into the painter’s face and stalked off.

Still with the shock of sudden rejection, the painter stood in the middle of Main Street, next to the scaffolds of bad holiday sculpture, with chili dripping down his nose to splatter on his expensive jacket and the ground. Nearby, a gaggle of teenaged girls laughed at him with their mouths open, not even trying to disguise their amusement of his humiliation. A small child in powder blue overalls stared up at the strange man, not understanding. In the child’s hand was the leash to a puppy terrier. The dog sniffed at the chili dripping on the ground and began lapping it up.

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## Chapter 31 – Bonfire

Even though it was only early evening, the cloud cover made everything as dark as midnight. Derry Pond looked like a large oil slick occasionally reflecting the yellow flames of the bonfire that licked a large pile of logs nearby. The shore of the pond was crowded with people, mostly adults who didn’t have to worry about bed times. Grills had been set up to roast pork and beef and chicken. The bonfire cast eerie flickers across the shore, the shadows of people wavering to and fro like dark spirits dancing on the wilting grass. Smoke rose up into the air as a column of whiteness.

The smell of meat, for some reason, made Mel’s stomach rebel. So instead of partaking in the ribs and drumsticks that were being offered by the Harvest Festival volunteers in kiss-the-cook aprons, she took an extra helping of corn on the cob and nibbled the ears like a timid rabbit. She didn’t feel very hungry. Instead, she felt nervous. It was the dark again and even with the knowledge of the skillet in her tote bag, she didn’t feel very confident. Something was going to happen tonight, she was sure of it. The pieces of the puzzle were falling together—but not fast enough for her.

Stuart stood beside her, eating slowly, mostly watching the bonfire but also watching the people around him. He wasn’t so much concerned with strange things leaping out from the darkness in this huge crowd of people. No, he was worried about a certain group of lecherous and drunk bingo ladies. He thought he had spotted a couple of them near the edge of the lake waving about beer bottles.

“If it was any other time or any other place, this would have been fun,” she murmured. “I feel like I’m suffocating here.”

“I know what you mean,” he replied. His gaze was suddenly drawn to a point across the bonfire where he heard some yells and laughter. Someone had set up a long rope for a game of tug-o-war. There were perhaps about ten people on each side and everyone was pulling, straining arm and leg muscles. “Is that another contest? I thought there were only three.”

“That’s what I thought too. But the three for the Horned King competition—those were all for individuals, weren’t they?” said Mel. “That one, I think they just set up. And it looks like a team effort.”

“Right.”

“Are you thinking of joining them?”

He shook his head. “Maybe, as you said, in a different time and place. How about you?”

“What about me?”

“You could do tug-o-war—although maybe in different circumstances. Like in warmer weather. With some mud. And some shorts. Some really short ones.”

In the firelight, he finally saw her smile. “Someone needs to scrub your mind.”

They stood, finishing the free barbeque that the town offered to all the visitors to the Harvest Festival, and watched the contestants of the tug-o-war struggle with the rope. Finally, with one great

heave, one side pulled the rope over a line that someone had scratched onto the ground. The opposing side toppled over each other in a groaning heap.

“Ooo! Wasn’t that fun!”

Stuart stiffened, afraid to look at the source of the drunken whine.

Mel looked over at the older woman who had lumbered toward them. It was Petunia Granger, the president of the bingo club. She was holding a bottle and there was a strange loopy smile on her face. Her other hand was grasping the shoulders of a bald man with a graying beard. The man grinned, revealing bad teeth.

“Why don’t you try it?” Petunia slurred. “You’re a big strong boy.” She pinched Stuart on the arm. He winced.

“No thanks.”

“Aw, spoilsport.” She waved her arms dramatically and nearly toppled over if her escort wasn’t there to steady her. “Anyways, maybe I can convince the rest of the girls to have a go at it. I mean, I think there are enough of us here to form a team. Well, Harry, let’s be off to round the rest of them up!” She waved her arm again, nearly smacking Stuart in the face had he not ducked. The president of the bingo club lurched away from them, dragging her companion with her.

“Hello? Hello? Testing, one, two, three...”

Without a word, Stuart took Mel’s plate of barely touched food and discarded their plates into the nearest trash bin. Near the shore of Derry Pond, an amplifier was set up with a wire running off to a portable generator. A section of the shore was lit up with some lights and a small black platform was placed on the ground. A short man wearing a pin-striped suit was holding a microphone and had raised his hand to get everyone’s attention.

“Welcome to the Harvest Festival’s annual awards ceremony!” the mc declared. “And without much further ado, I’d like to announce the winners of the various contests that Gavot has held this week. There are many, many winners and we’ll like to get through them in a timely manner. After all, we’ve got an excellent round of dancing planned coming up. So let’s see...”

“Are there really that many contests at the festival?” Mel whispered to Stuart as the short man fumbled with the microphone and pulled out a piece of paper from his pocket.

“Who knows? Ah, we didn’t actually stay around for the main part of the festival, did we? I suppose if we wanted to, we could get a list from city hall or maybe the community center since they planned out everything.”

As the mc began reading out the first contest, Mel looked around them, feeling a bit antsy. The rest of the people at the bonfire, if one didn’t look closely, were merely other figures around them. In the evening, one couldn’t really tell who was who. But some people were rather distinctive. They were even more distinctive if they were doing something that no one else was doing.

Mel jabbed Stuart by his side to get his attention. “What’s he doing?”

Stuart adjusted his glasses and peered at the direction of her gaze. “Beats me. What do you want to do about it?”

The person in question was a figure dressed completely in black. By his build, they could tell that this was a man. By his hairstyle, they could tell that this was the painter, Laurent de Matheus. After the humiliating blow that Mel had dealt him, she would have figured him to be one of those hurt personalities who would have slunk back to the bed and breakfast to lick his wounds. But perhaps he was made of sterner stuff. The painter was trying to move out of the bonfire light, out into the edges of the Derry Pond field. He was trying to leave without being seen.

There was something about the painter’s strange creeping behavior that struck her curiosity and alarm.

“We’re going to follow him,” she said decisively.

“I was hoping you’d say that,” the reporter told her. “I didn’t want to say it because then you’d tell me it was one of my crazy and insane ideas that would get us in big trouble.”

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Chapter 32 – The Beads

Once the two journalists had gotten into their rental car and watched the painter take off before them in a compact dark car, Stuart turned the key in the ignition.

A thought flickered through Mel's head. "Oh great. How are we to follow him? He's going to know if we're after him."

"For all we know, he might be going back to the bed and breakfast to get some sleep," Stuart replied. "Besides, there are a couple other cars leaving too—we can blend in the crowd."

"Until everyone leaves and it's just him and us."

"Relax, we're going to be behind him. With the glare of the headlights, I don't think he'll be able to us out, even if he's looking."

There was one other car between them and the painter. Stuart kept a close eye on the cars and the road. After a few minutes, they turned out of the road leading into Derry Pond into a major road. Soon they turned again, onto Main Street. The car between them and the painter stayed on course. So were the cars behind them, Stuart noticed as he looked into the rearview mirror.

They headed out of the town and into the farmland. Mel stared out into the passing darkness, clutching her tote bag and feeling uneasiness creep through her. Stuart was right. This following business was her idea. What had she gotten them into? But still they were in the car and she felt a little measure of safety, no matter how flimsy it was. The dark fronds of wheat and corn were a furry dark blur—continuous and unrelenting. The only break was that of a familiar road with a silo. This was the intersection to the Grandbury Farm. But no, they weren't going there. Stuart drove past there, not even aware of the landmarks. His eyes were firmly on the cars ahead of him.

"Well, we know for sure that he's not going back to the bed and breakfast," Mel finally remarked. "This is the wrong direction. And we're going way too far north."

"That's for sure," Stuart replied. "I wonder what's all the way out here."

"We just passed the Grandbury Farm, which would have been the next logical place."

"Oh?"

"Mad Dog was staying there when he was here, remember? Apparently he visited Mad Dog at the farm if his relatives remembered him."

"Yes, that's right. So I suppose it is really odd that we're still going north. All that I can think of is..."

"The abandoned mine," said Mel immediately. "Oh hell, I hope we're not going in that thing."

"If that's where he's going, we won't go in the mine. I'm crazy, but not that crazy."

"Do you still have Mad Dog's beads?"

"Yeah. They're in my pocket. What do you want to do with them?"

"Remember that book we read in the library? We're going to give them back to Laurent de Matheus."

"Oh sure. So what are we going to do, go up to him and tell him nicely, 'Oh, we'd like to give you back Mad Dog's beads. He doesn't need them any more because they're cursed.' Somehow, I don't think he'd take kindly to that. Besides, he hasn't exactly confessed that he gave anything to Mad Dog."

"Of course he wouldn't confess," she said, "otherwise he would have pretty much confessed to putting Mad Dog in a coma—or worse, if we hadn't gotten the beads off him in time. If he's going off to that mine to do whatever he's doing, we're going to give him back the beads by planting them in his car. Then that thing..." She stopped. "No, the Horned One, would be after him and not us."

"To be honest, Mel, I wouldn't wish that thing on anyone."

"Well, it was his fault. He should have to deal with the consequences."

Stuart turned the car again. They were on the dirt track that led toward the horn silver mine, but other cars were also heading in the same direction as the painter's car. "You don't suppose there's an entire group involved in this thing, do you?"

Mel looked at the mirror on her side and watched the long line of headlights follow them down the dirt track. "Gee, do you think so?"

Ahead, the headlights illuminated the office building to the mines that stood just off the road. The cars continued past the office building, down even further. The dirt road abruptly ended and paved road began. "Uh, Mel?"

"Yeah?"

"I hate to admit it, but I'm getting second thoughts. We're heading into the middle of nowhere!"

"No we're not," she said calmly. "I figured where we're going. We're heading to the Gavot Cemetery. When the cars finally pull off the road, try to park a little bit away from the others."

"The cemetery?"

"I sort of have a hunch why we're going there, but who knows what's going on. Knowing that

perverted little painter, he might as well have arranged an orgy. Maybe he gets off on people doing it on top of tombstones.”

“Geez.”

Sure enough, the cars began pulling off from the road into a small grassy clearing surrounded by trees that had already mostly lost their foliage. Stuart parked the rental car away from the rest of the crowd and turned off the headlights. The journalists stayed inside the vehicle and watched as the rest of the cars pulled in and figures got out, heading toward a small pathway leading through the trees. There were ten other cars parked in the clearing. Finally, when the coast was clear, they got out of the car and quickly walked to the pathway.

The cobbled path was covered by a canopy of branches which ended as another clearing began. This clearing, however, was filled with stones and statues. The cemetery. At the very far end where they could make out the figures moving about, one of the tombstones rose higher than the rest. It wasn't a tombstone at all. It was a statue. Since it was cloudy and the moon wasn't out, all they could make out was a vaguely humanoid figure with horns. Some of the figures turned on flashlights and they could make out the faces of cemetery visitors. Some of the people weren't familiar, but others were—the painter Laurent de Matheus, the mine owner Lloyd Fenster, and to the journalists' surprise, Belinda Montgomery the city clerk.

Using the other tombstones as camouflage, Mel and Stuart slipped toward the group. They crouched behind a particularly large slab of granite and watched the proceedings.

This is a really bad idea, thought Mel. What if they catch us? We're outnumbered.

Lloyd Fenster appeared to be the leader of the group. He began leading them into a chant, the words from a strange language.

“This is like straight out of a bad horror movie,” Stuart whispered in her ear. “Occult rituals and all. Too bad they're not wearing cloaks or lighting candles or sacrificing naked slaves.”

“Stuart! This is no time to be funny,” she hissed. She peered over the edge of the tombstone and watched the group. Their hands were pointed to the statue of the Horned One, their eyes closed. “If they're doing what I'm thinking they're doing, funny should be the last thing on your mind.”

Suddenly, the group stopped chanting. There was a pregnant silence as the group waited and as the journalists held their breaths, wondering what was going to happen and why they were curious enough, or perhaps stupid enough to follow through.

Mel blinked. Was it just her befuddled mind, or did the statue just move? No, it wasn't her mind playing tricks. There was an audible crack and then a black, formless smoke began issuing from the statue's head. The group who called up the Horned One fell to their knees in a prayerful pose. Instead of feeling the rapture, Mel felt very cold. With one hand, she reached into her tote bag and gasped the handle of the cast iron skillet.

The smoke began to take shape into a familiar figure. It was the thing. It was the dark side of the Horned One with the red eyes, the antlers, the claws, and the gigantic maw that devoured souls. The thing turned and stared straight at the journalists' hiding place.

Mel felt the hairs at the back of her neck rise. She was too frightened to move. She was too frightened to say anything, let alone scream. Beside her, she felt Stuart similarly tense. Oh, they were so doomed, she thought desperately.

Fenster stood up. “My Lord, what is it that you wish us to see?”

The thing simply lifted up a claw and pointed toward the tombstone that hid the journalists.

“Yes, my lord.” Fenster strolled toward the tombstone. As he got closer, Mel noticed that the expression on his face was a strange one, as if something had possessed him, something mad. She felt her paralyzed muscles thaw and she tightened her grip on her weapon.

But before the mine owner could reach their hiding place, Stuart rose to his feet. In his right hand, he held up the bag of horn silver beads which despite the darkness, glowed. Fenster stopped in his tracks. All eyes were on him.

“Is this what you're looking for?” the reporter asked.

“Stuart? What do you think you're doing? This is insane!”

“It's him!” The cry was from the painter. “What are you doing here?” He turned toward the shadow thing. “My Lord! He's the one you've been looking for...”

A low hiss emanated from the thing and the claws began to move.”

“Hey Fenster,” called out Stuart. “Catch!” He threw the bag of beads and automatically without thinking, the mine owner reached out and caught it. Immediately, the thing's claw took a detour and took

hold of Fenster's neck. The man made an unnatural gurgling noise.

Although the rest of the group was frozen watching the demise of their ringleader and perhaps wondering what on earth was happening instead of what they expected of their ritual, only the painter responded, sprinting towards the reporter. "No! You'd pay for this..."

But before he could get his hands on Stuart, Mel jumped from her crouch and swung the skillet with a resounding thunk. The painter crumpled on the ground. "Run!" she shouted. She grabbed Stuart's arm and pulled him along as they stumbled among the tombstones.

Before the other accomplices to the summoning of the Horned One could register the fact that they should also be running, the Devourer of Souls turned its attention on them.

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## Epilogue

"So how was the movie?" asked Rita, a perky brunette who worked as a gossip columnist at *Hot Tread*. She was wearing a hot pink tank top and a long skirt with a slit up the side. The gossip columnist had spritzed her hair with glitter so that her hair sparkled whenever it moved.

"Hm?" Mel was leaning against the wall of her tiny cubicle. She had a mug of coffee in her hands. She was hardly awake. Just one sip, she told herself, and make sure it doesn't spill on the new lavender blouse. One sip, and then maybe the question would finally register. But if she was awake, that would mean that she would have to work in her cubicle. Doing paperwork. She hated that. But at least she could take off her new pumps which were pinching her toes. If only she had an assignment! But first she would have to be awake.

"The movie," Rita repeated. "I assume the two of you did see it. Or did you two just go back home and neck like horny teenagers?"

Stuart was finishing a bagel. He swallowed and brushed imaginary crumbs off a bright orange t-shirt with the logo "Computer Quest" written in blocky letters across his chest. "There's nothing wrong with necking."

Mel finally took a sip of her coffee. In measured tones, she said, "Rita was asking about the movie, Stuart, not your disgusting courtship rituals."

"Last time I checked, you didn't find them so disgusting."

"Shut up, Stuart." She turned to the gossip columnist. "The movie was okay, I suppose. Not really a brilliant piece of work. I guess you could say it was more suited to the made-for-television kind of thing."

"But I love made-for-television specials!" exclaimed Rita.

"It's different when you're seeing it on the big screen," the photographer replied. "It just feels wrong, you know?"

"Well, probably. But I think I'll go see it anyway."

"I suppose we can't dissuade you, can we?" said Stuart. "Even if I say that it would be better to rent the thing than to waste the eight bucks or so to see it in the theater?"

"Nope. Not when it has my favorite actors in it."

"Figures," Mel muttered. She took another sip of her coffee and felt marginally awake. "So Stuart, did you talk with Mad Dog? I heard that the final proof for the Gavot article went to his desk yesterday afternoon."

The reporter shrugged. "No. Mad Dog hasn't come in yet."

Rita tapped her chin with a manicured nail. "That's strange. Mad Dog is usually here quite early. I mean, he was here quite early the past week despite his illness—same as his usual routine. Maybe he got caught up in traffic."

"You've got to be kidding me," said Mel. "Mad Dog, caught up in traffic? He runs over the traffic with his supped up motorcycle."

At that moment, the front door to the offices of Hot Tread burst open and the familiar figure of the burly biker stumbled through. With one hand, he hastily closed the glass door and flipped the lock. He was breathing heavily as if he had been running up the stairs to the offices instead of taking the elevator. In a free hand, he was clutching a rolled up newspaper.

"Damn the *Times*!" Mad Dog bellowed after he got his wind back. He tossed the newspaper onto Stuart's cubicle desk. "Roubere, Ang, I want you two to get on the story right quick. I want to find out

where that new celebrity reporter—Eddie Outman—came from. And make sure no one disturbs me in my office today. Oh and another thing, good work on that Gavot assignment. I knew you two had it in you!” Mad Dog rubbed his neck. “Although I can’t seem to remember where I misplaced that necklace...”

As the editor of the magazine *Hot Tread* slammed his office door shut, Stuart pulled out the newspaper that Mad Dog had so carelessly tossed. He opened *The New Halis Times* to the front page and began reading the headlines aloud.

“New Halis’ most eligible bachelor receives inheritance. Ralph “Mad Dog” Bartlett, the editor of the up and coming magazine *Hot Tread* and most eligible bachelor of New Halis came into his inheritance that was willed to him by his great-uncle, Rodger Pellington, billionaire and founder of Pellington Industries...”

“Mad Dog?” said Rita, wide-eyed.

Mel peered over Stuart’s shoulder. “Ah, so that’s where his latest idea came from. That article is written by Eddie Outman.”

A loud bang suddenly diverted the three journalists’ attention from the newspaper. Plastered against the glass door was a horde of screaming women. Even from the closed door, they could hear chants of “Bartlett! Bartlett! Bartlett!” One of the women held up a sign that had been written with marker. It said, “I love you Mad Dog!”

“No wonder he locked himself in his office,” said Stuart.

Mel shook her head. “Let’s just call security.”

THE END