

# **Humanity Lost**

A Short Story Collection

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'In the end, there is only darkness.  
Sometimes we find others in that darkness,  
and sometimes we lose them there.'

Stephen King

'My heart is lost;  
the beasts have eaten it.'

Charles Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du Mal*

# Blasphemy

“Where’s the fun in an immaculate conception?”

The angel goggles at me, the expression not enough to mar the perfection of his face. His wings stir the air with a hint of almond and cinnamon, each white, shimmering feather rainbow-tipped.

“What?” I continue into his silence. “You’re the one who poofed into my bedroom in the middle of the night to announce I’ll carry the next reincarnation of Jesus. Can’t you just magic him to life without all this baby nonsense?”

“Magic?” the angel splutters. “This is a miraculous conception! A divine pregnancy! Not-not—”

“All right, all right, don’t get your robe in a twist. Go over it one more time. I think I’m awake now.” I pinch my arm and the angel narrows his sapphire eyes, veins of silver sparkling in the iris.

“You have been bestowed the honour of carrying the son of God but, in this time of great need, the pregnancy will begin at an advanced stage to allow the messiah to be born on Christmas day. Twelve days from today.”

“So you’ll put your magi—miraculous hands on me and I’ll balloon to thirty-five weeks pregnant? And then have to birth some screaming infant in twelve days?”

The angel’s blond brows collide. “Jesus Christ the son of God, not some screaming infant.”

“Sorry, I’ll have to pass. Kids are not my thing.”

The angel’s mouth drops open. “You are refusing? You cannot refuse!”

“Sure I can. If God is real, he gave us free will, didn’t he—”

“If God is *real*?!”

“—which means I can choose. And my answer is no.”

The angel shakes his head as if stunned but his slack jaw firms. He steps towards me, his hands raised.

“Don’t you dare,” I hiss. “It’s still rape if you force something inside me that I don’t want. You’re the angel, you can’t do something evil.”

Maybe he can if it's for the greater good.  
I glance around my bedroom and wonder if I can brain an angel with a bedside lamp.

He crosses his arms, static sparking between the barbs of his feathers and painting flickering shadows on my wall. "You have a duty to God! How dare *you* refuse Him in this crisis. His son must be born to protect humanity from the Great War!"

"I thought the Great War was World War I."

"The war between heaven and hell, you-you—"

"Can't even call me names, can you?"

He bares his teeth and the golden brilliance surrounding him flares until I have to shade my eyes against the glare. A waft of burnt cinnamon heat singes my arm.

And I thought hell was supposed to be the hot place.

"Would you tone it down? What happens if I don't carry the baby?"

"If you refuse the honour of carrying the *messiah*," he says, the glow diminishing with each word, "the war will spill into the streets. Humanity will be lost! Darkness and chaos will reign!"

Sounds like a normal Saturday night in Glasgow to me.

"Sorry, Mr... um" — how the heck does one address an angel? — "Seraph, but it's still a no. You really should have done your research before you picked me."

"You will regret this. I must consult with Him." The angel vanishes in a puff of glittery smoke.

Well, there's no way I'm getting back to sleep.

I slip a silky gown over my nightie and pad into the living room to wrap more Christmas presents, carefully slicing the paper with a kitchen knife since I've lost my scissors. Sellotape tangles in my hair and sticks to my lips.

A pop comes from behind me, like someone stepping on a bag of crisps.

I sigh. "For god's sake, angel, I said no— who the hell are you?"

The creature smells of darkness and sex. Black hair falls into solid crimson eyes split by an elliptical pupil.

"I bat for the other team. The devil wants you to carry his son but" — his gaze burns from my cleavage to the hem of my nightie at mid-thigh — "there will be nothing immaculate about this conception."

His smirk punches into my gut. My eyes drop from his broad shoulders to the line of his hips disappearing into tight, leather trousers. So tight I can see...

Oh, my.

I jerk my gaze to his face. "Tempting offer, daemon, but I decline."

His smile widens, flashing fang. "Unlike the angel, I care not for free will."

He stalks towards me, muscles rippling under flesh. Scorching fingers grab my shoulders. I lash out and the blade of the knife, forgotten in my hand, slides easily into his

throat. We stare at each other, our eyes wide. He stumbles and hits the floor, oily fluid pumping from the slice in his neck. His body vanishes with a sulphurous crack, scorching the carpet.

There goes my security deposit.

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The twelve days of Christmas pass peacefully — no more angels or daemons clamouring for my uterus. The day itself dawns beautiful and snow-kissed, the hours passing in a whirl of family visits before I can escape to the quiet sanctity of my flat and a glass of wine. One sip and a crackling draws me to the window overlooking the street.

Is someone setting off fireworks?

A silver slash scars the dark sky and a gaping crevasse yawns to greet it in the concrete of the road. Leathery-winged beasts pour from below to meet glowing angels in a clash of horns on swords. People scream, fleeing from other nightmarish creatures emerging from the deep.

I place my glass carefully on the coffee table.

No son of God to save us or son of Satan to curse us further. What's with all the sons, anyway?

I grab my knife. The lights of my Christmas tree twinkle merrily on the blade.

Seems about time for a female messiah.

# The Daily Grind

Poison removes Michelle from the running. She never could resist scones with clotted cream, not even at a business brunch.

Silly little rabbit.

Laurell shakes her head and finishes typing, the wheels of her office chair stuttering over the threadbare carpet. Her lamp clicks off, darkness consuming all but two circles of light.

“Leaving so soon?”

Laurell glides towards the voice and leans against a partition, the material of her skirt slipping up her thigh.

“You have something better for me to do, Damian?”

His wicked smile tightens her stomach. The lust, as unexpected and annoying as it was at first, adds an enticing layer to the danger.

“You know I do,” he says.

His charcoal suit matches his eyes and hugs his shoulders. Her gaze follows the line of his collarbone, shadows pooled in the hollow of his throat. She trails a hand through her hair to where it curls over her breast, her heart thrumming beneath her fingertips. Damian’s grip tightens on the arms of his seat.

“Maybe another night,” she says and sashays away, putting an extra swing in her hips.

He seems to think she’ll surrender first. And perhaps she would have, if it were only sex.

“Watch your back, Laurell.”

The thud of her heels stops at the last oasis of light. “That a threat, Bruce?”

A sheen of sweat glistens on his forehead. He smooths a hand over his tie—a quick, darting movement, like a mouse streaking for cover.

Too late.

He’ll be next. He isn’t strong enough.

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Bruce doesn't show up for work the next day. His desk stands forlorn in a room humid with bodies and noise. The babble ceases when a man pauses in the doorway, the ruby of a signet ring flashing on his raised hand.

"The news of Bruce must be distressing, for some of you." His voice booms through the long room.

Laurell hides a smirk behind her hand.

"But I expect you all to be professional. Work stops for no man. Any issues, I'll be in my office." He disappears down the corridor, the plush carpet muffling his footsteps.

And then there were two.

"Shame about Bruce."

Laurell swivels in her chair to find Damian draped over her cubicle, his black hair framing perfect cheekbones. Her heart skips though her face stays blank.

"Baseball bat to both kneecaps." Damian leans a little further, exposing the shadowed promise of his smooth chest through his gaping shirt.

At his laugh, Laurell yanks her gaze up, her cheeks heating.

Damn, he's good. She'll have to be careful. This is no Michelle. Or Nathan.

"Nasty way to go," she says, crossing her legs and flashing a golden line of thigh.

"How about we toast to our colleague's swift recovery? Tonight. My place."

She bites her lip. Forces herself to pull in a breath.

Close. Everything she's worked for.

She peeks at him from under her lashes. "A drink at Flannigan's first. It's only right."

A flash of something sparks in Damian's eyes. "Of course. And then?"

She smiles. "Then we'll see."

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Laurell steps into a wave of heat and fights through suited bodies, loud voices echoing from the polished interior. She pauses on the edge to survey the bar. Damian leans against it, scanning the crowd like a wolf selecting which soft-bodied mammal to sink its teeth into.

The perfect mix of danger and sex.

Laurell struts towards him. His eyes fix on her and her knees wobble.

"I bought you a drink."

"Such a gentleman," she says, accepting the chilled glass. Her fingers brush his and the jolt tingles to her toes.

He sips his beer, his eyes never leaving her face. She slips a stirrer from her pocket and swirls it through the frothy liquid. Colour creeps up the black to a red as bright as arterial blood.

"Really, Damian—a date rape drug? How *déclassé*."

She slides into the warmth of his body, her glass thumping on the bar a little too hard. His bottle droops in his hand, a pulse fluttering in the hollow of his throat.

"I expected better," she whispers in his ear.



He shudders and she pushes herself away before succumbing to temptation. She glides through the crowd until cool air caresses her cheeks. Her heels click on the pavement. The door opens behind her in a swell of voices. She throws a challenging glance over her shoulder and slinks around the corner.

"Laurell," Damian growls.

She presses her back to the wall, rough stone scraping her shoulder blades. Damian stalks towards her.

"At least kiss me first," she says.

He collapses into her with a groan. She almost loses herself in the smoky scent of him.

He jerks away when the needle goes in. His eyes widen and a hand flies to his neck.

"No!" He swipes at her.

She dodges and he falls to his knees, his palms braced against the wall. She strokes his hair and he raises his head, his eyes the grey of storm-tossed clouds.

"Goodnight, my love," she says.

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"Welcome to your new office, Miss Fowler. Excellent work, truly excellent work."

"Thank you, sir."

A hand squeezes Laurell's shoulder, the signet ring biting the spine of her scapula.

"I'll let you get acclimatised."

Sunlight gilded windows offer a panoramic view of the city, flecks of gold glittering in the mahogany desk. The rich burgundy carpet is thick enough to sleep on. The private bathroom has marble veined with silver, recessed lights and a spill of flowers from a cut crystal vase.

Sighing, Laurell relaxes into the leather desk chair.

Damian was a worthy adversary. The thought of him chained and gagged in her spare room makes her heart pound.

Such furious eyes.

She suppresses a delicious shiver and taps the intercom button.

"Yes, Miss Fowler?" chirrup her assistant.

"Send in my first client."

"Of course, Miss Fowler."

Work stops for no man. Or woman.

She smiles.

Promotions are brutal.

# Beware the Darkened Halls

Shadows pool beneath the tables pushed to the wall. Jocelyn Barnes cuddles closer to her boyfriend and her slight figure disappears under his arm.

“Just scary stories,” Evan whispers into her hair.

She nods but wishes he hadn’t persuaded her to come. She hates school. Why did she agreed to spend the night in it?

Because she doesn’t want him to think she’s boring.

Her eyes drift over the mauve walls decorated with cut-outs of quavers and crotchets.

The other three people aren’t even her friends.

Torchlight carves Steve Scott’s face into a pitiless mask. “The police say he went missing on his way home from school. But I know the truth.”

He lowers the torch from his chin and sweeps the room, stopping on the face of the girl next to him.

Zafia Ali slaps at his hand where it rests on her thigh. “Quit it, Steve.”

The torch returns to his chin. “He didn’t go missing on his way home but from these very halls.”

“Yeah, right,” Chris Nugent says, swatting at the dreadlocks flopping over one eye. “He ran away. Have you met his parents?”

“All right, Nuggy — go open the trapdoor beneath Doc Wayne’s desk. That’s where his body is buried.” Steve drops his voice and leans forward. “What’s left of it.”

Jocelyn’s hand tightens on Evan’s sleeve. She wants to be home, burrowed under her duvet, not huddled on the floor of the music room.

“His ghost roams these halls, waiting to trap the unwary. Beware the whisper of your name in the dark. Don’t turn around.” Steve grins, flashing perfect teeth. “Run.”

He claps his hands and Jocelyn squeaks.

“You’re such a wimp,” Zafia snorts, flipping her black hair over her shoulder.

Jocelyn drops her eyes, her cheeks flushing.

“Come on, Zaf. I’m just a good storyteller.” Steve tips his glass. “A toast to Matty, our missing classmate. May he rest in pieces.”

The others laugh and sip their drinks. Jocelyn tries to make herself smaller. She takes one swallow of the boxed wine and hides her cup behind a table leg. Chris guzzles his glass and unfolds his long body from the floor.

Steve pauses in his exploration of Zafia's mouth. "Where you going, Nuggy?"

"To find Matty."

"Don't go down there alone," Jocelyn blurts.

Zafia rolls her eyes. "Who invited her again?"

"Don't you worry." He stops in the doorway and wiggles his fingers. "I'll be right baa-aack."

His laugh echoes from the blackness and fades with his footsteps. Steve pulls Zafia to her feet. His hand slides down her hip to play along the hem of her short skirt. She mirrors him and they dodge among scattered candles oozing wax onto the linoleum.

"Why don't you two take advantage of the alone time," she tosses over her shoulder. "Bout time you put out, Jocelyn."

Zafia giggles as they sidle out the door, Steve's hand disappearing under her skirt. Jocelyn ducks her head, her face blazing to the roots of her brown hair.

Evan gives her a squeeze. "Ignore her. Zafia's a bitch to everyone."

"I guess."

She peeks at him through her fringe and the familiar tingle starts in her belly. Dark hair, dark eyes. Smouldering. He could have anyone. Zafia's best friend pants over him whenever she's around. She has breasts and coltish legs but it's Jocelyn who gets to hold his hand and kiss him and run trembling fingers across his cheekbones.

"Come here, Jo-Jo." He cups his hand under her chin.

The tingle crackles to her toes. His lips suck the air from her chest and do crazy things to her heart. His hand rests on her hip. That's okay. He scoops her into his lap. Harder to think. She reminds herself to breathe. His hand slides up her side, fingers bumping along her ribs. His thumb brushes her sock-stuffed bra. She gasps and pulls away.

"Evan, I'm—I've told you I'm not ready."

He frowns and a lump forms in her throat. She should say yes. She wants to. But not here where Zafia could flounce in and mock her stumpy legs and flat chest. She tries to wriggle out of his lap but he holds her in place.

"Sorry," he says, stroking her hair. "We can cuddle."

She nods and tucks her head under his chin. She likes to listen to his heartbeat. It would be peaceful, if she could ignore the moans from down the hall.

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Zafia and Steve stumble into the room, their faces flushed. Jocelyn jerks awake.

"Aw, well isn't that cute," Zafia says, smoothing her skirt.

Jocelyn blushes and slides onto the floor. Evan sighs but lets her go. Steve refills his glass and flops onto his side.

“Seriously, Zaf,” Evan huffs, “why do you have to piss over everything?”

“You know why. Why are you with—”

“Wait, you guys,” Jocelyn says. “It’s been over an hour. Where’s Chris?”

Zafia’s eyes spark but she prances through the candles and settles her spine in the bend of Steve’s hips.

Steve slurps his wine, his cheek propped on his fist. “The bastard will be hiding, waiting for us to go looking. He’ll give up when he’s bored.”

“What if he’s in trouble?”

“Jesus Christ,” Zafia mutters.

“We should look for him.” Jocelyn stands up and tugs on Evan’s hand. “Evan?”

“Yes, Evan. Pray don’t let your girlfriend wander alone. When Nuggy jumps out, she’ll pee her little panties.”

“Shut it, Zaf,” Evan growls, climbing to his feet and heading for the door. “How bad will you feel if it’s not a trick?”

“It’s Nuggy. It’s a trick.”

“Ask him if he found Matty,” Steve shouts, his voice bouncing down the corridor.

“Idiots.” Evan shakes his head and squeezes Jocelyn’s hand. “Let’s start on the second floor. He’s probably not up here.”

Jocelyn regrets her flash of bravery as the golden glow of candlelight dwindles. They push through a swinging door at the end of the corridor. Stairs descend into darkness. Jocelyn’s sweaty hand tightens on her torch.

She’d rather be with Zafia, quietly bleeding after each barbed comment.

Their footfalls reverberate in the stairwell.

What if it isn’t just theirs?

Swallowing, she pushes into the second floor corridor. Her light jitters over the walls. She expects a dark shape to jump out. A pressure low in her stomach warns she might wet herself, like Zafia taunted. Evan’s torch joins hers but the corridor stretches empty, doors on each side.

“What’s that?”

She jumps at Evan’s voice. Tears burn her eyes, a wave of goosebumps rippling between her shoulder blades and down her body.

A soft dome of light illuminates the end of the corridor. Evan walks towards it. Jocelyn drags her feet. They reach the corner and she scrunches her eyes shut.

“Nuggy?” Evan calls. “This isn’t funny.”

She cracks one eye open. A torch lies in the middle of the corridor, shining away from them. Blackness fills the space beyond, too thick to breathe.

“Come on, man. This has gone on long enough.”

Their feet shuffle on the linoleum. Evan nudges the torch and it rolls to the wall.

Jocelyn licks dry lips. “I don’t like this. I want to go back. I want to go home.”

“It’s okay, Jo-Jo. Nuggy’ll be sniggering in one of these rooms, no doubt. Listen.”

She holds her breath but can’t hear anything over her pounding heart.

The lift pings behind them.

She yelps, dropping Evan’s hand and spinning around.

He frowns. “I thought it was switched off.”

The metal doors slid open. Liquid oozes out. It paints the walls and drips from the ceiling of the carriage. It swirls in the corners and slurps in the gap between the lift and the floor.

The smell hits her—coppery, sweet. The air tastes metallic. Evan makes a noise but she can’t turn to look at him. She stares at the blood lapping the linoleum.

Boots hammer the floor. Her head jerks and she gapes at Evan’s fleeing back. He disappears around the corner.

“Evan, wait!”

She lurches after him, calling his name. She trips at the corner and her torch smacks the linoleum. The light flickers. Dies. Her panting tears the silence. And then, another noise.

Click... Click...

She squints into the gloom, her fingers cramping around the dead torch. She pushes to her knees.

Click-click click, click-click click.

Faster. Closer.

She thumps the torch against her hand. The light pings, a brief flare in the dark. Enough to see the flash of eyes. Black claws.

Not Evan.

She screams and scrambles to her feet, careening away. Flying past the discarded torch, she skids in the congealing pool by the lift. A howl batters her ears. She dives into the nearest classroom, slamming the door and twisting the lock. She retreats on quivering legs and curls under a desk.

Wood rattles. She whimpers and tucks tighter into a ball. Glass shatters. Her light snaps on. A snarling muzzle pushes through the narrow window. Sparse hair and mottled skin.

She buries her face in her knees. When she raises her head, the beast is gone. A line of drool slithers down the wood.

If she stays here she’ll be safe. It’ll be dawn in a few hours.

Muffled screams. “No! Get away!”

“Evan!”

Jocelyn finds herself sprinting past the slick of blood and forlorn torch. She hesitates at the yawning blackness of an open doorway.

She doesn’t want to look.

Her shaking beam illuminates the classroom but she struggles to understand the shape in the middle. A shaggy hulk of bulging muscle. Red and pink. That coppery smell.

She blinks.

Evan stretches a hand towards her. Three weeping slashes ruin one dark, smouldering eye.

“Jo—”

The thing buries its muzzle in his belly. Evan gurgles, his heels kicking. Jocelyn’s spine hits the wall but her feet keep trying to back up. The monster lifts its head. Lips curl over wicked teeth.

Blinded by tears, Jocelyn barely registers the corridor. She slams into the stairwell and jumps the last few steps. Her knees collapse and her temple rings off the handrail. Panting and dazed, she flops on her side.

Muted clicks from above.

She shoves to her feet and bursts onto the ground floor.

Where is the computer lab with the window they climbed through? Nothing looks familiar.

She spins, her hair sticking to her face. Blackness encroaches on her vision despite the glow of her torch.

She staggers into the closest corridor before realising her mistake. Religious Studies. Golden light spills from a classroom. She floats towards it.

“There you are, dear. I hoped it would be you.”

“Doc-Doctor Wayne?” she says through chattering teeth.

“Come in, come in.” His eyes crinkle in his weathered face. The black silk of his divinity robe brushes the floor, the stitching a dazzling red. “Don’t be afraid.”

“Please—phone the police. The others—a beast—”

Doctor Wayne places a steadying hand on her shoulder. “Ssh, it’ll be over soon.”

“What—”

The monster blocks the doorway. Jocelyn meets its burning cobalt-blue eyes.

Familiar eyes.

“Matty?” she whispers.

The thing barks. Cloth covers Jocelyn’s nose and she inhales a chemical sweetness. The room dissolves. Gentle hands lift her body. A hard table. The rattle of beads.

Nothing.

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“What happened to them? Where did they go if their excuse was a lie?”

Voices flutter to shadowed corners, shushed when the boy in the centre continues.

“But it wasn’t a lie—they did have a sleepover. They had it right here. As for what happened to them?” The boy cocks his eyebrow. “I guess we’ll find out.”

Nervous laughter trickles into the corridor.

In the darkened halls below, two beasts begin to prowl.

# A Bad Week at Work

I think I'm losing my mind.

It started a week ago. I stepped out onto the balcony to make a personal call, the murmur of voices from the office silenced by the glass door. Wind whistled around the building, whipping my hair across my face and snatching leaves from the trees in Princes' Street garden. A tram *ding-dinged* five stories below.

"Ah, hello, I'd like to book an appointment for a cut and blow dry."

My eye caught a figure on the hill at the base of the castle, black against the blaze of autumn. They stood motionless and alone on the path.

Odd. There's usually at least a jogger or a couple of tourists enjoying the view to the Forth.

A prickling sensation began at the base of my spine and tingled upwards. I turned my back to finish my call, shivering in the wind, and forgot all about it.

Until the next day.

The dark shape was a shadow on the steps shaded by the bones of a tree. A train *click-clacked* on the railway. On Wednesday, it stood on the bridge, still clothed in black.

A hooded cloak, a jacket? My eyes couldn't pick out the detail.

By Thursday, the figure reached my side of the gardens.

It disappeared on Friday and I breathed a sigh of relief. Just someone playing a prank or doing an obscure art performance. They weren't watching me.

Or was the thing in black simply out of sight?

Closer, closer still.

I skipped my lunchtime walk to the fountain and ate at my desk.

The weekend passed too quickly. I convinced myself it was all in my head. It wasn't the same person stalking nearer, day by day.

I've been under stress. Too many deadlines, not enough time. My brain conjured sinister figures as a manifestation of my anxiety.

Today is Monday. Not exactly my favourite day but, hopefully, it will be the end of this nonsense.

I ignore the rapid trip-tripping of my heart and take my coffee out on the balcony. The chill sucks the steam from the cup. I keep my back pressed to the window and force my gaze up.

The gardens are beautiful at this time of year—flame-coloured against a cold, blue sky. A flock of pigeons wheel towards the castle.

No figure in black.

A tension eases in my chest. I claim a step and clink my cup on the metal railing. Traffic and people bustle on the street below.

A dark shape watches me from the pavement, head tilted back.

There's no face. Nothing but blackness beneath the hood.

My fingers freeze on my mug.

"You've been spending a lot of time out here."

I yelp and spill coffee on my hand. "Jesus Christ, Danny, don't sneak up on me!"

"Sorry. Adam's looking for you. He says there's a problem with the report you submitted."

Danny turns to go through the door, ducking to avoid banging his head on the frame.

"Wait. Do you see that man in the street?"

"What man?"

But it's not a man.

"The man in black. Standing on the opposite side of the road."

Danny peers over the railing. "Are you feeling all right? You've been working pretty hard lately."

I force myself to look but the figure is gone.

Were they even there? Maybe I should book a doctor's appointment next. High blood pressure is making me hallucinate.

"It's... I'm fine," I say. "Didn't sleep well last night."

I return to my desk after a disheartening chat with Adam. The client has decided to change the layout of their development meaning the huge report I worked my ass off to complete now needs updated.

But they still want it tomorrow.

I slump at my desk, waving absently as my colleagues drift away home. Quiet settles over the office. I stretch my back and glance up.

I'm the only one left.

Darkness presses against the balcony windows.

Unease does its prickling dance up my spine.

No one can get in. The building is locked. The door of our office needs a fob for access. I'm on the fifth floor.

I hunch closer to my screen, my fingers tapping on the keyboard. I finish the report,



click save and collapse in my chair with a sigh.

The tapping continues.

I stare at my computer so hard, my eyes blur.

I will not look. There's nothing out there. Just some leaves or a broken branch blown onto the ledge. I will not look —

I lift my head to the darkness of the balcony.

And the black shape *tap-tap-tapping* on the glass.

# A Goddess Named Karma

Would you sacrifice yourself to save the world? Of course, you cry. The greater good! Well, spare me your judgement.

If you survive.

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“Where is that blasted girl? Girl!”

Sighing, I put down my brush, interrupted from cleaning Master Arnott’s latest potion—a noxious combination of burnt feathers, sage and the snot of a divine beast. I wipe my hands on my stained bodysuit and follow the querulous summons into a bright study of panelled lizardwood.

“Do you drag your feet to antagonise me, girl? Can’t you see I have a guest?” Arnott sits in his grand throne of red brocade and gold. His watery eyes glare at me, his spindly hands clasped on top of his desk.

He insists on calling me girl though he knows my name and I’m a thirty-year.

“I’m sorry, sir,” I say, my voice the appropriate level of bland contrition. “What do you need?”

“Tea, obviously! Good grief, I know she’s a Null but I never expected such a lack of intelligence,” he directs at a tall man seated in his velvet guest chair.

The man sweeps me with amber eyes, one long leg crossed over the other. The tattoo on his cheek marks him as another master-level.

Wonderful. Arnott’s snotty superiority worsens when he has peers to entertain.

“Scurry along, then. I want it now not next week when you’ve quit your gawping.”

I bow my head to hide my gritted teeth. “Of course, sir.”

The kitchen is down two flights of spiral steps, a chore to climb while balancing a full tray. I pour the fragrant tea, careful not to spill.

Arnott flutters his fingers. “Stand over there.”

“Perhaps it would be better for us to speak alone?” The man’s voice almost rattles the crockery.

“Don’t concern yourself; she won’t understand what we’re saying. Speak freely, Master

Garod.”

Yeah, he may need me to scuttle off and get him a germloaf, or his reading glasses, or the third claw of a rainbow-jessabird like he tricked me with the last time a guest called.

If I had a smidgen of power for everyone who laughed at me that day, I’d be stronger than the lot of them.

I claim my usual post by the window, leaning my hip against the sill. Arnott often leaves me standing for hours. I fainted once. He scolded me for napping on the job, adding another demerit to my file, guaranteeing I’ll never be able to serve anyone but him.

“What have you heard from the Council?”

Shifting my stance, I can’t resist peeking through the glass. The sky is a perfect, wurzil’s-egg blue. Other dwellings drift—a jungle paradise, a castle of stone, a palace of sparkling crystal—lazily circling the smog-shrouded city.

“They’ve broken through the wards protecting our planet and an attack is imminent. Filthy Lorellians, tainting themselves with the dark arts. Tell me, Garod—what is this solution the Council are keeping so secret?”

I blink at my scuffed airboots, keeping my expression docile. Garod leans forward, his answer lost in a whisper.

“What!” Arnott splutters. “Don’t be ridiculous! How could a Null display that kind of power?”

“They believe the power is great because it’s latent. The search has begun.”

“Waste of time. Are you saying the might of the Masters is insufficient to destroy Lorell but one Null can? Preposterous. I mean, watch—”

Arnott flicks his fingers at me. Heat stings my face. I gasp, my hand flying to my cheek. With each twitch of his knobbled digits, pain prickles along my skin, even under the bodysuit.

“Stop it!” I fling out my hand and his power nibbles my fingers, sliding needles into my wrist.

He chuckles. “They can’t even protect themselves from my weakest attack. We must convene the Masters to gather their power.”

“Our projections say it won’t be enough. This is our last hope.”

Arnott snorts. “I’ll be damned if I leave the future of our planet in the hands of a Null. Come, Master Garod, let us seek an audience with the Council.”

The men rise with much shuffling of robes. I run soothing fingertips over my blotchy red skin.

“If it’s any consolation, the power extraction required to operate our weapon will kill the Null.”

“That’s something at least but I doubt it will come to that.” Arnott grips his staff, his yellow thumbnail stroking the mounted amethyst. “Girl, I want my breakfast at 6 am sharp tomorrow. Don’t make me punish your tardiness again.”

Powers forbid an attack from our mortal enemies delay his breakfast. The one day I tried to take off sick, he flashed screeching images into my head, forcing me up before he ripped my mind to shreds.

“Yes, sir,” I say in a monotone.

He’s already moving for the stairs, a spidery hand on Garod’s back.

“I’m sure I can persuade the Council towards a change in strategy.” His voice fades down the corridor. “This threat requires an unprecedented gathering of powers, our most mighty of potions. Imagine—”

The front door slams. The shakes start in my shoulders and shudder outward.

I was a ten-year during the last Lorellian attack, too young to appreciate the devastation. How close we came to extinction. I’ve seen the memorials, learned the Histories. In the beginning, they sent missionaries to convert us. When it failed, they decided they couldn’t share a solar system with godless heathens and sought to eradicate us.

They are the heathens. Communing with spirits and bargaining with demons instead of using inherent abilities and natural potions.

I shuffle outside, too distracted to notice the vertigo as my airboots bounce me across the sky to the nearest aerobus stop. My trembling fingers release the catch on my bodysuit automatically. The protective layer deploys over my exposed hands and face. I blink to clear the blurriness from my eyes and take a deep breath, ignoring the suffocating sensation of the film merging with my mucous membranes to filter the air.

Should I warn the other Nulls? None of us can do anything about it except cower in our shabby homes and hope those with the power defend us.

For once.

The rust-splotched aerobus creaks to a halt in a belch of purple smoke. I squeeze inside, tattoo-less faces and worn bodysuits crammed in the space. The vehicle jolts and descends. A Novice skims past, her salmon-pink robes flapping. She sneers at us through the smeared windows.

She has little to be superior about. Her power are summoning fire and levitating objects. Parlour tricks.

A roiling wall of grey replaces the sun-kissed sky, the shape of buildings shifting through like huge sea-creatures. The aerobus sinks into the depot in a wash of hissing jets. The roar of a hundred voices pack the structure. Prefects in armoured bodysuits guide everyone off the aerobus. The scrum carries me into a long queue towards tables manned by Fellows in white robes.

I tap the arm of the nearest Prefect. “What’s going on?”

His black helmet shields most of his face but his lip curls. I remove my hand and he turns away. Further down the shambling line, I try again. A female Prefect.

“Screening,” she barks. “Another sickness carried by you people.”

“How long will it take?”

“Long as it needs to.” She yells at someone up ahead and disappears.

Helpful, as always.

My back aches by the time I reach the front. The seated Fellow doesn’t even look at me.

“Hand.”

“I’m sorry?”

She sighs. “Give me your hand.”

A needle pierces my finger and a drop of blood wells. The Fellow waves an aura reader at me, the lasers dazzling my eyes. It spits out a slide that joins the red phial in a bed of protective foam.

“Sign here.”

I scrawl my name and ID number on the screen. “Will I get the results? How will I know if my aura is tainted?”

She smiles, a slow tilting of lips that doesn’t reach her eyes. “Oh, you’ll know. Next!”

I stumble home in the sucking humidity of the smog, my eyeballs steaming beneath the protective layer of my bodysuit. I place my palm on the door panel of my basement pod. It slides open and whooshes shut behind me.

“Air purification sequence initiated,” crackles the computer.

The progress light flashes red. It flickers, pinging off. I slam my fist into it and the light turns green, the inner door gliding open. The protective layer of my bodysuit retracts.

“Air purification complete.”

The familiar dinginess of my pod greets me—threadbare floor, dim glowlamps, dripping walls. Damp and the stench of rubbish decaying in the temperamental recycler. A welcoming gurgle comes from the polished tank occupying a third of the space. Vegetation shivers. I open the door and cup my palms.

“Hello to you, too, Clover.”

He scuttles into my waiting hands, his pliant skin cool and glistening but dry. One tentacle wraps around my finger as I scoop him up to my face, kissing along the hardened ridge of his dorsal shell. His stalked rainbow eyes whirl in excitement.

“Look what I’ve got.”

I hold the gavnut between thumb and forefinger. His little claws click towards it, his body bouncing in my palm.

“Go on, it’s yours, little man.”

He swipes the morsel, bringing it to his mouth of razor teeth. Happy crunching replaces the wheeze of the defunct climate-control system.

I found him broken and mewling in the streets a couple of years ago—shell cracked, claws limp, tentacles wavering. An ugly lump the colour of mould with beautiful eyes. A failed experiment no doubt tossed from the skies above.

The stumbling Fellow was probably trying for a divine beast.

Finished his treat, Clover scrabbles up my arm to his favourite perch on my shoulder,

burbling into my ear.

“Is that right? And what else did you do today?”

I pop a dinner capsule in the superheater. Clover’s tentacles tickle through my hair. The steaming meal tastes like chemicals but it’s hard to get fresh, untainted food in the smog.

Not enough credits, anyway.

I slump onto the couch, the springs creaking. Stuffing oozes from numerous rips.

“What do you fancy, Clover?” Light flares in the wall, the screen blurred. “The latest springball tournament? A cooking programme? Or do you want a night on the town? Could be one of our last.”

I run a hand over my churning stomach.

Nothing I can do about it.

Clover swings himself on top of my head, bobbing and twittering.

“Cooking programme it is.”

It’s not like I have people to visit. No family, Clover my only friend. Let those with the power worry about it. About time they did something useful.

Clover wriggles himself into a nest of my hair.

“Don’t go dribbling on my head this time.”

He loves anything to do with food.

The door squawks, “Prefects! Prefects! Emergency unlock procedure initiated!”

What on Danude—?

My half-finished bowl of unidentifiable dinner mush clatters to the floor. I scoop Clover into my pocket and he bleeps unhappily. My shaking fingers type the release code of the rear portal. I run into a foetid alley and straight into the arms of a Prefect. It’s like hugging a beetle.

“Fenella Longshank?” his voice buzzes in my ear.

“I haven’t done anything!” I gasp, struggling in his grip, my fingers scrabbling on hardened armour.

Clover scrambles out of my pocket and up to my shoulder, croaking his distress. His little claws click at the Prefect, his body swelling into defence mode.

“No, Clover!”

The Prefect curls his lip, his mouth and chin the only parts visible beneath his bulbous helmet. A gloved hand lashes out, knocking Clover to the ground. Clover spins in a circle, his multi-jointed legs trying to right himself. The Prefect raises his boot.

“No!” I scream.

The heavy sole squelches down. I drop to my knees and cradle the twitching body. A tentacle wavers. I sob and cuddle him to my chest, smearing my bodysuit in navy blood smelling of salt.

“He never hurt anyone.” Tears thicken my voice, my eyes blurred. “He—just wanted to be loved. He—”

Shadows fall over me, pairs of black boots crowding in.

“What’s she saying?”

“Can’t hear past the snivelling.”

“Eww, what is that thing?”

“Come on, get her in the van.”

Hard hands rip Clover from my grasp and toss him away. He leaves a splodge of blue on the smog-stained wall, tumbling to the dirty concrete. I fight to reach him but the Prefects drag me to an idling hovervan, black and shiny and forbidding. They bundle me inside, pressing me onto a wooden bench. I curl into a ball.

“What’s she crying about?” a new voice says.

“Some gross mutant Hitchens stomped on.”

My head snaps up. “He was my friend, you demon spawn.”

I throw myself at him and claw for his face.

Let him breathe the stink of this place into his perfect, healthy lungs.

The man who spoke taps his finger to my chest, zapping me back to my seat. “Settle down, now. Don’t make me knock you out completely.”

I spend the cloud ascent in a shivering heap, drool dribbling from my slack mouth. My chest burns where the man touched me.

What has Arnott blamed me for this time? I didn’t steal anything. It’s safer to wait for the curmudgeon to die before trading his possessions on the dark market. Nothing obvious. Crystals, potion ingredients. Less risk of someone noticing the missing items and chopping off my hand.

The doors of the hovervan swing open. I squint into the sunlight. My wall of Prefects carry me into the pristine Council building, silver flecking the spires and marble. My salt-stung eyes struggle to understand the bright corridors and floating staircases, the mustiness of old books. My airboots squeak on the polished floor, the Prefects hustling me into a room. They clatter out and the door closes. I blink at the man seated behind a table.

Master-level. The extra flourishes on his tattoo mark him as a Council member. What am I doing here?

He sweeps his arm towards the chair opposite him, his long turquoise robe brushing the tabletop. “Please, Fenella—may I call you Fenella?—have a seat. I am Master Sampson. I realise this must all be a bit of a shock.”

I flop into the chair. “A shock? You— you—”

“Haste, as you will come to appreciate, is necessary,” he says over my spluttering. His long-fingered hand strokes his white beard. “We are on the brink of catastrophe, our very lives threatened. We—”

“The Lorellians,” I say, dully.

Something dark moves through his eyes. His face hardens before relaxing to the pleasant expression he greeted me with.

“You are aware of our predicament. That will save time.” He leans forward, a ruby pendant swinging to cast bloody shadows on the table. “You, Fenella, are our chosen one—the saviour who will rescue us from the dark scourge of Lorell. Everyone on Danude will cheer your name. Your glory will be endless!”

“Glory? What use is that to me when I’ll be dead?”

The blackness in his gaze returns, swirling from his pupils. “The ultimate sacrifice is a small price to pay for the continuation of your race. As a Null, you should be eager to contribute something meaningful to society.”

“No,” I whisper, my fists clenched. “I do not consent.”

He laughs. His teeth are sharp.

“Consent? Now, Fenella, I do not need your consent.”

My chair clatters to the floor. I manage one step towards the door before his power wraps me in a scalding prison. My skin burns, delicate hairs singeing on my arms.

“It worsens if you struggle.”

His robe swishes on the floor. The door opens to the corridor darkened by Prefects. Sampson flicks his fingers. My back stings, forcing me to walk before my flesh bubbles. Slaps of heat guide me to the top level of the building.

“But... I don’t want to die.” Tears sizzle as they fall.

“I’m afraid it is your fate, my dear. If we don’t extract your power, we all die.” He gives me a wolfish smile. “And I quite enjoy my life.”

I lash out, little plan beyond grabbing his fancy robe and shaking him. My bodysuit blackens, blisters popping along my arm. I shriek and cradle it to my chest.

Sampson tuts. “You really are making more of a fuss than you need to. What are you giving up—the shame of a Null? A life of servitude? This is a gift. Embrace it with grace.”

I stumble into a cavernous room, a dome of glass open to the sky. A crowd packs the space in robes of many colours. Arnott scowls at me from a seat near the back, Garod lounging beside him. A huge silver contraption circled by rings of pulsing yellow hulks in the centre. One globular head points to the heavens, the other aimed at a table. A swirling rainbow liquid fills one third of the translucent trunk of the machine.

It makes me dizzy just looking at it.

Sampson’s scorching power directs me onto the chill surface of the table. I hug my knees to my chest to stop myself from shaking.

“Please... there must be something else. Some other way—”

Sampson snaps his fingers and the heat fades. “We tried, but, as you can see, we could not charge the weapon completely. Only the power locked within you can fill it.”

Black-gloved hands grip my shoulders. I struggle and a swarm of Prefects descends. My blisters slough under their hold but their pressure doesn’t ease.

“You’re hurting me!”

My skull raps on the table, my spine grinding into metal.



Sampson shakes his head. "What a waste. If the power had manifest, you'd be the strongest Master in our history. You could've subjugated those god-loving demon worshippers without thought. The vagaries of fortune."

Cold straps fasten my wrists and ankles.

"How do you know this will work?"

"Nothing is certain but our calculations indicate a high probability of success." He shrugs, a smile hardening his mouth. "The irony is the Lorellians would probably let you live. They have nothing to fear from Nulls. But they'd kill the rest of us."

"You deserve to die! What sacrifice have you ever made? What hardship have you suffered? What—"

One elegant finger draws a circle in the air. A wheeze steals my words.

"Enough of that. It's too late to bemoan the injustice of the world. I'd rather you focus on saving it." Sampson nods to a Fellow poised behind a bank of screens. "Start the extraction."

The silver monstrosity hums. Golden light gathers where the curved head above me narrows to a point. I thrash against the bonds, my chest expanding with everything I can't say. Sampson brings his face level, his beard curling on the table and tickling my damp cheek.

"Brace yourself, Fenella," he whispers in a wash of cinnamon-scented breath. "This will be excruciating beyond your wildest imagining."

The buzz of the machine swallows his chuckle. He joins the rest of the Council on a throne-filled dais. Several members shake his hand, the jewels in their robes winking. He settles himself, smug satisfaction lining his face.

A crackling drags my attention away. The golden light swells to the size of a springball, chasing the shadows from the room. It roils and flares like a miniature sun. I slit my eyes against it, ozone scorching my nose. A beam of gold erupts from the globe and slams into my chest. I convulse on the table, my ligaments screaming as they struggle to hold my bones together. A shriek bursts from my mouth despite Sampson's gag order.

The pretty golden light tears my insides out through my skin.

Howls tumble one after the other. The pain increases, though it seems impossible. Blue swirls within the beam and coalesces with the rainbow fluid in the transparent tube, inching up the sides. My vision feathers to black.

Let it be over. Take it, take all of it, and let me die.

An agonising band stretches between my body and the cruel weapon. I gather the part of me it's shredding and shove it into the beam of gold.

The contraption whines. The table judders and bruises my spine. A dazzling white blinds me to the room. Screams not my own batter my ears. Static crackles between every hair on my body. The pain eases and my muscles relax.

It's over.

The machine explodes in a glittering rain of silver. A waterfall of hot fluid flattens me to

the table.

No more screams.

I shake my head to clear it, my wet hair heavy and sticking to my face. Bodies sprawl, colourful robes lightly smoking. They fill the doorway in a tangle of limbs and cushioned chairs. Sampson lies against the wall, his legs trapped at an unnatural angle beneath him. His ruby pendant glints from the socket of one, dark eye.

Vertigo grips my stomach. The sky wheels through the open roof.

The building is falling.

I thrash against my bonds and roll off the table, gaping at the smears of ash on wrist and ankle—all that remains of the straps. My skin is undamaged, even the blisters from Sampson's power are gone.

No time to wonder. I scramble to my feet and jump, clicking my heels to activate my airboots. The building drops away. I hang in the sky, the sunshine warm on my cheeks, the pleasant breeze cooling the liquid on my skin. The other floating structures plummet, disappearing into the smog in plumes of grey. Glass shatters and marble shrieks. Stone blasts upwards, trailing wisps of smoke.

More screaming.

I stumble away. One chunk of rock thuds into my side. I roll through the air, my legs kicking to right myself. My scrabbling hands, expecting wetness and broken ribs, find no pain, no mark. My skin gleams pale and smooth through my torn bodysuit.

I bounce across the sky to the ridge of mountains surrounding the city. Deactivating the airboots, my feet crunch on solid ground. I fall to my knees and vomit into the grass. With the last of my energy, I crawl into a cave and curl into a ball.

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That was yesterday.

I sit on my mountain peak and watch the Lorellian ships darken the sky. The spiny vehicles glow green and enter our atmosphere in a blaze of fire. My fair city puts up a token fight, detonations painting the shuddering air. Beams of emerald light silence them, reducing all to dust and ash.

I'm not afraid. There is no hunger, no thirst, only a detached amusement.

Is this what a god feels like?

I climb to my feet and float towards the largest ship. No need for airboots anymore.

Time for the god-fearing Lorellians to worship me.

# Not the Babysitter

I love Halloween. The pumpkins and costumes and sweets. The fine line between terror and excitement. I've never had kids of my own and, just like Christmas, they make the holiday more fun. I babysit every year and have done since I was eighteen. So many years, so many children. It gives their parents the freedom to go to their boozy Halloween party while I take their little cherubs guising.

This year is no different.

Emmeline and Rupert greet me at the door, squirming around their parents' legs like rosy-cheeked puppies.

"Auntie Edna, Auntie Edna, guess what I am!" Rupert shrieks, bouncing on the toes of his trainers.

I crouch to his level, my knees popping. "Well, now. You must be a pirate. No? A cowboy? Wizard? Spiderman?"

He giggles at each wrong answer. "No, silly, I'm Superman!"

He plants his tiny fists on his hips and raises his chin, his bottom lip thrust out.

"Ah, yes. I see it now. And what are you, young lady?"

A sequined belt cinches the cream fabric of her toga at her waist, green tubes with flopping pink tongues curling from her blonde hair.

"I'm Medusa."

"Oh, dear." I poke her round tummy. "I guess that means I've turned to stone."

"Not you, Auntie Edna! Only bad people turn to stone."

A cold breeze tangles around my tight-clad legs and sensible shoes, my duffel coat fastened to my throat.

"This is so nice of you to do this, Edna," the mother says, her makeup done on only one eye. "We really appreciate it."

"It's no bother. Makes me feel like a child, again."

"I wish I knew what that was like," the father says, throwing an arm around his wife. "Come on, honey, we'd better finish getting ready."

Both parents are lawyers for some hot-shot company in the city. Working parents

rushing from place to place. Constantly frazzled. Their party is being held at their office and is likely to be a swanky affair, going by the number of jewels sparkling on the mother's fingers.

She hands Emmeline and Rupert a plastic pumpkin. "Now, you two behave for Auntie Edna and don't eat all your sweets at once."

They wave us down the garden path. I take a chubby hand in each of mine and steer my charges to the first house, a witch cackling at us from a rocking chair on the porch, puffs of cobwebs decorating the posts.

"Trick or treat!" their voices pipe.

Foil-wrapped sweets clatter into plastic and off we skip to the next house. The streets are filled with laughing ghosts, robots and vampires shepherded by bored parents or a sullen-faced older sibling. The air smells of charred pumpkin and blown-out candles.

In a quieter avenue, I let Emmeline and Rupert run ahead, their pumpkins swinging while they sing about Incy Wincy Spider and his waterspout.

Such sweet innocence.

"I know what you're doing."

I turn towards the slurred voice. A man stumbles from behind a parked car, his dark hair clumped in greasy ropes. The pores of his nose are as wide as pennies.

Two pairs of footsteps rush behind me. "Auntie Edna?"

The man lurches a step closer. Emmeline and Rupert huddle against my legs. I place a calming hand on their silken heads.

"I'm watching you," the man says, the waft of alcohol on his breath stinging my nose. "I'm watching *all* of you."

"You're scaring the children."

"This is the year," he cackles. "This is the year I prove it."

Just my luck I get a stalker who smells like a brewery and looks like a bum. The man has dogged me for the last few years. A pitiful nuisance but a harmless one.

"Good for you," I say, herding Emmeline and Rupert away. His heavy tread stutters after us.

It's a shame, really. The man used to be a police officer, and a respected one at that, before the drink took hold. Now, he spends his days fabricating crimes and jumping out at people.

Emmeline shivers, her hand clutching at my jacket. "Who was that, Auntie Edna? He didn't smell nice."

"Nobody, dear. A bad man we should avoid. Why don't we play a game?"

We play escape the bad man. It's not difficult considering his brain is addled by booze. We lose him in the maze of streets and return to our guising until the plastic pumpkins overflow with sweets, scattering the path as if Emmeline and Rupert are Hansel and Gretel.

The village is peaceful, most of the other kids tucked up in bed, their hearts racing from too much sugar. Emmeline and Rupert yawn with every fourth step.

I guide them home on a path through the woods. My favourite part. No lights dilute the blackness under the trees. Anything could be crouched in the dark, hot breath puffing white as it watches us. A monster, a demon. It's Halloween, after all.

But I keep them safe. I always keep the children safe.

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A key scrapes in the lock at midnight. I place my marker in my book and gather my things, meeting the parents at the door. Their eyes are bright, their movements careful.

"How were they, Edna?" the father says, facepaint smudged across his forehead.

"Good as gold, the little darlings. Not a peep out of them since they went to bed. How was your evening?"

"Spook-tacular," the mother giggles.

I leave them in their drunken merriment and return home. Ovaltine and off to bed. A splash of whisky to chase the chill. I close my eyes for but a moment and the doorbell rings. I answer it in my ankle-length cotton nightie, a fluffy housecoat belted at my waist. Cold air nips at my toes.

Forgot my slippers.

A police officer fidgets on my doorstep, his expression apologetic. "I'm sorry to bother you at this time, ma'am, but may I come in?"

He seems a pleasant young man with bright blue eyes and hair the colour of autumn leaves. I usher him into the living room and offer him tea, which he declines.

I settle myself in the chair opposite. "Has something happened, Officer?"

"I'm afraid so, ma'am. Do you know an Emmeline and Rupert Hardcastle?"

"Why, of course. I babysat the little dears tonight in fact, while their parents were out. Good gracious, please tell me nothing's happened to them?"

His eyes soften, his mouth gathering into a sorrowful pout. "They're missing."

My hand flies to my throat. "But I put them to bed a few hours ago. How can they be missing?"

"It looks like someone climbed onto the garage roof and opened a window. Both children were gone from their beds."

Tears prick my eyes. The lovely young man hands me a tissue and I noisily blow my nose.

"I know this is distressing but is there anything you can tell me? When did you check on them last after you put them to bed?"

"I popped my head in after an hour," I say, sniffing. "They were safe and sound and fast asleep. There was a noise perhaps an hour after that but I thought it was one of them getting up to use the bathroom." I clutch my housecoat to my chest and widen my eyes in horror. "Oh, gracious, you don't think..."

“It may have been when the kidnapper entered the house. The parents looked in before they went to bed and the children were already gone.”

I hide my face in the tissue, my shoulders shaking. The nice officer pats me on the back.

“Is there anything else you can tell me? Did anything happen while you were outside with the children?”

I shake my head but stare at the tissue, holding it in my lap and tearing it into pieces.

“Anything, no matter how small, could be important.”

“Well, I don’t like to speak ill of those less fortunate but...”

The officer reclaims his seat, sitting forward expectantly.

“We bumped into the disgraced police officer. You know the one.”

“David Govan? The one you accused of harassment? We weren’t aware he was still following you.”

“I didn’t want to make a fuss. But we saw him tonight. He was drunk. He said he was watching us. All of us.”

The pleasant young man hustles out soon after that. I close the door behind him and let the remnants of my tissue flutter to the floor. I smile wide at the squeal of tyres on the road outside.

Another successful Halloween. So many years, so many children.

They never make it out of the woods.

# Thanks for Reading!

Thanks for reading my collection of short, twisted stories! If you haven't joined my mailing list already, [click this link](#) to get *The Beginning*, a free and exclusive prequel to *The Faction War Chronicles*, plus other bonus content, writing updates and book news.

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