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To my Brother for his support.  
To my Mother for her enthusiasm.  
And to everyone else for being just plain wonderful.

# 1

HIS NAME was Lucian King. He was thirteen, and with his shirt as a pillow, he was indulging in the act of star counting. It wasn't fun or simple, but it was his project, and he did it when the weather permitted. His goal was to count them starting from the north star and spiraling outwards without moving his steel-gray eyes from their starting position until all stars in his field of view had been counted. He had become remarkably good at it, despite never having completed the task. His mother owned the summer camp whose dock he was enjoying, albeit at a time much later than she would have approved. He wasn't a disobedient child so much as a pensive one and at times his wants and hers clashed, leaving him with few choices that would make them both happy.

The camp was old, and the dock with it, so its construction lacked the integrity most would prefer. It had been patched in places, and a few of its older

supports had demanded a replacement, but it had never been entirely rebuilt, which gave it a distinct personality. Since the dock and the boy were old friends, it was relatively vocal about the approach of anyone that might interfere with their conspiratorial bonding sessions. Even now, the old dock grumbled in its manner that a visitor approached that was familiar and welcome.

“Hey, man,” the visitor called out.

“Hey, Rowan,” Lucian greeted his friend, who made it a point not to step into his field of view.

“How many have you counted tonight?” Rowan slipped off his sandals. He sat down next to Lucian, his feet hanging off the edge of the dock.

“Four hundred and thirty-seven.”

“Cool,” Rowan said.

The pair sat in silence, enjoying the simple joys of nature. A cool breeze danced across the lake, filling their noses with the smells of the pine and cedar from the surrounding woods. Bats wheeled in the moonlight, seeking their nightly meals. Stars twinkled and shined, whispering a story as old as it was unique to its viewer. In a few weeks, autumn would supplant summer and mother nature was urging her children to drink in what they could.

After a few moments, Lucian blinked hard and sat up, rubbing his eyes. “I thought you were gonna

stop sneaking out after the last time.”

“I was. I don’t know why I came out tonight,” Rowan muttered. “I just woke up and wanted to come out here. Needed to, I guess. Is that what it’s like for you?”

“I guess. I just like it. I don’t get in trouble, though. Well, not a lot of trouble.” Lucian regarded his friend. Rowan was a lithe boy the same age as Lucian. He had fluffy, sand-colored hair, an olive complexion, and dark brown eyes. It was his second year coming to the camp, and the boys had gotten close.

“The wrap-up games start tomorrow, don’t they?” Rowan asked.

“Yup,” Lucian said, his voice betraying his true feelings on the matter.

“I guess it’s boring to you since you’re better than everyone else at them. You living here gives you an unfair advantage,” Rowan said.

“No, that’s not it. It means camp is over, and everyone is leaving,” Lucian said.

“I got you. Summer will be over soon, and we have to go back to school. I bet I’ll have to write a paper first thing when school starts.”

Lucian grunted in acknowledgment. “Do you want the trophy?”

“From the games? Yeah!” Rowan said, excited. “Are you gonna be on my team? I thought everyone had

to stick with whoever was in their cabin.”

“I get to pick someone to be on my team. If you want, I’ll pick you,” Lucian said matter-of-factly. “You have to do one event, and I’ll do the rest and give you the trophy.”

“Cool! I’ll do one of the swimming ones. I’m good at those. Or I can do the rifle one.”

“If you want to do more than one, it’s cool,” Lucian said as he rolled backward onto his feet. “You could lose all the swimming ones, and I could still carry us. The rifle one you can have since my mom always gets this look when I shoot.”

“I’m good with guns. My dad is a Marine, remember?” Rowan beamed. “I’m gonna join when I get old enough. I still think you should, too. You’d be an awesome Marine.”

“I don’t think my mom would like that. She said my dad was Army and died overseas. She’s really anti-military. I don’t know. I kinda want to so I can see the world. All this woodsy stuff doesn’t work anywhere else.”

“Well, when we get old enough, we can both join. It’ll be fun. We can be friends on Facebook since I move around a lot,” Rowan suggested brightly.

“Mom doesn’t let me use Facebook,” Lucian mumbled.

“Just email then.”

"I can't use the internet at all. She's super paranoid about predators and stuff. It's stupid." Lucian sighed. "I swear she wants me to stay in the woods with her and my uncle forever."

"That sucks."

"Yeah, pretty much." Lucian scratched absently at a bug bite on his stomach. "You should get back before these stupid bugs eat you alive."

"I'm just gonna hang out for a little longer."

Lucian nodded and turned to leave. He had taken no more than a few steps when he felt it. It was like a chill in his chest. A creeping sensation that grabbed his heart and held fast. Something was wrong. Something was there. He turned to face his friend, his eyes darting all around, trying to see the thing he was feeling. Nothing was there but Rowan staring at the lake.

Rowan felt Lucian's eyes and turned to look at him. "You cool?" he asked, confused.

"Yeah," Lucian stammered. "You cool?"

"Yeah, man. Quit being weird." Rowan chuckled and went back to gazing at the lake.

Lucian turned and started the short walk home, all the while trying to shake the alien dread that had taken root in his heart.

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Lucille King was particular about her appearance. She often told her son that just because they lived in the woods didn't mean they had to look like it, but she had shaken him awake with a slightly wild look about her. Her hair, customarily bound back into a neat puff, was a wild bush, and she was still wearing her housecoat. It was as though she had been roused as unkindly as she had just roused him.

"Did you sneak out last night?" she asked, her voice strangely urgent.

"What?" he mumbled, still struggling to clear the haze of sleep from his head.

"Did you sneak out?" Each word was sharp.

"Okay, yeah," Lucian said. Wakefulness came faster as the pain caused by his mother's iron grip on his arms sharpened his senses. "Mom, you're hurting me!"

Lucille released her grip and ran her hands over his arms where she'd been holding him. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry," she said. "I need you to tell me what happened between you and Rowan last night."

"Between me and Rowan?" Lucian cocked his head slightly in confusion. "Nothing happened. We hung out after lights out. Is he in trouble?"

"Where was he when you last saw him?" Lucille asked, brushing off his question.



“He was sitting on the dock, looking at the lake.” Lucian rubbed his eyes. “What’s going on?”

“Did he seem depressed or sad or anything?”

“No. We were talking about the games and stuff. He was excited because I was gonna help him win the trophy.” A sense of dread had replaced the fog of sleep, and Lucian found himself on the edge of panic. “Mom, what happened to Rowan?”

Lucille looked at him for a moment, her eyes searching his face. Her head fell back, and she closed her eyes. She drew in a long breath through her nose, which she seemed to hold forever. “Rowan is dead.” She exhaled.

Laughter burst uncontrollably from Lucian’s mouth. He was confused by his own reaction. What his mother has said wasn’t funny. He felt sick, not amused, his body cold and hot all at once. He wanted to throw up, and his eyes felt puffy. Each laugh got longer and rougher until it became small, racking screams.

In that instant, Lucian knew that something had killed Rowan. The same something he’d felt on the dock before he left. He should have said something when that creeping feeling grabbed his heart and wouldn’t let go. He should have made Rowan return to his bunk, as that sense of wrongness fouled the surrounding air. He looked at his mother, his face wet with tears and a gut twisted in guilt for ignoring his

feelings.

“Something out there did it!” he shouted. “I felt something out there, and it killed him!”

Lucille leaned back, her eyes narrowing. “What do you mean something out there did it?” she said carefully. “Lucian, Rowan drowned.”

Lucian shook his head. “No way. No way!” The boy shook. “Rowan was an awesome swimmer. Something killed him. I felt it! I felt it, and I didn’t help him. I didn’t warn him!”

Lucille gathered her son into her arms and cooed softly into his ear. “Hush now,” she murmured. “It’s not your fault.”

A wave of exhaustion washed over him like a fresh spring breeze. His mother’s voice dragged him into the depths, and all thoughts of the dark thing that killed his friend scattered like a flock of startled birds.

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“I thought you were going to stop doing that to him.” A warm, deep voice came from the doorway to Lucian’s room.

“I can’t stand to see him like that,” Lucille said, her voice betraying the exhaustion that always came from putting a spell on her son. “I really don’t need any judgments right now, Jack.”

Jack, despite his trim frame and relaxed demeanor, had a presence that filled any space he was in. "Now, take it easy. I'm not casting judgments. I just know that casting on him is hard on both of you. You told me as much."

Lucille sighed as she finished tucking Lucian back into bed. Jack was right. Lucian was resistant to magic, and as a parenting tool, ensorcelling your child was suspect. However, this was a stressful enough situation without having to endure her baby's self-recriminating howls of grief.

"He said he felt something," Lucille said, hugging herself tighter into her robe. "I know I warded this place. The idea something could wander past them is terrifying."

"I'll start doing some extra patrols of the area. If something wandered in, I'll show it the door," Jack said warmly. "There are few monsters foolish enough to cross wards like yours, and of those, fewer still who would be determined enough to cross me."

"That's true," Lucille said, her thoughts wandering. Jack, for all his kindness, was a monster himself. Something unique and old and close to perfect. She never understood why he'd laid claim to her family, but he demanded nothing from her other than affection and, even in that, accepted less than what she'd wanted to give. If he said it would be safe, it would be.

“It’s a shame you can’t protect me as easily from the legal issues this will cause,” she said with a wry chuckle.

“I’m best with inhuman threats,” he said, wrapping his arms around her shoulders. “Human ones are much more complex.” He suddenly sucked his teeth, making a little noise of annoyance.

“What is it?” Lucille turned to look at him only to see him staring absently out the window.

“I realized something bothersome,” Jack said. “I don’t want to scare you, but if something inhuman is responsible, the Choir might get wind of it. If that happens, I can’t help you. Not with them.”

A nervous laugh escaped Lucille’s lips before she could stifle it. “The Choir?” she said despite herself. “How would they even find out about this? The town is insignificant, and we don’t even live in it.”

“I don’t know how they do it, but they have an uncanny knack for showing up in situations like this.” Jack rubbed his jaw, thinking. “If they show up, it’ll probably be a pair. That’s the best-case scenario. They would check things out, deal with whatever was here, and if they succeed, they will leave.”

“And if they failed?”

“I’d make sure they didn’t,” Jack said simply. “Since I’m a known thing to them, it would be best I only make myself known in a pinch, so you’ll need to be

prepared to deal with them.”

“Jack, I’m an apostate!” Lucille snapped. “An apostate with a dead child in her camp under whatever magic circumstances it would take to summon them! How am I to deal with that?”

“Your grandmother was an apostate,” Jack replied, his tone soft. “You’re just a mage they don’t know about. That happens frequently enough.”

“They’ll kill me. I know they will!” Her ire slowly gave way to panic. “They’ll blame me, kill me, and take my baby! That’s how they work! Mother told me it’s how they keep up their numbers!”

“Okay, stop that,” Jack said, pulling the now-fretting mother into a tight hug. “They aren’t going to kill you and take Lucian. You’ve done nothing wrong. The Choir doesn’t simply purge anymore. I may be out of the loop, but I’m confident in that.”

“But you said they’d investigate. Jack, if they so much as see Lucian—”

“We will deal with this,” Jack said, cutting her off. “If the situation resolves before they dig too much, they’ll leave. It will be okay.” He kissed her forehead and held her tight.

“Do you promise?” Lucille said, her voice small and still very much afraid. She needed him to promise. He’d never once failed to keep his word to her, even when she was a child.

Jack's silence spoke dreadful volumes.

## 2

JEANETTE ROBERTS was a nobody, and she was happy with that. She didn't stand out at work, so she never had to deal with extra responsibilities. She wasn't the kind of person who was attractive enough to get hit on regularly, nor so unattractive as to draw negative comments and harsh whispers. She didn't date due to a lack of interest and thus avoided the many pitfalls of relationships. She was happy merely being, which is why it was distressing to find herself, for the first time in her short adult life, fighting for survival in a dark alley.

She'd run to the corner bodega for snacks to fuel a late-night horror movie marathon. While she'd made the trip around the corner plenty of times without incident, she still kept her wits about her, as her mother always warned her. She'd passed a couple of women moments before who seemed familiar. One woman was tall and olive-skinned, with purposefully

messy hair and a warm smile. The other was on the small side, with long black hair and a distinctive red streak that started at her temple. Had she met them before or merely seen them around the neighborhood? Jeanette brushed the thought aside.

As she neared the mouth of an alley, she walked closer to the street to avoid it. The brick buildings the alley separated were just close enough to shield it from the streetlights, giving it a more menacing look. Having passed it, Jeanette glanced back over her shoulder as a precaution, only to be grabbed roughly from the front and thrown backward into the darkness. A hand clamped like a vice over her mouth before she could shout in alarm and slammed her head against the brick of a building.

“I thought I was gonna have to chase you all night,” a soft voice purred in her ear, “but lucky me.”

Jeanette struggled to see who was speaking. Between the shadows and the concussion she was confident she now had, her vision was understandably untrustworthy. She fought weakly against the form pressing her against the wall, but whoever it was had an iron grip. She used a free hand to grip the small mace canister she kept in her pocket, but as she pulled it out, it was slapped out of her hand, tumbling uselessly deeper into the alleyway.

“I guess I rang your bell a little harder than



intended.” The soft voice came again. “Good to see you have a little fight left. Adrenalin adds a little something to the dish.”

Jeanette fought harder, but the results were the same. Whoever held her was enormously strong, and her flailing was as effective as sitting still. As her head was roughly pulled to one side, she could finally make out a detail of her attacker. A feature that froze her blood and brought tears to her eyes.

Her attacker’s mouth was massive and filled with row upon row of flat, jagged teeth that seemed to move ever so slightly. This mouth was a living nightmare, and it was approaching Jeanette’s painfully stretched neck. Terror beyond anything she’d ever experienced locked every muscle in her body. What was she looking at? Was that thing going to bite her?

The next sound she heard was horrific. It was as though someone had twisted a bundle of fresh celery. She was no longer pinned to the wall, though her legs seemed uninterested in doing anything related to moving. She slumped to the ground, struggling to understand what was happening.

“I’m sorry.” A cheerful voice cut the air like a knife. “I thought you were hungry? Would you believe I salted my knuckles first so your teeth would have a little extra flavor when I knocked them down your throat?”

As Jeanette's eyes slowly became focused, she realized the speaker was one of the women she'd passed on the street. She wore an unbuttoned dress shirt that barely hid a pair of heavy-looking guns on her lower back. On her hands, she was wearing what Jeanette thought were brass knuckles, but they looked more silver than brass.

"I'm warning you to mind your own business!" The soft voice had become an enraged snarl. "Do you know what I am?"

The woman scoffed at that. "To be honest, I don't," she chirped. "But do I need to know that to give you this free dental treatment?"

"Stop playing with it, Don," the woman with the red streak said. "I've already got too much work on my hands with our rabbit here." The woman was pointing at Jeanette with a look of mild irritation.

"Sorry," Don grumbled like a chastised puppy.

The thing in the darkness swore audibly and took off at a dead run. "See, Allie, now I gotta play with it!" Don laughed as she dashed off into the darkness.

"Such a fucking child." Allie sighed in resignation. "It would be cute if it wasn't so stupid." She turned to look at Jeanette, who had mostly recovered from her fear due mostly to the odd exchange from her rescuers. "Hello, Jeanette. Are you okay?"

"Do I know you?" Jeanette groaned as she

struggled to stand. Allie shrugged. "I don't know. It's your dream."

Jeanette laughed at that. Being stuck in a dream made sense. Even though they'd never met, Allie felt like an old familiar friend. She even knew Jeanette's name. Whatever that thing was, it couldn't have been real. If she hadn't seen its mouth, she'd have been confident it was just some crazy killer. She felt something was wrong, though. The whole situation felt too real. The back of her head still hurt. "But you can't feel pain in dreams, right?"

"Depends," Allie said as she stared intently into the darkness of the alley. "With the amount of wine you've had, it wouldn't be surprising."

"What?" Jeanette was confused.

Jeanette awoke with a start. Her head throbbed in more ways than one as early morning light streamed into her living room. As she sat up, she realized that in the night, she'd fallen asleep on her couch, rolled off and used an empty wine bottle as a pillow. She gingerly probed the bump on the back of her head with two fingers, finding it sore.

Had the whole night before been a dream caused by wine and horror movies? The sound of her alarm ringing from her bedroom forced her to shelve such thoughts. It was time to get ready for another day of quiet work.

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“It’s a good thing she was a heavy drinker,” Allie mused as she and Don watched Jeanette leave her apartment building for her morning commute from their car, an old crown Victoria with tinted windows. The pair had only just gotten their would-be victim home safely. They had taken a break to ensure she was all right and file their report. “I’m happy at least that went right.”

“I’m not gonna live that down, am I?” Don said.

“You smashed its skull, you colossal fuck up!” Allie snapped. “We needed it in one piece! If you’d just cut its head off, I could deal with that. You do understand how hard it is to autopsy a pancake?”

Don groaned and rested her head on the steering wheel. “It tried to bite me. It’s not my fault! It was an instinctive head stomp!”

“Instinctive head stomp my ass.” Allie sighed. She was working from a slightly bulky laptop that was as dangerous as it was dependable. At least three times in her first year of fieldwork, she’d been forced to use it as a weapon and to significant effect. Today, though, it wasn’t much of an ally; the report it had dutifully sent off would not be met with much positivity.

Allie’s phone rang with a distinctive tone

exclusively for Choir business. She took a deep breath, shot her partner a dirty look, and answered the phone on speaker. "Allison Piper here."

"Hello, dear." The familiar voice of Mary, the pair's handler and Don's mother, came through the phone clear and cheerful. "I am on speaker, yes?"

"Hi, Mom," Don said, her voice full of false cheer.

"Ah, it sounds like everyone is already in the proper frame of mind," Mary said. "I assume you both already understand why this hunt is considered such a critical failure?"

"Yes," Allie said, her gaze boring a hole into Don.

"Good. If that thing wasn't unique, we would have to hide more corpses. It's not a simple matter to hide half-eaten human bodies from the public, even in a city as big as Seattle. Each time a new fiend pops up, it is the job of investigators to catch them to study properly. This failure reflects poorly on you two, me, and the North American home division. There is no way for me to cover for you this time. Commander Nix told me I must rein you both in before something bad happens. We are playing with people's lives here."

"Yes, Mary," Allie said.

"Excellent," Mary said. "I expect you both to be consumed with guilt."

A snort of barely contained mirth escaped Don. "Mary, please be serious," Allie said, rolling her eyes.

"I am serious!" Mary said. "I've been told I coddle you both far too much, and I never remind you of your jobs when you mess up. You are both my precious babies, even if only Don came out of me. You know you bungled that hunt. Why should I beat you up about it?"

"Mom, we didn't bungle it," Don said.

"True. You bungled it."

"That is an accurate assessment."

"Of course it is. A mother knows her daughter," Mary said matter-of-factly. "It's a good thing Allie is your partner. I'm not sure what would happen without her."

"Thank you, Mary," Allie said with a smirk as Don tried without success to make herself smaller.

"In all seriousness," Mary said, "we're using the populace as bait. Let's fix that. Now that that is out of the way, I have something more urgent to review with you. You're being reassigned."

"To other partners?" Allie asked nervously.

"Of course not," Mary said with a laugh. "That would be a disaster. No, to a different case. It's more pressing than any of the ones you are on."

"What is so important that we have to get pulled?" Allie asked.

“A prophecy came up from the oracles. It’s got the watchers in an absolute tizzy,” Mary said.

“The watchers are always in a tizzy,” Don muttered.

“That will do, Donna,” Mary said, her tone firm. “The Watchers and the Oracles are a cornerstone of our organization, and their sacrifice is to be respected.”

Don merely grunted as Allie gave her a comforting pat on the shoulder. Allie understood the very concept of the Oracle division bothered Don because of how common it was for espers to end up as Oracles; trapped in their own minds, doomed to an unrelenting flood of visions and premonitions. Don hated anything she couldn’t punch and losing Allie to the madness of her blessings as an Esper was the purest manifestation of that.

“This is a big deal, as it appears all the Oracles received the same premonition in one way or another at the same time,” Mary explained. “And when I say all, I mean all. Calls came in from the other homes so I can’t properly express how important this is.”

“Isn’t this a little too big for us?” Allie said, exchanging a look with Don. “We’ve only been in the field for a year. Shouldn’t a champion be called in for a prophecy of this magnitude?”

Mary was silent for a moment. When she finally spoke, it didn’t ring with her usual playful confidence.

“The order came from Commander Nix, and he was very specific about the need-to-know nature of this. We also don’t think we can send you any backup until something in particular happens, so you’ll need to be filing daily reports so we can figure that out.”

Don sat up. “It is what it is then,” she said solemnly. “Are we going into this blind? We honestly get no support at all?”

“We’ll be sending you the parts of the prophecy that are most clear as well as notes to boil down what we are fairly certain some things mean. A purifier team will be on standby in case something happens that demands their intervention or in the case things take a turn and we have to wing it. Also, there is a succubus in the area you’ll be looking for with a name that’s related to the color yellow.” There was the sound of shuffling papers as Mary looked through her notes. “She will have something to do with animals that are loose but shouldn’t be, so our best guess is something like a dog catcher or something of that ilk. Beyond that, I’m sorry, but you are on your own.

“One last thing. There is something very wrong with this prophecy in that something is missing from it that isn’t actually missing.”

“Well, that’s just vague enough to work,” Allie said irritably. “That’s a prophecy for you,” Don said ruefully.



“This isn’t a normal level of cryptic oracle language,” Mary insisted. “This is something else. There is something that you are supposed to find and protect, but when any Oracle attempted to express it, nothing came. They just went through the motions as though they were talking. Even the ones that communicate non-verbally couldn’t express whatever it is you are supposed to find. It’s unheard of for something like this to happen, so you have a critical piece of the puzzle: a giant blind spot.”

“No pressure or anything.” Don laughed nervously.

“I have the utmost confidence in you two, and I mean that, but understand this: the prophecy references the fall of the walls of the world. Everyone agrees that could only mean one thing. So if you fail, we all fail with you.”

### 3

THE TOWN of Maplenut was a few hours east of Seattle, tucked cozily into the mountains and forests near a sizeable lake. Distance from the city brought sweeter air than the pair of Choir investigators usually enjoyed. Unfortunately, a three-hour drive after a full night of chasing an unknown fiend had robbed them of their energy. For Allie, this was compounded by the struggle of reading through the prophetic information handed down by the Oracles. There were plenty of notes from the Watchers, the caretakers that dedicated themselves to recording and understanding their mad ramblings, but one could only do so much with such things.

"The watchers have this pretty boiled down, I suppose," Allie mused as she reviewed the notes. She'd been reading silently for most of the drive, doing her best to absorb the writings. "At least as far as the major players are concerned. There is the Thief of Eyes, the Chained Liar, the Mother, and the unknown, whatever

that's most important but has no details to even hint at what it could be."

"Could this unknown thing be obscured somehow?" Don asked, stifling a yawn. "Maybe a mage or something is hiding what we're looking for?"

Allie shook her head. "It would have to be incredibly powerful to override the Oracle's clairvoyance, and even in that case, the Oracles would have been able to see it before it was obscured. They'd still have some details. No mage ever recorded could obscure things through time."

"So there has to be a link from one of the other players," Don concluded.

"Agreed. The Mother is pretty direct, thankfully. The Chained Liar is a little obscure. It's suggested that it's someone locked into some obligation by a lie."

"And the Thief?"

"That one is murky, but it's pretty clear that the Thief is the threat," Allie said, tapping a finger absently against her laptop. "It makes me think a demon is involved because of the references to eyes, which points to souls."

"I'd agree, but the Thief part makes that suspect. Demons can't steal souls. They can trick you into a deal, but would that translate into theft?"

"Possibly?" Allie rubbed her temples. "It could imply subjugation. That's also a demonic trait, so I'd

argue that it could be theft. So either a loose demon, which I doubt or a mage."

Don groaned. "I hate mages."

"More than you hate demons? Besides, if it is a mage, you won't have to fight it." Allie gave her partner a reassuring pat. "That would be the best-case scenario since espers eat mages for breakfast."

Don fought down another yawn. "Wouldn't that be nice? Big prophecy, easy fix?"

Allie smiled wistfully. "Yeah. Oh, is that it?" Allie excitedly pointed ahead at the town coming into view.

Don glanced at the GPS. "Looks like. I wanna sleep so badly. You know, if this town doesn't smell like maple, I'm gonna be super-duper disappointed."

Allie rolled her window down. "How much is super-duper?" Don sniffed the air and let out a small whine.

Maplenut was a town of over five thousand people with a distinct small-town vibe. The highway split the place in half and seemed to double as its main street. Its buildings were all brick and stone, packed tightly on each block. None were over three stories tall, with shops on the ground floor of most. Many shops had covered awnings and large picture windows with hand-painted lettering on the glass. A large, hand-carved wooden sign featuring a cluster of maple trees

welcomed visitors to the town. The townsfolk were active, shopping and conversing on the street, which was a good sign. Small towns with a conspicuous lack of human activity during the day were a red flag that no investigator ever wanted to see.

Don pulled into a gas station just off the main road to top off the tank and stretch her legs. "Finally, a break!" she said, leaning backward to crack her back.

"I think I'm gonna pop," Allie muttered, heading for the store, her mind on finding a bathroom.

Inside the gas station was the familiar fare for the road weary. Various drinks and bagged foods were on display alongside some minor vehicle supplies. After leaving the restroom, Allie grabbed a local map and a pair of sodas. The counter attendant was a gangly, doe-eyed girl with a too-tight ponytail nervously speaking with a pretty strawberry blonde in her late teens. The blonde had a slim stack of women's magazines and seemed to be working on getting the attendant to give them to her for free. She displayed a distinct lack of shame as she leaned suggestively on the counter, allowing for an almost completely unobstructed view of her non-existent bra. Her shoulder-length hair framed her face perfectly, making her eyes stand out like sapphires. However, as she was tracing circles on the attendant's hand, Allie noticed the most important thing about her.

She glowed. Not figuratively, but an actual shedding of light warm like a fall bonfire. The warmth drew Allie in, coaxing her to drop her guard and get closer. She'd seen enough and pushed the light and its false warmth back with her mind. The girl was a succubus, and that light was a glamour, visible to Allie because of her mental abilities. It carried a powerful hypnotic suggestion to either ignore or be aroused by the producer and was believed to be largely autonomic. She was young and obviously inexperienced, but her sense of self-preservation became evident as she started and turned abruptly to stare at the little Esper who had just touched her mind.

Allie smiled at the girl. It was a warm, albeit predatory smile Allie spent years perfecting. "Hello," Allie said coolly.

The girl squeaked in alarm and fled, leaving her magazines on the counter and the attendant confused.

Allie turned to the attendant, whose confusion was giving way to embarrassment. "Do you know her?" Allie asked, setting down her drinks and the map.

"Y-yeah," the attendant stammered, still shaking off the effects of the young succubus's glamor. "Her name is Goldie."

"Goldie?" Allie remembered what Mary had said about the succubus who was supposed to help them. She reached into the attendant's mind to scan her

surface thoughts, as she couldn't be bothered to strike up further conversation. Since Goldie was fresh in this girl's mind, Allie gleaned a wealth of information.

Allie finished paying and headed outside to find Don cleaning the car windshield.

"Everything okay in there?" Don asked. "I saw some pretty little thing bolt out like her ass was on fire, and I figured she'd upset you somehow."

Allie laughed. "Oh, fine. That pretty little thing was a youngling succubus trying to glam a bunch of magazines out of the attendant. She might have been feeding on her too."

"Might have been?" Don asked dubiously.

Allie shrugged. "Well, she was touching her."

"Fair enough," Don replied as she returned the squeegee. "Weren't we looking for a succubus?"

"Yeah, with a name referencing the color yellow," Allie said as she got into their car. "Would you believe that girl's name is Goldie? And that her mother is named Amber? And that they work for animal control?"

Don blinked hard and burst into laughter. "Well, that was easy."

"I know, right? Let's get a move on. They're right down the road."

Allie and Don had little trouble locating the Animal Control building Allie had seen in the

attendant's mind. It was an unassuming, squat brick building with a notable section of its side of the block to itself. The area behind the building was visibly fenced off, and the parking lot in front was empty save for a single long bed pickup truck that had seen better days.

The reception area was small, with only a few chairs, a small end table, and a reception counter. The walls were wood paneled and bare, which gave the room a slightly unwelcoming feeling. Absent was the smell of concrete and animal urine often attributed to such places, which attested to either fastidious maintenance or a lack of use. Behind the counter, Goldie was nervously nibbling her nails and pacing.

"Excuse me." Don spoke up, grabbing the young succubus's attention. "Is this animal control?"

"It is!" Goldie replied enthusiastically. She looked Don up and down rather deliberately and leaned coquettishly on the counter, her glamour flaring to life. "How can I help you?"

"Well, you can start by reining in your glamour," Allie said disapprovingly as she stepped from behind her tall partner.

Goldie squeaked in fright. "Mom!" she shouted as she bolted through a door to the side of the counter.

"What did you do to that poor thing?" Don asked wearily.



"I've been the soul of civility," Allie shot back.  
"All I did was smile at her."

Don gave Allie a hard look, which Allie ignored.

Suddenly the door to the back of the building burst open, and a woman who could only be Amber strode out. She looked like an older, thicker version of her daughter with less of a tan, brighter hair and greater respect for the purpose of clothing. She was wielding a large revolver and wearing a serious expression.

On instinct, Don pulled Allie behind herself as Amber opened fire on the pair. The revolver was loaded with buckshot and shredded Don's shirt with little difficulty. A second and third shot sang Amber's ire as Don's flesh gave way to metal.

As Amber went to pull the trigger again, she found it locked in place. She strained to squeeze it, but found it unyielding in her grip. She glanced down at the stubborn gun only to have it fly out of her hands and into the waiting hands of Allie, who was peeking around her human cover.

"Whoa! Hey! We didn't come here to fight!" Don shouted, holding up one hand. Had Don been an ordinary woman, she would be dead or dying. Her body was blessed with inhuman levels of durability, and save for a single bearing that punctured a lung, most of the damage was superficial. Her ability to regenerate

wounds had already begun to staunch her bleeding but also trapped the offending bearing in her lung. She coughed violently and pressed her other hand to her side.

"Where is the one who is terrorizing my daughter!" Amber snarled.

"That was me," Allie said. "I'm sorry. I was having a little fun. I didn't realize how badly I'd scared her."

"All I did was smile at her," Don mumbled mockingly.

"Who are you two? You are not wolves?" Amber asked, cautiously relaxing her posture.

"We're Choir investigators. I'm Allison Piper, and she's Donna Kyle. I'm gonna come out. My partner would very much like not to be shot anymore, so if you wouldn't mind having Goldie put the shotgun away?"

Even as she said it, Goldie was leaning out of the doorframe, trying to line up a shot on the pair of agents. The younger succubus trembled slightly as her mother gently pulled the loaded gun from her grip. "She's gonna eat me!" she whimpered, relinquishing her weapon.

"Humans do not eat succubi, little one," Amber said as she stroked her daughter's face. "Even ones like these." Amber returned her attention to the pair of agents. "She is disarmed. Are you alright, Ms. Kyle? Do

you require medical attention?"

"Naw, I'm fine," Don grunted. She leaned over, took a deep breath, and expelled the bearing with a final loud hack. "It's been a while since I've been shot. I'm glad you didn't use something with a higher caliber."

"Goldie thought you werewolves. Those bearings are silver. They do the job better than a single bullet could on them. I would not shoot a human. It is wasteful."

Allie held up the bag of magazines. "Honestly, I was going to give her these as a peace offering, but she turned her charm on full blast as soon as we were in the door."

Amber's eyes narrowed, and she turned toward her now cringing daughter. "Go get your gift, child," Amber said crisply.

Goldie sullenly walked forward and took the bag of magazines from Allie. She shuffled back to her mother and handed the bag to her. Amber pulled out the stack of magazines and examined them critically. After a moment, she selected one and tossed the others on the nearby counter. She rolled her chosen one into a tight tube and struck her daughter repeatedly on the head.

"Stop harassing that girl for these wastes of paper and ink!" Amber snapped, punctuating each

word with a rap on the head. "There is nothing in here for you, and you will get that poor girl fired." She finished by throwing the magazine onto the counter in disgust. She turned back to Allie and Don. "I am very sorry for both her and my attack."

"Eh, no harm done," Don said, massaging bits of metal from her chest. "Is now an okay time to talk? We need some help, and we think you are the person we need."

Amber nodded. "I can make time for you. It is the least I can do after shooting you. Please come to my office." She turned to Goldie, who was eyeing her magazines, but hadn't dared make a move for them yet. "Clean up this place before you bury your face in that tripe."

"Yes, Momma," Goldie said obediently and grabbed a nearby broom.

The pair of agents followed Amber down a wide hall past a room with some cages inside. A few cats and a single wizened dog were visible, but otherwise, the cages were empty, and the room was clean.

"Will the gunfire be an issue?" Allie asked.

"I have had that room soundproofed, and I have no neighbors," Amber said. "It gives me an advantage if I get attacked, which thankfully has only happened twice in the forty years I have lived here."

"Can I ask why animal control?" Don said,

scratching absently at her regenerating wounds.

"Animals are easy for me. I like them well enough, and they are an easy energy source when needed. I have,"—Amber paused thoughtfully—"convinced the last few mayors to work me into the budget so I can live fairly comfortably. That also ensures nobody looks at this place too hard."

"Easy food is important when you have a kid," Allie said. "How old is she?"

"Three. She is not maturing as fast as she should be. She is my first, and I am sure I made a mistake somewhere. I suppose that is why Mother told me to make a boy first. They are cheap, and no one cares what happens to them."

Amber's office was modest, with enough room to maneuver between the furniture. It was dominated by a large metal desk that looked older than the building. It was covered with small dents and that unique texture caused by newer paint done over older. There was a laptop on it and what looked to be an intercom unit. In front of the desk was a single wooden chair for visitors. In the corner on the right side of the room was a small couch with seats large enough for an adult to sleep comfortably but not so deep as to be awkward.

Allie took the chair as Don flopped unceremoniously onto the couch. After a moment, Don

wiggled further into the sofa and expelled a content sigh. This was followed by soft giggling, which earned her a withering look from her partner.

“I’m exhausted,” Don said plaintively. “Can you not?” Allie asked with a scowl.

Don nodded and covered her mouth with her hands, but her hazel eyes still sparkled.

Amber smiled warmly at Don as she settled into her seat, leaning the shotgun on the wall behind her and sliding the handgun into an unseen holster underneath the desk. “It is comforting to see such humanity from agents of the Choir. I remember when investigators were much more severe when speaking to worldborn who are not under their thumb.”

“That’s what being unregistered earns you,” Allie said, purposely looking away from her partner. “It’s a matter of trust. Normally registration is a great boon to succubi. Everyone wins.”

“You are young,” Amber said. “You do not know your organization the way I know it. If you did, you might better understand my choice to stay firmly off your radar.”

“Are you pre-war?” Don asked.

“I am,” Amber said, her tone level.

“We try to be a lot more understanding of the ecosystem now,” Don said diplomatically. “I know that doesn’t mean much from someone my age, but we do

try when we can.”

“So it would seem,” Amber said as she relaxed slightly. “Now you said you needed something from me?”

“We were sent here because of some vague information we heard and hoped you might be able to help us,” Allie said. “Have there been any unusual deaths or events here recently?”

Amber rested her chin in her hand, her pinky pulling thoughtfully at her bottom lip. After a moment, she spoke. “I recall Goldie mentioning an unusual death at the local summer camp. I did not ask for details, as I had no interest. One moment.” Amber pressed a button on the intercom. “Goldie, come here, please.”

After a minute, Goldie poked her head nervously into the office. Her hair was pulled back into a shoddy braid on the left side of her head. “Yes, Mom?”

“You mentioned a child died at the camp? You will tell the investigators about it.”

“Oh, yeah!” Goldie said, her eyes lighting up at the prospect of sharing gossip. “I was talking with that gas station girl; her name is Wendy, by the way. She tastes like that look puppies give you when you call their name, and they love you and stuff. Anyway, she told me that a kid drowned at the camp a few days ago.

She overheard when their mom showed up with a lawyer. I asked one of the boys that work as a counselor about it when I saw him at the arcade yesterday. His name is Ted, and he tastes like a playground on a summer evening when all the kids have gone home. Not in a sad way, but in a happy way. He should taste like he sucks at fighting games. That's mean, though, because I cheat." She slapped her hip suggestively.

"Anyway, he said it was weird because the kid was a decent swimmer and drowned at night when everyone else was sleeping. He thinks something might have been going on with the owner's son since he's been holed up at home, and no one is allowed to see him." The information spilled from Goldie like glitter. It was clear that she had utterly forgotten her fear of the agents.

"Wow," Don said with stunned amusement.

Amber groaned and dropped her face into her hands. "Goldie, please tell me you are not speaking that way to the humans around town?"

"No," Goldie said, rolling her eyes. "Just you. And these guys. And Wendy because she's my favorite and thinks I'm clairvoyant."

Allie gave Amber a pitying look. "This is a great help. The camp is as good a place to start as any." She stood up. "We'll be going. We'll need a room to get set up and rested for tomorrow."



"If you would like, I have room for visitors. I would happily put you up," Amber offered. "I think you'll find it comfortable, and my price fair."

"I'll bet it is," Don said with a small smile.

Allie shot Don a look of frustration. "I'm sorry, Amber, but can I borrow your office to speak with my partner for a moment?"

Amber glanced at the pair of investigators and stood up. "I'll be in the lobby. Come, Goldie." She left the office with her daughter in tow.

As the door clicked shut, Don rolled her eyes and let her head fall backward. "Here we go."

"I haven't even said anything yet," Allie said innocently.

"Oh, don't play coy. You think I just want to sleep with her, and being in the house makes it easier. Well, I'll have you know I have actual legitimate reasoning for taking her up on her offer."

Allie turned her chair to face her partner better. "Do tell," she said, taking on a relaxed air. Allie could always read Don's motives without too much trouble. Her impulsive nature, combined with their long history, made Don an open book. Allie made it a habit of forcing her partner to explain her choices, not because her intelligence was suspect, but simply to ensure it was engaged.

"I am authorized to negotiate with any succubi

living in my jurisdiction since I'd be the one paying them. I figure a pre-war succubus has to have some pretty solid contacts. She's also smart. I mean, she's got this town pretty shored up, right?"

"You think you are gonna turn out a pre-war succubus who doesn't like the Choir?" Allie asked.

Don shrugged. "An addict is an addict. Blessed agents are like heroin, and despite her clear distrust, she's still offering room and board for a chance to taste one of us. She doesn't know about our new policies if she's been under the radar since the war. I'll have her on board in an hour."

"And this has nothing to do with how you would be paying her?" Allie asked.

"Well," Don said, refusing to meet her friend's gaze, "a girl can have some fun, right? I mean, we have a super dangerous job. Besides, the more enthusiastic I am about feeding her, the faster it goes. It's a win for everyone involved."

"Now, who's coy," Allie said, shaking her head. "We can stay, but only if she has a room for me with a lock. I'd like there to be no confusion about my consent to be touched, and the little one is a budding gourmet."

"Succubi are kinda liberal with the concept of implied consent."

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Amber lived in a three-bedroom bungalow that looked to be kept in fantastic shape. The house was ringed with flowering bushes of different shades, and the yard was well maintained. The house was painted a yellow strikingly bright, but not obnoxiously so. Unlike many of her neighbors, Amber's house had a fence, a stockade style only waist-high in the front but roughly six feet on the sides and back.

The inside was well-appointed, focusing on natural materials and earth tones, giving off a warm, intimate feel. Various paintings and small shelving fixtures holding curios covered the walls, all seemingly filled with a story to tell.

In short order, Allie and Don were set up in separate rooms with Allie's prerequisite locks. Allie found hers had a desk with a lamp and alarm clock that she could set up as a workspace. She quickly typed up her notes for the day before preparing a deep reading of the room.

Empathy was one of the most commonly used powers an Esper had access to as it was relatively mild regarding mental exertion. As one of the three Esper pillars, it was a valuable tool to master for no other reason than self-defense. Deep reading was one of the first skills Allie developed as it showed the current emotional state of an object or environment and its

history. Emotions and intents couldn't be scrubbed away, but they could be buried under layers of newer, stronger ones. Deep reading peeled these layers away, giving the Esper access to sometimes life-saving clues.

A room was more complicated than an object, so it required more focus, weakening her usually static mental armor. As a general rule, she never read rooms without Don physically present. It wasn't an operational protocol, but among espers, room reads without a spotter were widely considered foolish, so Allie left her room to collect hers.

Don, still wearing her shredded shirt, was in the living room speaking with their hosts. Don and Amber were sitting on the couch facing each other while Goldie had eschewed a chair and was sitting on the floor at her mother's heel. Don was holding her hand against Amber's face, gently cupping her cheek. Amber appeared flushed with pleasure, her body shedding the same soft light Allie saw on Goldie back at the gas station. After a moment, she pushed Don's hand away and shook her head vigorously.

"Amazing," Amber said. "I see no limit to your life force. How is that possible?"

"That's my strength of will you're seeing," Don said. "It never runs out, nor can anything or anyone break it. We discovered that it allows succubi and incubi to feed off us without causing any harm. It's nice

to feed without fear, isn't it?"

"It is," Amber said, biting her lip. "How often would you allow me to feed on you if I agreed to the Choir's terms?"

"Four times a year until you are full."

Amber blinked hard. Her usually comported features now showed naked surprise and hunger. "Four times? Full?"

"That's the standard deal. Anything more would demand special circumstances; only the high command can approve them. I would suggest thinking it over. Don't just say yes, alright?" Don said as she rose from her seat. She walked over to Allie, leaving Amber in deep thought.

"Sorry for doubting you," Allie said softly as the pair made their way to her room.

"Yeah. I doubt she'll turn down being allowed to feed to her heart's content without worrying about killing someone."

Allie ushered Don into her room and shut the door behind them. "Are we worried about her making a new kid? You gonna be a momma?"

Don snorted with mirth. "Don't make it weird. It's life energy, not DNA."

"You hooked her well enough." Allie sat on the floor in the middle of the room. "Now, let's make sure I'm not in a murder room."

Don didn't reply as Allie began her deep read. Allie allowed her arms to rest limply at her sides as she pulled in deep full breaths, allowing them to ease out of her mouth slowly. With each breath, she felt her mind stretching further and further outside of herself. The edges of her mind probed the environment, seeking its natural boundaries. Soon her mind had filled every seam and crevice of the room, mapping itself for analysis. Allie took a moment to exclude Don from her mental inventory to avoid accidentally reading her. They were close enough that Don didn't instinctively shut Allie down whenever she needed to touch her mind, but she still didn't feel comfortable seeing that much of her old friend. Satisfied with her mental inventory of the space, she began her reading.

The empathy blessing allowed one to see the world in various colors, each representing a different emotion. The room was awash in innocent feelings. Nothing stood out, leaving Allie with the impression the room wasn't used much. When it was used, everyone present was pleased with being there. Satisfied that everything was safe, Allie allowed her normal state of mind to reassert itself and stood up.

"Is everything looking good?" Don asked.

"Yeah. Seems safe and healthy. If they've hurt anyone, it wasn't in here."

"What's next?"

“Let’s make a midnight trip and check out this camp. So go take a nap.” Allie gave her partner a critical look. “Alone.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Don grumbled as she left the room.

## 4

THE CAMP was a fifteen-minute drive from the town limits. It was tucked back away from the main road on the edge of a large local lake. The sky was blanketed in dark clouds, intent on sucking up all the light they could, bathing the forest in almost oppressive darkness.

The investigators had dressed up in dark browns and blacks that looked excusably normal and planned to drive past the camp's off-road before stopping. Allie's nap was barely enough to take the edge off, so she decided their visit would be short. She was most interested in the site where the drowning had happened. Once she was in sight of the lake near the camp, she'd use empathy to track directly to it.

A tall wooden sign reading 'Whiteridge Summer Camp' marked the turnoff for the camp. The road was unpaved but flat and well-traveled. In the dark, it vanished quickly, marked only by a tiny distant



light. Don drove them an extra five minutes before stopping and getting out. She circled the car to the trunk to retrieve their weapons as Allie scanned the woods with a pair of night vision goggles. They were mostly for Don, as Allie could use telekinesis to blind-guide herself, but she found them fun to look through. Don offered Allie her pistol: a Glock .38 snapped into a safety holster connected to a shoulder harness. Allie handed off the goggles and slipped on her holster and harness. She drew her pistol, loaded it, and chambered a round. Preparations complete, she looked to see if Don was ready.

Don was readying her own pistols, a pair of HK USP.45s. Her harness was on her lower back, keeping them out of the way of her preferred method of dealing with issues. After harnessing her pistols and adjusting the goggles, she turned to Allie with a nod and tapped her forehead, indicating her mind was open to telepathic communication.

*To the lake and back, Allie spoke directly into Don's mind. If we see or feel anyone, no engagement unless forced. Understood?*

*Right,* Don shouted her thoughts, much to Allie's continued frustration. It was hardly Don's fault as she couldn't hear her own thoughts to control their volume, so it was simply a matter of personality, and Don's was loud.

As Don slipped into the woods, Allie admired her partner's silence. Even with her normally boisterous nature, Don could be frightfully quiet. Her size seemed no hindrance as she vanished into the tree line. Don also acted as the team's eyes by allowing Allie to share her senses. It was an old trick from the academy. Since Don could see through illusions, Allie used their combined senses to spot them. After allowing Don to get a few yards lead, Allie followed.

Allie was only ten yards in when she was hit with a knee-buckling wave of nausea. Her skin crawled, and the air around her felt slimy, almost like she was being pressed into a bucket of frightened eels. A smell born of sulfur, blood, and fecal matter invaded her nose and mouth. She wretched violently, unable to push out the sudden psychic attack.

Don was there on soundless feet even before Allie could form the thought to call her. She felt herself snatched up and held tightly as Don exited the woods at full speed. Once they were out of the trees, the sensation faded as quickly as it came on. Don put Allie down gingerly, then squatted next to her, rubbing her back.

"Wards?" Don asked.

"Yeah," Allie replied, spitting out the last of the bile. "Pretty sure they're infernal too."

"Well, that confirms the mage theory," Don said.

"What now?"

"Sneaking in isn't gonna happen. I don't think I've ever felt a ward that powerful before, so we are gonna go through the front door." Allie rose to her feet, using Don to steady herself. "I hope it's either not warded, or the ward field is small enough that driving through it isn't a complete shit show."

"You want to go now?" Don asked.

"No. It'll keep until morning. I didn't sleep enough for this," Allie replied as she stumbled to the car.

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Camp Whiteridge was closed for the season. Although it only had another week to be open anyway, its early closure was disruptive to the parents who would now need grief counselors for their children. This early closure also disrupted Larry Daniels, who had been sent in to do the end-of-season checks on the camp and its facilities and didn't expect to have to do it in the middle of the night.

Larry didn't work directly for Ms. King. He worked for Wagner Maintenance, a small local company that handled most of the repair and janitorial work in Maplenut and the surrounding towns. Whiteridge was an old contract Ms. King had inherited

when she bought the camp. She was strides nicer than the previous owner, so when he was asked to work at night and not to talk about the camp with anyone, Larry was happy to oblige, even if it would make things more troublesome.

The night was going smoothly. The work mostly consisted of replacing screens and oiling hinges. Larry had stopped to eat when he saw a boy hiding in a nearby copse of trees. He was fair-skinned with wet-looking, straw-colored hair. He was shivering violently enough that it was apparent from forty feet away. The camp had closed a week ago, and there should have been no kids around. Larry grabbed his lantern, pulled an old towel out of his work truck, and approached the boy.

As he got closer, Larry realized the kid had not only wet-looking hair, he was drenched like he'd just been in the lake. His soaked pajamas clung to his skin. "Hey, kid," Larry called out to the boy, not wanting to get too close and scare him. "Are you okay? What are you doing out here?"

The boy's head snapped toward Larry, his face a fixed mask of fear and confusion. He shook his head and dashed out of the trees with unearthly speed, latching to Larry's arm like it was a life preserver. He jerked Larry's arm hard enough to almost pull the man off balance. The boy was attempting desperately to

drag Larry into the trees.

Larry recovered his senses and wrenched his arm free, stumbling and falling back. He lost control of the lantern, seeing it tumble away soundlessly before flickering out, leaving him lost in the pitch. He tried to shout but was stunned to find himself mute. He clutched at his throat and tried again. He felt it vibrate, but no sound came. It then became clear that the silence was more than just an affliction he was under; the world itself, from the insects to the soft breath of the wind, had gone silent. Larry had never experienced real silence before. The sensation was both confusing and terrifying. Was that boy suffering from this? What was happening to them both?

As Larry tried to rise to his feet, something pushed him back to the ground. He felt hands pinning his limbs and warm, wet air on his face. He could only make out something huge above him without the lantern's light. A blackened silhouette against a starless sky. He tried to scream and voice his panic, but still, nothing came.

He continued to scream silently until there was nothing left.

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Allie was awakened by a polite but urgent knock on her door. She wasn't usually a heavy sleeper, but she might

as well have been dead between how little she'd slept the day before and the aftereffects of walking into an infernal ward. Instead of getting up, she reached across the room and unlocked the door with her mind.

Don walked in, holding a small digital camera and wearing a worried expression. "You okay? I was about to break the door down."

"I'm certain Amber would love that," Allie muttered, her face peeking out of her duvet. "What time is it?"

"Nine. I didn't realize how tired you were."

"Well, we don't all express ourselves by giggling like idiots at the first touch of soft furniture."

"That's mean. You're mean," Don said with an exaggerated pout. She fiddled with the camera momentarily before showing Allie the preview screen. "Look, coffee!"

It took a moment for Allie's still sleep-addled brain to make sense of what she was looking at. It was a person, but it seemed like massive chunks of their flesh were missing. Savaged organs and shattered bones lay exposed in the remains of the victim's torso. Allie squeezed her eyes shut as comprehension set in. "Fuck, Don!"

Don loosed a short bark of a laugh. "That's for being a bully."

Allie threw off the duvet as she sat up. The

sight had snapped her out of her torpor. She grabbed irritably for the camera, which Don now insisted on holding out of reach. "Gimme that. What happened?"

"Wash up first. Amber took these this morning, but I convinced her and Goldie to get us food. They should be back by the time you're done, and she can explain."

By the time Allie had finished showering and getting dressed, Amber and Goldie were back with a week's worth of groceries. Amber had set to work cooking breakfast, using the opportunity to teach her daughter the finer points of cooking pancakes. The kitchen and eating areas were joined, and Don sat at the table, watching the pair of succubi. The camera, with its grisly payload, sat on the table innocently. The smell of Amber's work reminded Allie she and Don were so caught up in everything happening she'd forgotten to eat the day before, save for a pair of hastily purchased meal bars.

"Good morning, Ms. Piper," Amber said over her shoulder. "Ms. Kyle has informed you of my call this morning?"

"Not in any detail, no." Allie shot Don a dirty look and received a raspberry in return. "I was told it would be best to wait for you."

"A moment then." Amber handed Goldie the spatula she held while giving her a final pointer before

walking into the next room. She quickly returned with a slim stack of paper, which she offered to Allie. "I printed the pictures so you could see them better."

Allie spread the photos out on the table. The images were at various distances, allowing for an unobstructed view not only of the body but of the immediate area as well. Despite the wounds the victim suffered, there was little blood on the ground.

"This morning, I received a call from the sheriff that demanded my immediate attention," Amber said. "When I arrived, he informed me of the death of this gentleman at the hands of some animal, and he wanted me to tell him what it likely was. I told him it was a bear, but I am confident this is no bear."

"No kidding," Don said. "If bears did this, we'd have hunted them into extinction by now."

"I am reasonably sure this man did not perish quickly, yet there are no signs he was able to fight back. The owner and her,"—Amber paused—"brother were there and claimed to have heard nothing in the night."

"Why did you say it like that?" Allie asked.

"Something about that pair does not sit well with me. I like to think I am very skilled at reading humans, and she does not view him as a human sister should."

"You sound really confident in that," Don said.

"It is an invaluable skill. I have found humans



say far more without words than they mean to," Amber said, glancing at Don. "I do believe, however, that they know nothing of this killing or at least if they do, they answered true about hearing nothing last night."

"The edges of these wounds are pretty uniform," Allie said, massaging her temples. "I think these are bites, but their width is strange. What creature has a mouth this wide?"

"How tall would you say this guy was?" Don asked, looking at one of the close-up pictures of a leg wound.

"A bit taller than me, I would say," Amber replied.

Don looked at the photo closely, held out her hands at Amber's knee and hip, then moved her hands to the table while carefully keeping them the same distance apart. "If we assume it's a bite, its mouth would be more than a foot wide and on a flat face. No ground dwelling natural creature fits that profile. No worldborn either."

"You're suggesting it's some sort of fiend? It couldn't be," Allie said. "There's a mage present with heavily warded territory, and this killing happened in the middle of that."

"It could be a smart one, and it's working with the mage?"

"That's possible, but infernal wards equal

infernal mages. It would be stupid to mess around with something as unpredictable and uncontrollable as a fiend when you can summon safe, dependable imps. That's even more true if it was an intelligent fiend."

"Okay, but imps don't have mouths like this. This is like an ape or monkey. I suppose it could also be a human, but in any case, it would have a head the size of my torso to have a mouth this big," Don said. "It's an impossible trait. That means fiend."

"Maybe it wandered into the camp? We're only assuming the whole camp is warded. Perhaps the area where this guy died was open to access. Amber was able to get there to take these pictures after all."

"True, but would a mage be fine with a fiend killing people on their doorstep? That's pretty sloppy. Not to mention dangerous."

"Okay, so our two theories are an infernal mage working with an intelligent fiend or a wandering fiend leaving corpses in the mage's living room?" Allie said.

"Breakfast!" Goldie sang as she slid a plate of pancakes in front of Allie. The case details rapidly gave way to her stomach's demands for attention. It's usually wise to be wary of food cooked by creatures that don't actually eat, but to Allie's surprise, the pancakes were delicious. Even the ones Goldie made, easily identified by their wonky heart shapes, were cooked to an even golden brown and had a wonderfully

fluffy texture.

"These are amazing!" Don said between bites.

"I take some small pride in my ability to create a flavorful breakfast," Amber said.

"If you do it right, it's the only meal you gotta learn, right, Mom?" Goldie said brightly.

"Hush, child."

"Sorry."

With a full stomach and clear mind, Allie returned focus to the task at hand. "I don't think we're gonna get much further on speculation. Since Amber could go to the camp, that confirms I can get in without wasting all this food."

"I was thinking about that," Don said. "We need to have a good disguise so we can wander the camp during the day without it seeming strange!"

"Yay, disguises," Allie said, her voice steeped in sarcasm.

"You know you love it!" Don said excitedly. "Our cover story is perfect, too. We say Amber called us out to do a dangerous animal relocation! That should get us the access we need."

"And I suppose you—" Allie stopped mid-sentence and looked away from her partner's delighted face in disgust. She didn't need to ask how prepared Don was for this. It wasn't even that the cover was unreasonable. It was more the smug glee Don had at

being vindicated each time one of her overly elaborate fake personas was actually useful.

"Yes?" Don said, dragging the unfortunate word out by its ankles.

"Never mind, just go get your kits so we can go do this."

"No rush. It takes a few hours to get here from the city, and we want our arrival to be believable." Don turned to Amber and Goldie. "Can I have more pancakes?"