
Gallery
of
Nightmares

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Short Stories by
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The Note

My father went missing.

And I didn't care.

The day had started just like every other weekday for the last ten years—since my mom had passed away. My father and I had a quiet breakfast. Not really talking or looking at one another. Just the clinking of silverware or the sizzling of bacon.

Sometimes, he would break the silence with a brief question. “Do you want some juice or milk with your breakfast?” Something to fill the silence. He would then drink his coffee and stare at his breakfast, mindlessly eating.

But once he had finished breakfast, he'd always head off to his private study filled with old dusty books while I got ready to head to school. No goodbyes. For a while, I would let him know when I would be coming home, but he'd only grunt an okay. I stopped after that.

It was not like I wanted to go to school anyway, but my father insisted I get a college education. I didn't know what good it would do, especially since it was a community college. It was nothing fancy like the bigger state ones most of my friends went to. But we couldn't afford those ones. I had just signed up to get him off my back. Besides, it was just four blocks

down the road.

Most of the time, I didn't even attend class.

Near the front door, a large, twisted tree cast a foreboding shadow over our house. It had been like any other tree in our neighborhood, but when my mom passed away, I watched it twist in pain. The rustling leaves had been like cries in the night.

When I was much younger—not that being seventeen meant that I was old—my parents and I would spend hours playing in that tree's swing and having our own little picnic beneath it. I imagined that we were in a remote valley, and I was a fierce warrior guarding my family against wicked monsters.

Now, it was just an old tree with a broken swing.

“Hey, Jonathan!” a voice called out. “Jonathan!”

It was Lars, my best bud. He was like the little kid brother I never had, even though we were the same age. I waited on the sidewalk as he caught up to me.

“Hey! You headin' over to the abandoned mansion later today? I might not be able to. My old man said that if I didn't start looking for a job, he'd find one for me. Something that I wasn't gonna like. He says that every so often. Never means it.”

“Not today,” I replied. “I got to get some homework done.

Ms. Lyle warned me that if I didn't do better in class, she'd go to the board to revoke my scholarship. You gonna listen to your dad?"

He kicked rocks in front of him and said, "I don't know. He seemed pretty serious this morning. But it's my life, not his. I can do whatever I want. I just wished we could get out of this hole of a town. I keep thinking about getting on a bus and leaving, living life how I want. It's gotta be fun traveling all over the place. Checking out girls in different towns. Bet they are just aching to meet someone like me!"

I looked at him. He was all talk, no action. For most of my life, I would hear all about the great things he wanted to do, but he never did anything about them.

He had also been pretty obsessed with the girls since high school, always talking about which ones he would ask out or how he would impress one with his knife juggling. First of all, he wasn't very good. He'd cut himself so many times that the teachers thought his dad was hurting him. Also, he never talked to any of the girls. Always made an excuse. It was never the right time, or they were too busy.

Lars would end up exactly like everyone else: old and tired. No grand adventures. No tours of the world. No great love affairs. He'd have his little fantasies and, eventually, blame everybody else for how his life turned out, just like everyone else in this town.

“Yeah,” I said offhandedly. “It would be fun to leave.”

A block away from the college, we ran into Mikhail. I’d known him since high school, too. He was a jerk back then and was still a jerk now.

He approached Lars and bumped his shoulder. Lars ignored him and kept walking. So, he tripped Lars, and when Lars’ books scattered across the lot, he laughed.

“What’s the matter, Lars?” he asked. “You can’t walk straight today? Those skinny legs of yours can’t hold up your big head?”

A crowd already gathered around. Lars brushed off his books as he got up. Even though his eyes moistened, he didn’t cry in front of everybody. We both knew that would make matters much worse.

“Let me help you up,” Mikail said. As he grabbed Lars’ arm, he acted like he slipped and pushed Lars back down again. “Sorry!” His laugh grew even louder.

I went over and helped Lars up. Then, facing Mikail, I just stared. No emotion. No movement. Just made sure I was between him and Lars. Staring.

Now, Mikail was much bigger than I was. He also was a lot stronger. We’d never fought before, but I wouldn’t back down. He knew it. I knew it. It always came down to us staring at each other while the crowd around us waited. But one day, we

both knew *something* would happen.

It wasn't that day, though.

“Knock it off, Mikhail,” one of his buddies said. “We gotta go.”

“Bah!” He went off, presumably to his classes.

“Thanks, Jonathan,” Lars muttered. He was quiet for the rest of the walk. He'd spent more time looking down; whenever I tried to ask him something, he'd give simple “Yes” or “No” answers. I knew he was scared. He always got quiet when he was.

School—what a waste of time. I already knew everything I needed to, yet I still listened to whatever nonsense the professors were trying to drive into my head. The same boring topic every day—stuff I would never use. Those teachers acted like they were helping us, but they were really just trying to fit us into some job in town.

I needed to get out of this old, broken-down town, full of old people who didn't know how to live. Most of the younger people just cared about what the older people thought. But not me and Lars, though. We had a future that those others had never dreamed could be achieved. It all started with being far away from here.

The best part of the day was when I was done with my last class. I could head out and do whatever I wanted. Most of the

time, I headed to the abandoned mansion at the edge of town. Locals avoided that old building. The grass was overgrown, and the building looked like it would fall at any minute. But Lars, Missy, and I would crawl through the back window and hang out for the day.

Nobody bothered us—no Mikhail. No parents. Just us, the house, and the quiet.

Apparently, it used to be a gallery owned by a strange woman. When we first entered the place, we tried to check out all the rooms, but everything was locked. We couldn't even break down the doors or wedge them open. Eventually, we gave up and only hung out in the foyer.

Unfortunately, I won't be able to go today. I had to finish some homework for Ms. Lyle's Creative Composition class. As my class ended, I gathered my books, talked to some friends, and returned home. The last two classes of the day were boring, so I decided to skip them.

“Jonathan! Jonathan!” Lars again. He ran up to me just behind the building of my Creative Composition class and gasped for breath. “I've been looking for you! The professors are on a witch hunt. They're asking everybody where you are. I don't know what it's about, but they don't look happy. Well, they're more unhappy than what they look like when they're usually looking for you. You better get out of here!”

They seemed to blame me for everything wrong around here.

Not sure why.

In the distance, the dean and a couple of professors were already walking toward me. There was no use in hiding.

So, I waited.

Whatever they wanted, I could convince them they were wrong. It was pretty easy to fool them. I had done it before.

As the dean walked over, he definitely was not happy. However, this wasn't his usual look when he was trying to find me. There was a sadness in him. Actually, the other two professors seemed to have the same look.

“Jonathan, have you got a minute? I need to speak with you,” the dean said in a quiet voice. “You’re not in trouble. Just something I need to talk to you about. Something’s happened.”

“Uh... sure.” I looked around and the other professors were avoiding my gaze. This wasn't like them at all. No yelling. Just the quiet voice of the dean. I really didn't like how this was going. On the outside, I appeared calm, but I had an unsettling feeling in my stomach.

“It’s your dad,” he said when we stepped over to the other side of the corner. “There was an accident near Cedar Bog. He was helping some searchers look for a small child when he was...he was attacked. No one knows what happened, but he had been dragged under the water before they could get

to him. They tried searching but didn't find anything. We're... we're pretty sure he's gone." He hesitated. "I'm so sorry. I wish this hadn't happened."

I froze. Numb.

I didn't know how to respond. Although my father and I no longer had a good relationship, he was still my father. I should have felt...anything. But I didn't.

After the shock wore off, I turned around and started walking home.

Lars soon joined me. "You okay? What did they say?" he asked in a worried tone.

"My father is gone," I said in a steady tone. "Something dragged him under the water at Cedar Bog. I don't want to talk right now. I've got to get home. I'll see you tomorrow."

I left Lars just standing there.

When my house stood before me, it felt different—lifeless. The old tree and broken swing seemed to mock me, reminding me that life had a way of changing—and never for the good.

Fine. I could handle it just like I had handled everything when my mom passed. It was not like my father did anything for me. So, I guessed the empty house was now mine.

Inside, it felt cold.

I headed to my bedroom first, but a red and black envelope lay on the dining room table—the same table where I ignored my father every morning. It was from the Gallery of Nightmares and addressed to me. I had no idea what the gallery was since my father always seemed to change the topic when someone talked about it. All I knew was that it was someplace I was forbidden to go.

Inside, the note read, *“In accordance with your mother’s wishes, Dablia Stromberg, you, Jonathan Stromberg, are to take immediate ownership of the Gallery of Nightmares at 101 Theon Lane. Her wish is that you restore the gallery to its glory and aid the community through its artwork. When entering the building, please bring this note. It will grant you access to the rooms you never could have entered.”*



Gallery of Nightmares

What a weird note. It didn't look like any legal document I'd ever seen. At 101 Theon Lane? That was the abandoned mansion! But...access to the other rooms? I didn't find a key in the envelope, so I wasn't sure how to get into those locked rooms.

I wondered if this was even legal.

Still, I grabbed the note and headed over there. But when I got there, it was no longer decayed. The parking lot on the side looked like new pavement, and the grass had been recently mowed. All the windows were fixed, and a new wrought iron gate now surrounded the entire gallery.

“What the...?”

How did it get repaired so quickly? I was just here several days ago. Did someone buy the place and start renovating it? If so, why did I get the letter saying I was the new owner?

Caw. Caw.

A small raven cried out as it sat on the ornate, tall, black, closed gate in front of the gallery. Just beyond the gate, I thought I saw shadows of people among the trees in front of the gallery and its door. Tall thin people with extremely long arms and hands. They looked like emaciated gorillas with

their arms dragging on the ground. The shadows moved and melded with one another. Must have been my imagination.

Caw. The raven cried out one more time and flew off.

With a click, the tall, black, ornate gate in front of me swung open. The walkway was also repaired.

I stared at the front door, wondering if I should go in. What did all this mean? What were those weird shadows? Would the inside be in perfect order? I wondered if I could sell the property now that it had been fixed up. I had no clue who did the work, but I was sure it would go for a good price in today's market.

I could then start over in a new town. Lars would want to come with me.

I opened the door and realized... that nothing had changed inside. The windows were repaired, but that was all. The main entryway was as decayed as before. Random spiders scurried near the baseboards or on their cobwebs that covered holes in the walls. Gothic wallpaper peeled away from some walls, and paint was cracked or faded on others.

The chandelier, though, looked more ominous but I loved it. Every time I came here, I couldn't help staring at it. It was made of skulls that shed a dull light over the entire entryway. Small bright points of light in the eye sockets twinkled, and I got the impression that it was watching me and deciding if I should be allowed to stay.

I only realized I was still carrying the note when it evaporated into a black mist. The mist flowed throughout the foyer, under the doors of many first-level rooms, and then up the staircase. The clicking of opening doors reverberated throughout the whole gallery. Then silence.

Excitement and fear grabbed a hold of me. Lars and I had talked about what could be in the rooms. Mostly hidden treasures, dead bodies—we were in a decayed gothic building full of cobwebs, spiders, and who knows what—or, more realistically, nothing: just dust, spiderwebs, and torn wallpaper.

Of all the locked rooms in the building, we were especially curious about one on the second floor, which had a broken sign that said “Shadow Nook.” With a shaking hand, I stepped up the stairs and turned the doorknob on the door to The Shadow Nook.

Inside the room, there were three paintings on the wall and a soft red velvet-covered bench in the center. The walls were already painted, and no cobwebs were present. The ceiling glowed with a soft white light that lit up the paintings and the bench. The room felt cool as if warmth had never really taken a foothold. Unlike the other rooms, this room needed no work and another note was on the cushioned bench.

I carefully picked up the note and read, “*Welcome to the Shadow Nook. Concentrate on the first painting, and you will enter the world of Caelith. You cannot be harmed when you are in the paintings. Once your story is complete, you will be returned to this bench safe and sound.*”

Be warned that expectations and reality are rarely the same.”

I took a deep breath and focused on the first painting...



A Wish Fulfilled

I don't remember everything that happened, but I do remember a calmness as air raced around me. The brief look of horror on my friends' faces at the top of the cliff told me everything I needed to know.

That handstand at the cliff's edge wasn't one of my better ideas.

You know... you would think that falling off a cliff would be fast. It wasn't. It felt like an eternity.

No panic. No urgency. Just calmness.

My life didn't flash before me. I remember the sensation of falling and wondering why it was taking so long to hit the bottom. Was I flying? Did I have powers that I didn't know about? Would I survive this fall?

Darkness eventually surrounded me. I was no longer falling but wasn't touching the ground either. It was like I was floating in an ocean of black water—except I couldn't feel the water. I moved my hands down to feel my body. Nothing. No sensation of movement or even touch. Only a coldness permeated my soul.

I hoped that this wasn't death because I didn't believe I could survive that long with only my thoughts. Would I be stuck

here? Is this like a standby area before I entered heaven, hell, or another form of the afterlife? I didn't believe in any of those places. Is this my life now?

I tried screaming, but no sound came out. How long had I been here? Minutes? Hours? Days? Years? No way to tell. But there was a good chance that, eventually, I'd go mad. I hoped that I hadn't already done so.

With a bright flash, the darkness became lighter. Shades of gray replaced the inky darkness, and muffled sounds lingered in the distance. They were faint but present. Actual light and sound! Soft blankets curled beneath my hands! I could feel my body again!

I slowly opened my eyes—I could feel them opening!—and looked around. The white room was still a bit blurry and dark, but it wasn't like the darkness where I had been floating. It appeared as if light bathed the room, but I knew that wasn't so.

A female glared at me in the corner of the room with her arms crossed. Her skin was slightly dark green with patches of blackness and broken wings. Tattered skin hung from the stubs of her wings and disappeared into the darkness. Scars covered her face and body, and she was not happy to see me. Yet, as I focused more on her face, she disappeared.

I wonder who she was.

“You're awake! You're awake!” the healer cried as she entered

the room. “Don’t worry. The confusion is to be expected. You’ve been in death state for five months! We were hoping but never thought you would wake this soon!”

She called to the next room near my bed, and two other healers rushed in.

I tried to look around, but my body didn’t respond. “Where... am..... I?” I croaked out.

“Shh... Don’t talk. You’re at the Medini Infirmery in Edlowe. You were brought here after your fall. Just rest now, and we’ll get you in better shape.”

I looked into the healers’ faces and saw their teeth rot and fall out. *No! Not again!* Their hair became brittle and straggly, and large clumps dropped onto the floor. The longer I looked, the more their soft skin turned into grey ash and dust.

The visions had returned, but I couldn’t stop them. I closed my eyes abruptly and slowly opened them. Everything returned to normal.

“Are you okay?” The nearest healer asked while checking my vitals.

“Yeah,” I said. “Just thought I saw something. I’m fine. Just tired.”

She laid a glowing ShadowMyths card on my chest, recited a couple of inaudible words, and the card melted into my body.

I'd seen street performers using similar cards, but it never occurred to me that healers would also use them. Made sense. I could feel my body getting warmer as the card melted.

“Just relax. This will help you sleep more easily. We'll be back in a little bit to check up on you.”

As everything faded once more, the green-skinned woman appeared again. Nobody else seemed to notice her, though. She was probably my imagination.

For the next month, the scarred woman reappeared in the corner of my room every night. She always stood there, glaring at me as black ooze dripped out of the scars on her body and face. I had gotten used to her look, but not that she kept showing up. Whenever I asked an attendant about her, they never saw the scarred woman. They kept repeating that it must be just a side effect of the medication—nothing to worry about.

Eventually, they released me and sent me home with an in-home caregiver. I was hopeful that the scarred woman would only be in the hospital and would now leave me alone.

I was wrong.

At night, the scarred woman appeared at the foot of my bed, and every time I screamed, my caregiver would burst into the room, look around, and tell me nothing was there. Eventually, my calls for help were ignored. I guess I had cried wolf too many times.

Once my caregiver stopped showing up, the woman at the foot of my bed spread her broken wings, and an inky shadow washed over me. The same nothingness I had felt before I woke up in the hospital. It was cold and made me feel more alone than anything I'd ever known.

One night, she was at the edge of my bed, like usual, but this time, I didn't scream. Just waited for the darkness to take over. I don't know how many times my screams had been ignored, and the cold nothingness had taken over, but it barely registered anymore. Instead of the shadows covering me, her claws scraped against the bed frame as she climbed onto it.



She perched on the edge of the bed frame as if she were a bird deciding whether to eat a helpless worm. The thick tattered wings unfolded, and razor-sharp feathers glinted in the light. Occasionally, a feather scraped against the bed frame's wood, and I could easily imagine how she could tear me apart.

I tried to move away towards the bed's headboard, but fear froze my body. All I saw was her scarred face, the edges of her wings, and the ooze that dripped onto the bed.

After tilting her head from side to side, she crawled onto the bed—towards me. Her mouth opened impossibly wide, and bugs of every form flowed out! Caterpillars. Spiders. Roaches. Centipedes! The bugs mixed in with the ooze that still dripped from her wings and scars.

Large taloned hands formed out of the sides of my bed. Hands! Where did they come from? They held my arms and legs down. Even more hands appeared from the edges of my pillow and held my head down. Some clamped over my mouth, and others forced my eyes open. I fought against their holds and tried to scream, but it was too late. There was nothing I could do other than watch her crawl toward me, vomiting insects and dripping black ooze.

When she finally got close enough, she spoke in a hoarse voice that smelled of decayed earth and rot. "Why have you

summoned me every night? What do you want?”

With a flick of her finger, the hands around my mouth dissolved into thick oily smoke and flowed off the sides of my pillow.

“What are you talking about?” I asked, my voice shaky. “I have no idea who you are! I didn’t summon you!”

Sniffing the air around her, she glared at me. “I’m the angel of mercy. In the middle of the night, *you* always summon *me*. Why? What do you want?”

“Angel of mercy? You’re not her! She is supposed to be beautiful and kind-looking! Bathe the room in her glorious light! You’re a demon!”

“I am who I am.” Her voice stayed calm. “Answer my question, or I will rip the answer out of you. Slowly. So very slowly.”

“A friend told me about you,” I muttered, slowly putting what I knew about her together. “All my life, I’ve seen things decay. Not a lot. Just enough. But ever since I came out of the coma, it’s been getting worse. *Everything* is decaying. When I see babies, I see them grow, age, and die. Same with every person I look at. Their eyes fall out. Their skin grows sallow and cracks. Open sores erupt from their bodies. Flowers. Plants. Buildings. Everything. All I see is death and decay. You’ve got to help me!”

The hands around my eyes dissolved as tears fell from my

eyes.

“Please! You have to help me. I don’t want to see that anymore.”

She simply stared at me for a long time. “I can help you,” she muttered after a while. “However, there is a price for my services. Are you willing to pay?”

“Absolutely! I’d do anything!”

With a smile, she gently leaned over and kissed my forehead. The kiss burned like nothing I’d ever felt, and the smell of charred flesh filled the room. The insects, ooze, and hands all dissolved in an instant.

She returned to the edge of the bed. “Shall we begin? Remember. You agreed to this.



She looked up to the ceiling and began to chant.

“Naloth Neek Sect Shibach. Naloth Neek Sect Shibala. Tok Seth Noch.”

The words repeated over and over again.

“From the heart of darkness, Shibach, show yourself. Payment shall be made. Payment shall be given. This for me. Next for you. Naloth Neek Sect Shibach. Naloth Neek Sect Shibala. Tok Seth Noch.”

Black ooze erupted from her eyes, body, and wings. The thick ichor flowed toward the ceiling and clung to every inch of it. Once complete, the ceiling looked as if it was a lake of darkness.

As her chanting continued, the room grew dimmer and dimmer. Ice formed at the ceiling’s edges and worked its way down the walls. The slight crackling sound got louder and louder. I could see my breath, and my body shivered.

A giant skull emerged from the ceiling pool overhead, and with a quick flap of her wings, she flew up and clung to it. Her wings held her in place as she kissed the forehead of the skull.

She screamed as the ooze flowed off of her body and into the skull’s eye sockets. The more she melted into the ceiling, the more human she appeared. Her sores and scars disappeared,

and her body decayed.

Then, she was gone.

After some time, she crawled out of the skull's left eye socket with fully formed wings and no scars. From what I saw with her back to me, her body was as black as ever but fully healed. Still clinging to the skull on the ceiling, she twisted her head like an owl and fully faced me.

Her face had a wicked grin. Black ooze fell from her eyes and hair. It was thick as oil and smelled of carrion. The first droplets fell onto my chest, neck, and face. Intense pain burned those areas. More and more dropped with even more agony. The smell of charred flesh was sickening, but the sores healed as quickly as they appeared.

More fell like heavy, concentrated rain. I tried to move my head out of the way, but hands appeared from the edge of my pillows again and held me in place. More hands appeared from the edge of my bed and held the rest of me down.

The ooze flowed down my throat and coated my eyes. My vision blurred as I tried to spit it out of my mouth. I couldn't even close my mouth because hands forced them open. Sensations of gagging, pain, and burning overwhelmed me.

Eventually, everything stopped.

The angel of mercy dropped from the ceiling. Or, at least, I'm pretty sure it was her. Things were getting harder to see.

She landed beside my bed, and the hands holding my head and body dissolved. The skull on the ceiling and the ice on the walls receded. Only an intense darkness covered most of the room.

Something was wrong. No more ooze coated my mouth, but... Something... My stomach! There was something in my stomach! Whatever was in there forced it to grow bigger and bigger. Tighter and tighter. Under my skin, I could see the outline of hands and... Was that a face? What was happening!?

I tried to scream, but all I could do was gag. And the gagging wouldn't stop. The thing in my stomach was coming up, and I couldn't stop it. Ooze poured out of my mouth, burning me, and fell onto the bed beside me. Whatever came up was mixed with dead roaches and other insects.

The room got even more blurry.

My jaw dislocated as I vomited. A cry came from somewhere in front of me. A tiny baby about the size of my fist. It was perfectly formed but smaller than usual.

From the side of my bed, a dark shape-who I was sure it was the angel of mercy-picked up the baby and cradled them in her arms. "It's okay, little one. You're going to be okay. Sh... I'm here for you." Her eyes then landed on me. "I have fulfilled your wish. You will no longer see dead and decaying things. And I will be back for three more children."

She laughed as she faded into the darkness.

At this point, the entire room was pitch black. The coldness and smell of dirt were gone. But why was it still black? I felt my eyes. The burning ooze was no longer there. My hands reached for the lamp next to me and heard the satisfying click of it being turned on.

Nothing.

She had fulfilled her promise. I no longer see death and decay. I no longer see anything.

Back in the gallery...

What the...!

As I sat on the bench in the Shadow Nook, the last thing I remembered was that the Angel of Mercy had blinded me. I glanced around, and everything looked the same, but the frames of the paintings were empty, and the room was colder than before. I wasn't sure if it was because of what I just went through or because the temperature dropped. The soft lights above me and the paintings did nothing to warm me.

I had no idea how long I had been in the paintings. I barely noticed the sheaves of parchment paper and cards on the bench next to me as I scrambled to get out of the room.

At the door, I looked back and could have sworn there was a tall, thin female partially visible in the shadowed corner of the room. The smooth dark skin of her shoulders and body melted in and out of the shadows, and her slight grin unnerved me. Before, I would have said that it was my imagination. However, after all the weird things I had seen today, I wasn't so sure.

I quickly glanced at my watch when I stepped out of the room and into the hallway—very little time had passed since I entered the room. Minutes. Not days or hours I spent in the paintings falling in the void... wait? Was that where I was?

I tried to recall what happened, but my mind became muddled. I remembered there was a woman with wings... some black... ichor... I think. Maybe children... no... that wasn't right... The woman... wait... was it a woman?

The more I tried to focus on what happened, the less I remembered. It was like thick oil slipping through my fingers. The memories left a residue of feelings, but what caused those feelings were quickly vanishing.

I should have finished checking out the rest of the gallery, but I couldn't. My mind kept thinking about the room.

Curiosity got the better of me, though, and I opened the door again. The frames were still empty, but this time, I focused on the parchments and cards on the bench. The room was still cold, and I could see my breath as I walked over to pick up the items on the bench.

On the parchment, I read the title *A Wish Fulfilled*. Below the title, in dark red text, it read, "*Jonathan. You're the only one that can remove your pain.*" Jonathan? How did it know my name... and what pain? My life was just the way I wanted it to be. My father was no longer around. Once I sold the gallery, I would have the funds to leave this town. My life was now my own; I could do whatever I wanted.

Next to the parchment were three cards the size of playing cards. The cards showed the same images that were previously in the frames. The room was too cold, so I gathered them and

returned to the hallway.

Quickly scanning through the sheaves of parchment, they told a story of the Angel of Mercy and darkness. The story felt very familiar. I tried to return to the room, but the door wouldn't open. I couldn't get in, no matter how hard I turned the handle.

Was this the only time I could have ever gotten into that room?

Rather than checking out the rest of the gallery, I was too unsettled and didn't know why. I suspected it had something to do with what happened to me in that room. Whenever I saw a shadow near the end of the hallway or down below on the first floor, I felt that something would jump out and get me—something dark, sinister, and with extended long arms. Similar to the ones I saw outside of the gallery.

I couldn't explain the feeling, but I had to get out.

On the drive back to my house, I almost drove off the road several times. Too many things had happened today that I didn't understand. My father was gone. The house was empty. I inherited a gallery. I saw shadows that looked like people. I had missing memories of something that happened to me. Worst of all, I wasn't in control of what happened. It was as if I was swept up in a flood and had no control over where I would end up. Part of me felt in control but most of me knew that it was a lie.

At a stop light, I checked my phone, and there were several texts from Lars. He wondered where I was and if I was okay.

I wanted to talk to him but now wasn't the time. I had to sort out what was going on. It had been a long day; it was late, and I was too tired to think. I just wanted to get home, crawl into bed, and sleep.

I stepped inside my house, dropped the parchments and cards onto the dining room table, and headed off to my room to sleep. I was more tired than I thought and could barely keep my eyes open.

As I drifted off to sleep, I saw the sullen face of my father sitting at the table eating his breakfast. Then, the vision shifted to my mom writing in her journal in the middle of the night. Then, all of us playing in front of the house, and I was running around fighting monsters. My dad was laughing and chasing me, and my mom was telling him that lunch was ready. As my father tackled me and we both fell to the ground, black mists flowed out of the base of the tree and covered me in darkness. I couldn't see my mom or father. I was alone.

I cried.

The last time I cried was when my father told me that my mom was no longer with us.

That was also the last time I remember my father ever laughing.

The images of the parchment sheaves and the red text floated in my mind. I grabbed my robe and headed off to the dining room. I stared at the parchments on the table but was afraid to touch them.

You're the only one that can remove your pain, the parchment cover read.

The words burned into my eyes as more tears flowed.

The darkness inside me threatened to swallow me. I felt colder and more detached from life than I had ever been.

I'm the only one that can remove my pain.

I'd held my feelings in for so long that I didn't know who I was. The more I thought about it, it appeared to me that my coldness to my father was really a coping mechanism. I'd seen the same thing in a lot of the movies I watched. I never realized that those people I tried to emulate were hiding something.

It was something I needed to think more about. I grabbed a glass of water, crawled back into bed, and slept.

The following day, I was exhausted but felt better than I had in a long time. I skipped breakfast, dressed, grabbed a jacket, and drove to the gallery again. There was no way I could concentrate on my classes today.

I realized that I hadn't locked up the gallery before I left, and

now that I think about it, I didn't even have a key. I'd have to get new locks installed. Once I got some paintings for the gallery, I wouldn't want anyone to come in and take them.

Upon entering the gallery, I immediately ran up the stairs to the Shadow Nook and tried the door handle.

It opened immediately.

Three new paintings were on the wall; like before, the room light illuminated them and the bench.

Should I sit down and see what happens or check out the rest of the gallery? My curiosity got the best of me, so I sat down and focused on the new paintings...