



Phantomaniacs

World of Shadows

by

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Have you ever heard the dust in a place tell you its story and the ones of its surroundings, of its roots, attaching to your minds the legends of its beginnings? All the letters and images, the sounds it once belonged to, the secrets it beholds! You probably haven't because you found no time for such things as the whispers of dust be it in the morning or in a fine afternoon spent in an old library among silent book-worms doing their jobs and students guided by librarians and teachers encouraging them to pace themselves down and find some time to read a real book. Well, I have. That's how I got for myself an allergy to dust: by spending too much time among dusty old books almost nobody wants to read these days.

So, I never do the cleaning and dusting: mom does. By the way: my name is Amy. What's yours?

AMY

Amy is a book-worm alright - a book-worm in the eyes of her fellow class-mates, her neighbours, even her mother's friends and family. Attracted to everything that is old, deserted or ruined, from books to buildings and objects out of use, she spends a lot of time studying details of the old days, sometimes collecting old objects with little value but strong energy wrap. She is a four-eyed creature - deep dark honey irises, white skin with rosy cheeks, almost fair hair - who spends a lot of time in libraries, especially in the Great Metropolitan Library where she practically lives. After classes it is there where she can be found most of the times, either studying or having a quiet type of fun. Sometimes she listens to music, *the best of all times*, she says as her friends tease her with her old-lady tastes. She's lucky though, to be a charming young girl whose wit and filled with knowledge brain, from all grounds and of all species, attracts people, making them fall in love with her immediately. The charms though get easily killed as distance settles immediately after she decides the easiest way: loneliness.

She loves living a secluded life more than the presence of other people. She is also a little bit spoiled by her mother, a single parent who found her peace in the practice of pottery and the club of poetry founded by herself in the neighbourhood. She gathered five other women hoping for a new member to show-up any day now. The woman had to do something as she was going nuts after losing one of her jobs and divorcing her cheating husband. So, she came-up with this idea of keeping her mind away from crazy thoughts that would lower her self-esteem. She's also a fervent instructor at the Motivational Center in the district: it's a place where people gather to get themselves motivated not to shoot themselves or another fellow-citizen, a place where they are invited to attend classes of art or literature or any other kind of class they'd like and brag about their results. They get applauded and rewarded thus feeling less willing to commit suicide or think about building a bomb to kill their obnoxious neighbour or their successful traitor of an old high-school friend who never gave a call in twenty years after graduation and whom they just met last night and found the news: not only looking good but also perspiring confidence - they won the lottery, they are a big-shot somewhere in a great company doing something really important; they won a great prize, they published a successful book or play in a great movie, they are a star now and there's nothing one can do to outshine this long forgotten friend's success. Instead, they learn how to smile back at their neighbour or friend and ask them how they did and if they felt like joining the group for an art exhibition, a play or a movie or any other event that may happen there at the Center.

So, mother is kind of busy building her self-esteem whereas the daughter expects most of the things to be done for her, as her only duties - and she sees things to be fair this way - are to be a great student and dream all day long her nose in the books she reads with a famished soul. All day long, she's caught by meddlesome sun-beams reading by the window in a special corner of the reading library room, a place that seems either cursed or reserved for her and her only as nobody ever picks that one - never. Her favourite spot from where to watch as well, from time to time, the fine little particles of dust shining for a short moment of glory before they landed on a piece of furniture or settled in between the pages of a studied book - it is hers and hers only, this spot. Five to fifteen seconds of ocular rest then she returns to her study or reading, her nose hidden by the books she's utterly fond of.

She's seventeen and almost nobody interested her more than her mother's well-being, her teachers' brains and her favourite writers known mostly through books and

articles. With nobody real in her proximity, she is often seen as a cold a spirit, the one guiding her as well, sharp and cold as a silver blade. It shouldn't harm to add withal that the few boys who liked her gave up asking her out feeling intimidated by her sardonic attitude towards matters of love and relationship. She does have a somehow close friend though, a charming little girl who likes books as well but who always manages to flaunt her skills and charms, her will to compete with Amy all the time strong, which bores the guts out of our girl and makes her lie all the time about the tedious chores her mother puts on her just to rid herself off another day of tepid competition.

Amy is not one of those hot-chocolate-sweet amazingly smart whole package right here, in front of your eyes girls. She is pretty, in her own way, always careful about what fits her well and what is better for a model or another character, not crossing the boundaries of exhibition of her own body being obsessed with matters of good taste and purpose.

- Oh, I'm sorry, Maureen! I can't study with you today. My mom asked me to clean the house again. And you know how big the house is and how much I hate to do this, but I have to!

- This way you'll become the perfect house-wife, Maureen tampered then chuckled. Amy smiled back in resent and took distance saying goodbye.

- See you tomorrow!

- Yeah, see ya! the jolly voice responded. *-Uh! how I hate her when she does that!* Amy's inner voice of honesty knocks then out all the good humours she's so proud of breeding.

And so, after a lie told with the craft of an experienced actress, she heads for the Great Metropolitan Library where she finds all the time in the world for herself. Nobody bothers her, nobody picks on her here! She is practically inexistent there, hidden in the back of a room where the magical dust of the past incites and invites the imagination to develop a story or two and wish for the extraordinary to happen. Amy was happy to be able to imagine things that happened in the past. Just a few days ago she read about medieval times, Renaissance and illuminism. Now she was going for reads on etiquette, customs and habits at the Royal Court of France - a curiosity aroused by a glorious description of the Versailles Palace in the *History of the Greatest Palaces of the Middle Ages*. She fell in love with the depiction of those times, imagining Louis Quatorze rather a funny-man among serious relatives from abroad at a ball where he made even the princesses and queens envious with his glamorous appearance and his sumptuous palace and gardens.

Oh, how I'd like to be at least a designer at a court like that! How I'd like to be something important to such a character! Then I would make a difference, she told to herself, fantasizing for the price of ten seconds, but the imaginary cloud puffed in front of her eyes with a sudden touch of magic. A prince-charming - dark hair, lagoon-green eyes - just passed her, took a glance at the pile of books lying around on the table, looked deep into her eyes for the price of two seconds that expanded, feeling more like ten, then smiled and picked a place near her, his smile still alive on his face. He sat then opened his books beginning his conscientious study. *Who is he and why is he anywhere near me? Nobody ever comes here, near this spot, especially good-looking people like him. It's like they never have to hide because they are beautiful and aware of it, going thus for recognition and adoration up there in the crowd in the first lines. This is **my** blessed spot, reserved by the skies with curses of all kind. Oh, I hope his pretty face will not be harmed.* a sudden shudder brought her back. Her feet on the ground, she squabbled: *Hey! What did just happen? I am not focusing right! Am I falling in love again?! Good, God! Last time*

I fell in love with somebody I ended up grounded for a year! I don't want that to happen again! She was thinking about her first meeting with an author she liked very much and who was kind enough to spend a whole evening and part of a night talking about his books and the processes of writing and learning. Agape, in the beginning, she forgot to take notes but every single word he said remained etched to her mind so, in a year of strict rules imposed by her mother she found herself able to reproduce, understand and interpret this writers' words as if her own - the journal she's still keeping holds all her secret thoughts, all her emotions, her beliefs and feelings. This time was different though, she seemed to be shallow, judging with her eyes and not with her mind. *Stupid hormones!* she finally concluded. *I am not going to let myself down and lower the shield. Think young woman, think! Why am I worrying anyway? I'm probably never to see this boy again. He's here today. He might come tomorrow too and the day after tomorrow because he has some paper or study to do. Then, puff! He's gone.*

Nobody can say with certain precision why but, from that day on Amy started going to the Metropolitan Library without giving any reason to anyone on why she wouldn't study with them or go out for a pie, a show or a concert - no more lies only a shrug as response to the question *Why?* and a *"See ya tomorrow"*. No more excuses for not descending for supper either. She felt a stringent attraction to the library, strongly drawn to her private time spent to note the *events* down in her journal as well, a time beginning to gather more importance than it ever had before, albeit there was little to tell about happenings in her life. Was it this boy? Was it the new books she was reading, was it the hard study that she had to do for the history of arts class to which she assigned voluntarily? She could not tell. The only thing that she could tell was that she felt extremely inspired, for the very first time in her entire existence: inspired to write, inspired to create, inspired to come-up with the best ways to built a paper-study she always dreamed about making great but ending-up doing just fine for the average A prize in any competition picked. This boy? Yes, most certainly was a curiosity as he kept going to the library picking the same seat he took the first time there, pretty close to her, a place from where he could see everything she was doing. A place from where she, too, could study his moves.

- Nice pick! he addressed her a month later. Is it for school or just for fun?

- This? Oh, this is for fun, she answered. I usually go for rest and fun after my studies which end about the time you come in, lately. She almost flushed feeling a hot air coming from her stomach up to her throat. She barred it making it go down with embarrassment.

- Aha! Well, the library is going to close soon, he said. Would you care for a cup of tea or something?

- Yeah, sure. She couldn't believe it. She was just asked out by a charming prince and not a thrill, not a shaking clumsy movement, no stammer in her voice - nothing. She was as calm as a rose picking sunlight in a normal summer day. With steady certain moves she collected the ten books surrounding her spot and she paced in front of him with the most normal air in the world, smiling at his proposal to help her with the books. - You have your own load which is not to be neglected, she said. I thought that I was the only one who borrowed such large numbers of books at once, she amused then joined him for a muffled laughter at the naive lie expressed. They carefully placed the books on the counter whispering:

- Thank you, Mam'! Have a nice evening, she radiated.

- You too!

- Thank you!

- Most welcome, young man. Have a nice evening.
- Have a nice evening.

- We haven't introduced ourselves properly. My name is Amy.
- I am Amitiel.

They went to a small tea-house near the library where they started talking about themselves and the books they've read and the ones they wanted to read. They also spoke about old times and the ways and objects used then, mentioning buildings in town they always felt attracted to. Apparently this boy, whose name was intriguing Amy a little, was attracted to the same things as she was. Of course, the girl wanted to know a lot more about him before he decided never to see her again, as they always do because they get either bored or intimidated by her. But Amitiel was not like the other boys she had met. He kept asking her out for tea or coffee every evening, being very interested in her ideas of spending their spare time and their soon to come summer holidays.

A very well raised young man was Amitiel, always thoughtful and caring, never letting Amy get back home alone after the fall of night's darkness, always behaving like a real gentleman. He was rather tall and handsome, thin but well-built. One could not say though if he was working out or if he was one of nature's miracles since he didn't like to show himself as a muscle-man. One could tell though that either he or nature took enough care of himself as not to let his body look too frail. He was also a very good listener which impressed our girl who expected a self-centered person to come out to the light soon. But no, Amitiel was different and, for the first time, Amy felt that she had found a real friend in this young man.

There was no tension, no competition and no jealousy between them. There was nothing but peace and Amy felt happy to find a real friend in a young man who wasn't looking for trouble and wasn't hitting on her like some of her previous dates did. Yes, she liked him, she truly did and she could not think of him in any other terms as best friend and company for her or anyone else in the world. Amitiel once laughed at her thoughts expressed loud:

- Why would you consider me a best friend to anyone!? I can be annoying too, you know?
- Do you want to be annoying?
- I don't know. Sometimes I do!

They went to art exhibitions and visited museums together, they attended a clay-modelling workshop, participated to concerts of classical guitar and piano and, for the first time in her entire life, nobody teased her for having a date. For the first time in the history of Amy's life *he* wasn't too cool or too fancy, too good-looking or too shy, too something or something else. And for the first time: "*Where did you meet this guy*" wasn't asked. There was complete silence regarding her new friend but she knew that many of her class-mates and friends were gossiping behind her back. It didn't bother her, though. On the contrary. She felt master of her own self and her life and couldn't care less about what other people might think or say. *What best than having a best friend you can trust and never compete with?* Her thought was carrying her far away into the distance that was beginning to put her on a different level than she ever imagined: she was feeling mature and confident.

- How about some pictures we took in *The Garden* or maybe you prefer the park? *The Garden* was a place where young people of different ages were gathering for fun

activities to do together while having either a picnic or a table in the restaurant area where they could eat and also play a few board-games. They both loved spending time there since it had very well-priced options and it was never too crowded with people or animals.

- That would be nice but I wanted to ask you something. It is nearly the end of school and you haven't told me anything about your plans for holiday! he asked her a week before summer holidays.

- I have no plans. My mom can't afford to take us anywhere this year, you know, after the divorce and losing her second job which used to provide very well for all our journeys and ideas of leisure-time... Amy seemed a little sad to Amitiel who was immediately there to offer a solution.

- Same here - nowhere to go. But I have a back-up plan. I knew that this year too was going to be a very special one for me so, I signed up this year too for a project of building rehabilitation. I will be part of a group conducted by a reputed professor of architecture and design. His name is Forscher, and he is conducting a survey for HafenCity University in Hamburg. For his study, Professor Forscher gathered a quite impressive number of students: two thousand one hundred thirty three so far. I joined the forces last year and I must say that I liked what is going on there.

- What is it about? Amy's curiosity enticed.
- Well, we are taught about buildings and their importance, his programme is reserved exclusively to old historical derelict buildings in Europe that can be saved from perdition or even reconstructed. He encourages us to learn about such buildings not only the styles and eras in which they were created but also about the personal stories of those buildings and places - their owners and their utility over time.
- Wow... sounds like a very interesting thing to do.
- What is even more interesting is that, after he presents us the buildings he has targeted, he splits us into smaller groups of five to ten people, even twenty, depending on how large an amount of work to be done for the building and how great its history, then we are asked to dig for information, find clues about the owners and how we could get to save those buildings. Then, after we gathered all the information and details we need, if we get all the approvals, we are regrouped and start working on restoring or rebuilding it.

- Wow.
- I know. It can take years to get approvals, of course, I haven't got any approval to act for the building I was assigned to yet, but there is a possibility to save it although a lot of work need to be done to get there. Some of us rewrite the history of the house or mansion or palace deserted, others present technical data and look for legal ways to get to restore the glam of the old days. Some feel even inspired to write their own stories based on the history of the property. We restored a garden last year, you know?

- Wow!
- We also learn how to read floor-plans and how to create some new ones..., we learn about laws and techniques of persuasion, about advertising and fund-raising and it's all free of charge. Anyone can subscribe to what they want to do and their participation is rewarded with career opportunities and lots of friends.

- Can I get into this group?
- Absolutely! I was about to ask you to. This way you can team-up with me and help me with this building I've been working on since last year, Amitiel enthused then mitigated his feelings completing his sentence: if you want to, of course. This won't make you particularly famous nor rich! But you'll love the experience. Besides, it is a great

opportunity to gather some knowledge and improve some skills, also learn new ones!

- I'd love to be part of it! Where do I sign? Amitiel laughed a happy healthy laughter.

- I knew you'd be excited but I didn't expect you to want this so much! he said.

Of course, there was no problem for Amy to spend a whole summer gathering information about an old house and trying to contribute to its restoration. Her mother had nothing to object against the idea either. In fact, she was relieved to know that her daughter found something to do for the entire summer - that way she wouldn't have to explain to her child why they were in no position for travelling like before. She was feeling blessed with a smart child and relieved from a tedious duty.

A week passed in the hurry for papers to complete and sign for the admission in Professor Forscher's group activities and the preparations for the parties given for the closure of school's year. As the first day of scouting approached so did the thrilling butterflies in the stomach for what was about to become a full day-time occupation with goose-bumps and imbued knowledge of the past.

DAY I

A sumptuous hum with uneven touches every now and then was populating the great hall before the lights went off and the introduction to the rehabilitation programme started playing on the screen. Concise and elucidating it got straight to the points that mattered most for the souls waiting for clarification and a sneak-peak to new opportunities in self development.

The aula in which the over two thousand students composed, produced quite an impression to Amy. Not being used to such large spaces filled with people having the same passions as herself didn't help her much accommodate in the first minutes of the presentation. Soon though, after the lights went off and the introduction inviting the previous summer-edition participant students speak and present their work done in the past year was done Amy began to feel more at ease. The entire project conducted with the five hundred of students participating the year before was now including the restoration of two large spaces, a task to which the great number of young people signing-up felt like heavenly help. Step by step, the new ideas for this year were revealed and details about signing-in for specific activities were given. Amy wanted to be in the same team as Amitiel. She was feeling a little scared about meeting other people - they were so many and she was still such a stranger to the idea of making new friends! Why? She couldn't explain it to herself; maybe it was just a phase. She had one of those when younger, a time when she avoided the presence of other humans just as much as she was now, spending time on her own, among books. Amitiel came right in time to spoil this time she was dedicating to herself and herself only and she couldn't say if she was more frightened than happy to leave the shell she was hiding in and adjust to a more dynamic lifestyle or if the joy of meeting other people was bringing along doubt and too much self-analysis.

"Now, for those of you who are new to this group, and many you are, I must confess, I am impressed, there is a need to emphasise that this is serious work. Don't take it just as fun or an activity you can assign to then drop at any time because you'll lose your right to apply for any other activities this group will bring in the future. This happened last year too, we had almost a thousand students signed-in to various projects and many of them found themselves in the position to quit. So, I am asking you to be serious about it and do what you can do, assign only to what you believe you can handle or are very determined to learn and stick to the activities you can participate to. Everybody has a place here but

you'll have to learn which activity suits you best. Now, for the next hour and a half we will have our last year student's speak to you about the projects assigned to them, about the levels an points touched and their work-flow, also about their results."

The very first second after professor Forscher's announcement Amy felt her anxiety level high. Another hour and a half stuck on the chair when she had to visit the ladies room. *Uh, I just had to assume there would be a break soon and drink that whole bottle of water!* Soon she forgot about her pain. The topics presented and the passion with which some of the students spoke were viral. She kept herself focused on the presentations and the break came sooner than she expected.

- Here, keep my bag, please. I have to go to the ladies'... Amy launched the instant the break was announced.

- Sure, Amitiel smiled.

In no time she was back:

- So, what's next? she asked rubbing her hands with excitement.

- Well, you will have to sign in to my project, if you want us to be in the same team. But you don't have to. There are many other groups with projects that you might feel more attracted to.

- Are you kidding me? Of course I want to work with you? What is the project's title, again?

- It's there, he pointed a box among other boxes where students were placing their applications. The Lauren's Orphanage.

- Okay... There is no way you can get rid of me! she smiled back smugly. He laughed. How come nobody's applying for it? I expected a line of applicants.

- We didn't advertise much. It is said that the houses were haunted for a while. Someone even mentioned murder and suicide. Not the boarding-school or any of the children's rooms affected, the pension was untouched by such ideas materialising in the heads of the humans stating ghost presences, only the little house where the teacher's and care-takers were living and the guest-house on the hill - the family business which was deserted after rumours spread about ghost encounters and people leaving the guest-house for reasons related to paranormal events.

- That should have made it popular! I don't get it.

- Well, yes, you're probably right but you see, the case was cleared and closed after they found rats in the basements of both houses, places that were never used after the death of Mr. Lauren.

- I see. Tell me more about this place, Amy asked, her enticed curiosity showing all over her white face on which one could distinguish a few red freckles if they looked carefully enough.

- Well, the Laurens were a couple that intrigued the locals very much. Their memory is still shrouded in a lot of mystery. The only one who remembers them quite well is an old priest who's retired five years ago. He lives alone in a small house in the village. If I were to follow his words, they loved each other more than one could imagine. It is said that they escaped their families who were against their relationship and secretly married. Then they ran away to a place where they could make a life together. They travelled a lot and eventually found this place where they established. Life was tough for them, in the beginning, but, being hard working and both very clever, they started a business, a guest house they built up on the hills, this helping them survive. Time brought them many ideas to entertain their guests and have them come back for more on other occasions. They were inventive and charming and never spent too much on themselves, looking forward to the event of having children. Soon they made a small

fortune. But the desired children never came. Furthermore, she fell ill and soon died leaving him alone to the world and their guests. People say that he worshiped her and with all the money they've been saving for the children they never had he bought the house and the land where the orphanage and a little chapel were built - all in the memory of his wife. The first years kept him busy with the guest house and this orphanage but wild dark thoughts were haunting him and as people enjoy telltale, the memory of his wife began to haunt him, her spirit calling him to her. One day they found him by the lake, dead, his body crushed by the rocks. They assumed he had jumped off the cliff, a note implying the idea of suicide left in his room. They found many other similar notes scattered in his office-desk drawer.

- You mean good-bye letters?
- Yes, some of them started like *good-bye* letters. Others were simple notes referring to him leaving this world voluntarily. It seems that the man had given it a thought for days in a row. A few papers that were found, appearing to belong to a journal that was never found, stand as a proof that he kept being haunted by the idea of putting an end to his life after her passage into the after-life.
- Wow. Pretty dark and gloomy story... with a shocking end. It burdens the soul.
- What is even more burdening and mystic about it is the note they found in his room. The note contained only these words, I quote: "*Your journal has been published, my love, now I can go for rest. I hope you'll receive me into your arms again. Here I come...*"
- Why didn't you say anything about it earlier, in your presentation?
- I didn't want people to crowd-up to our box. I want them to feel for themselves. I am not selling them the story, they are the ones that will have to sell a story. I want them to sense it and decide if they want to discover more or if they prefer something else. Besides, we are doing pretty well in the present formation. We don't need too many people in the group otherwise we'll feel crowded. There's need only for two people. You're here and I'm sure we'll find another volunteer!
- Well, you told me...
- Yes I did, he nodded with a smile showing he was proud of his deed... I wanted you to know what you'll have to deal with, he winked back. Just about then a young woman approached their box. - Look, we have a new member! Let's go and say *Hi*.
- Where are the others, by the way?
- Oh, they're over there, Amitiel pointed to a group of people talking heartily, but say nothing about the story I told you, they know almost nothing of it. I kept it in short terms so far. 'Wanted more evidence, something to prove what I just told you. When I started putting up together the pieces of the puzzle I had nothing but a few confessions and some rumours changing with every person willing to speak about this case.
- Did you get any... evidence?
- Perhaps I did, Amitiel replied putting up a mysterious guise.
- So, you were in charge with the reconstruction of the story, Amy concluded, heading to the box in which she carefully slipped her application form.
- Yes, he simply answered before turning to the girl they spotted earlier identifying her as the new member. Hi and welcome to the group! he started.
- Hi! Thank you, the girl smiled back at them with the whitest smile Amy has ever seen. *What is she doing to her teeth to have them shine so brightly!? so white!*
- I am Amitiel and this is Amy, she's also new.
- I am Miranda.
- Nice meeting you, Miranda, Amy said shaking the girls' hand. She felt like complimenting her too - on her white teeth, perhaps? the first thought - then gave it a second

thought: maybe it wasn't appropriate. Or was it? *What if she uses one of those teeth whitening pens that are said to taste awfully bitter! Well, that should make her even prouder for making such a sacrifice for the most brilliant smile ever.*

- Allow me to introduce you, girls, to the other members of this group, Amitiel followed. He led the girls to a group of young students gathered close to the entry door of the building, the same he indicated to Amy as the *rest of the group*. Hi guys!
- Amitiel! Hi, how are you, man? a friendly boy shook hands with Amitiel instantly.
- I'm fine, thanks, Garry.
- It's been a while! another student, slender with a pert nose and big dark eyes started. How was school?
- Just as usual, Amitiel answered. Nothing special. But I did get the chance to do some extra-work on our project a little and found some details you guys won't believe!
- Really, the young slender man asked with a dichotomy of a smile put up on his face.
- Oh, wow! I cannot wait for some news, Ami', dear! a girl in the group endeared.
- Well, first of all, we have two more members, I mean, I'm sure that their applications will be accepted. Here is Miranda, ...
- Hi nice to meet you, the girl waved as she was smiling.
- Hi. Nice meeting you, the slender man greeted stretching his hand to shake hands. He stopped and stared into the new girls eyes with unusual diligence.
- Nice to meet you, Garry's friendly reaction came with no delay, shaking hands joyfully.
- Hi, the other waved and smiled back at their turn.
- ... and here is Amy.
- Hi Amy! nice meeting you.
- Hi Amy!
Everybody shook hands waving a welcome.
- ... they are as it follows: Dean, he said pointing to the tall slender young man who was presenting an idea to the group right before Amitiel came to introduce Miranda and Amy, there is Garry, here is Lisa, right next to her Laura and Ramon, then Dinah and Yuri who are twins, by the way, and Troy.
- Nice meeting you, Amy said nodding.
- Very pleased to meet you, guys, Miranda said at her turn.
- The great meeting was to take a couple of hours more, about an hour dedicated to the distribution of attributions and chores and the rest of the time for questions and clarifications. The students were also to be toured to the laboratories and meeting rooms where they could develop their projects with the teams being given the chance to use some of the equipment available for their studies and researches. Of course, to each project a manager was assigned and each manager was an *adult* over the age of twenty two. For a position like that, there were many tests a student had to go through from psychological tests to management abilities and communication skills. Amitiel happened to fail the first time he applied or was simply unaware of the great possibility ahead. Still, being the closest to the top among the applicants, was given the position after the first manager the group had resigned.
- Amitiel, Amitiel! the voice of Professor Forscher was heard approaching. Hello, everybody. Amitiel, dear, you forgot to sign me one paper, you know, regarding your new position as a manager.
- Oh, I'm sorry, sir.
- Never mind. It's good that I caught you. Now look, the professor said taking Amitiel to the side for a short walk away from the group, we will have to talk a little about all

this project of yours, the Lauren's Mansion that seems to go nowhere. I might change your assignment if things don't move a little faster. You have to bring something of great interest to the public, otherwise we'll never get to the next stage. Oh, by the way, every Monday morning, at seven o'clock, sharp, the managers have a one to two hours meeting where they do some brainstorming and learn more about how to manage a team efficiently. You might want to get there.

- Sure, professor. Can I bring a friend?
 - Aaaa... sure, I suppose ... we don't have restrictions of the kind... I mean, I believe you're thinking of somebody in your team, right?
 - Yes, it's Amy, she is new but I could really use some help every now and then, you know... she is in the very beginning and a little shy but has pretty good ideas... so...
 - Yeah, sure. Whatever helps the team go somewhere with this project.
 - Thank you, professor!
 - It's the third house I want on my list for restorations. I don't know why but there is something about it, one can feel it in the air if they spend enough time around it and inside... it's some sort of a mystery combined with fantasy and magic.
 - Yes... there is. As a matter of fact I did a little extra work during this schools' year and found some interesting details that might help us raise more money and put it on the list of restorations soon.
 - Perfect! the professor jolted with excitement. Alright! See you around! He saluted by nodding and left lithe as a ten years old who was promised a new toy.
- Amitiel returned to the group where Amy was having a light conversation about their project.

- Too bad Minos left! He was doing a pretty good job, Dean carefully slipped at the end of the meeting obviously disturbed by the pick of new leader.
- Bah, I've seen better, Garry declared.
- So, when will we go there, at the house, to see the place and maybe speak to the current owners? Amy asked with excitement in her voice, being happy to detour the conversations' path.
- There's nothing to see, Dean aloofly dismissed. It's just an old house that's been deserted and the pension, or the orphanage, if you like, also derelict.
- What about the guest house? Amy asked.
- You mean the place that's up on the hill? Well... the owners still use it as accommodation.
- Who are the owners, she continued her inquiry.
- Amitiel, dear! It is you the one who did all the research on the people who owned this house, the orphanage, the guest house and the lands! Can you help us, please? By the way, didn't she come with you? I expected you informed her on these details already! the slender man waved a hand superciliously.
- Dean, you are horrible! Laura chided. I will be more than glad to help you with the details we already know - I hold the archives and do the publicity with Ramon's and Yuri's help. Sometimes Dinah and Lisa help too, but only when necessary.

- What are the other's attributions in this team? Miranda asked.
- Well, Troy, Garry and Lisa are more into the architecture and design part. Dean has been focusing mostly on architecture, lately; legal things as well. For a while Amitiel worked with Dinah on the "journalism" part or investigation, if you like; you know, history and questioning and stuff. We gave a hand there too, in the very beginning but then, after having to "advertise" for our cause and find financial support and come-up with donation campaigns and events to help us raise the necessary money for a res-

toration, then also find the legal ways to do that, which became Dinah's job soon... we changed plans.

- I was very much helped by Dean, to be honest. It's a lot of work, believe me!
- Yeah, Garry entered the conversation, poor Amitiel was left alone studying the places and questioning people all by himself.
- We could go there and look around, Lisa suggested. It's been a while and we haven't really moved a lot towards the subject of our project, so to speak, I mean, the rest of us.
- True, Troy admitted. Amitiel is the only one who kept a close connection.
- Well, I believe that I have the story to attract the donors, Amitiel followed, but I would really like to make of this building what it once was: A great place dedicated to true love!
- Oh, Laura's chipper voice sprang. This sounds so beautiful!
- Well, they did build an orphanage in the memory of a loved wife! Lisa flaunted her knowledge.
- Okay, I see you girls are up for a drive to neverland! Garry amused.
- What about you, guys? Amitiel asked the rest of the group.
- Sure, why not, Dean fluttered a hand with an air of pre-eminence.
- I don't like Dean's attitude, Amy confessed privately whispering to Amitiel. Is he this condescending all the time?
- No. I guess he is like this because he wanted the position of manager of the group. He hinks that deserved the title more than anyone else in this team working in two very demanding grounds at the same time: legal and architecture. The tests though, proved differently. I might not be the best suit but I am the best in this group, Amitiel clarified.
- Well, I hope he will soon lose this attitude 'cause he's getting on my nerves and I don't react well when I get too close to the edge.
- I know, Amitiel said distractedly. He paused a little letting silence say more about his errand mind than words can describe. Hey, I have some news for you, Amy! he proceeded. I asked the professor if it was okay for you to participate at the weekly manager's meetings and he said yes. It's every Monday morning, at seven.
- You mean like an assistant?
- Something like that, yes, Amitiel responded then returned to his absent watch out the window.

The trees were lining for a short parade of green leaves worn by audacious branches seeming to be still in their stand-up facing the wind. At the speed of sixty miles per hour everything appeared to be standing still, in wait for the cars to pass by in a hurry, one by one leaving dust and the smell of burnt gas behind. It was a two hours drive in a mini-bus that had no air-conditioning. Apparently it broke that very morning, a thing Ramon interpreted as bad omen.

- I tell you guys, there is something wrong here. I mean how could the air-conditioning break? Just think about it!
- Oh, Ramon, you're just impressed with the story you've been told, Laura mitigated. Yes, you guessed well, Amitiel decided to tell the *news* about the guest house being haunted and he did that before they jumped into the bus. - *Why didn't you say anything about these rumours before?* Lisa scorned. - *I had no proof. Well, I still have no other proof than the words of a couple of locals and a testimony in the guest-book the guest-house keeps.* Amitiel defended himself. *The others were pretty elusive statements that led nowhere.* - *I believe you did a pretty good job searching through all the guests in the book! I mean, you must have read a lot of interesting things there.* Laura stated. - No,

not really, Amitiel replied. *Nothing interesting or out of the ordinary except for this testimony I spoke you about, which can be helpful to our mission. At least now we have an interesting story to tell to the public.* - You bet we do, Garry's viral joy lit the spirits like candles grouped together in a bus station near the Crown Restaurant and the Ruby Park. Ramon though, was not that excited to learn about the possibility of him visiting a haunted place.

- What are you afraid of? Troy, a thin but not very tall young man asked.

- Yes, what's the problem, Ramon? Garry, the stumpy cheerful member of the group chipped in.

- Nothing... I just don't like haunted places, that's all.

- Oh, give me a break! Dean threw his hands in the air in exasperation. Don't tell me you believe in this ghost-haunting story! It's only a couple of rats rummaging for food, messing with the things tossed into the basement of an old house, stirring into people's imagination, that's all. You shouldn't encourage them to start believing in such things, Amitiel! For God's sake, you are the manager of this team now!

- Who said anything about encouraging anyone to believe the place was haunted? Amy protested obviously annoyed by Dean's attitude. Did you guys feel that Amitiel was trying to...

- No, Laura's answer cut through before Amy could finish her sentence.

Seeing that there was room for him to stand-up for himself, Amitiel started:

- I was not trying to make anyone believe any of the stories circulating about the guest house or the teacher's house, where there were a few ideas of the kind scattered. The place went through some bad times, true, but that's all. People sometimes imagine things based on events that might have seemed abnormal or mysterious, like the death of Mr. Lauren who kept writing short *good-bye* notes every night for a while. The paranormal was a fancy of those times, also a way to attract more tourists.

- Well, it seems that it chased them away, instead, Lisa, a cheering petite brunette reminding of snow white intervened. Didn't the guest-house stopped its activity ten years ago?

- It's back on business, Amitiel clarified. The owners restored it last year and thrive on the business now. The same thing, though, cannot be said about the orphanage-pension and the house next to it. The new owners of that place are not showing any interest in doing something about the two buildings which are, by the way, two architectural jewels.

- They are, aren't they? Dean said with a pensive visage, a little frustration colouring his voice.

The bus left them fifteen minutes of walk into the village to the orphanage. Our students were quiet, each of the heads in the group having thoughts of their own wandering by in their minds. Amy thought it was a good quiet time to observe the surroundings; soon though, she realised there was not much to see. The village was quite a forgotten in time place, with old houses still inhabited and derelict places where one would expect ghosts to make a battle-camp against living strangers. They all walked in line, following Amitiel, a solemn silence possessing the eleven souls heading towards Lauren's Mansion.

- Is that what I think it is? Amy glanced back at Amitiel after squinting the surrounding hills.

- What? The house up on the hill? Yes, it's the guest-house.

- Wow. It looks pretty big!

- It is a large place, Dean elucidated. They seem to have done a nice job restoring it.

I'm only sorry it was not among our projects.

- We could step by, Garry suggested. I mean, if everybody is okay with the idea.

- This is a great idea, Laura jolted a happy smile on her face.

- Yes, let's do it, Ramon said.

- Hey, Romeo, Dean interfered, we have no time to lose with projects that are not ours.

- But this is related to our project, Lisa protested. Besides, I want to take a look into the guest book myself! Did you take pictures?

- Not great ones!

- Luckily I carry my camera everywhere! Lisa winked, a wide smile adorning her oval pretty face.

- We'll go there to have a look, if you care so much, Amitiel decided, then we will get back to the village and head straight to the Lauren's Mansion.

-Alright! Garry started jumping around, dancing a strange dance that produced a wave of amusement among the rest of the group. Who's ma' man? Ami's ma' man! he cheered jocularly.

- I just love how the oriels turned out! Lisa expressed her deep admiration when they arrived to the guest house. She stopped and took a few pictures of the facade and oriels.

- It's a masterpiece, Dean said. They started studying the place with the air of prowlers on their way to produce panic. The place was unbelievably quiet - no trace of a human inhabiting the guest-house. After a round-about each on their own, they realised they had lost Ramon, Dinah and Laura. Garry proposed they got inside and ask for permission to visit the place - maybe they'd find the three inside, having coffee and biscuits. After all, it was tea time and the guest house was renowned for it's tea-parties!

Lisa and Dean decided it was a good idea to give it a try. The others didn't argue. They rang the door-bell but nobody answered.

- Strange. One would say it's deserted, Lisa observed.

- Well, we have to find them, Dean grumbled, don't just stay here people! Let's split and look for them.

- Maybe they decided to go into the woods. I saw wild strawberries going up on the hills and them picking some at the bottom, Miranda explained.

- They might have felt like going into the woods, Garry said, ...for God knows what reason, he added pensively.

- Or maybe they took ahead of us, going for the orphanage. Amy assumed.

- Now why would they do that? Dean smugly cut her words off. The place scares Ramon like cats chased by bulldogs and I cannot say that the girls were all too crazy about it either. Dinah was more than happy to change her occupation, preferring the tedious legal study instead of spending time around there. And Laura... oh, well... she's Laura; she might get a few ideas in her head but if she has nobody to support them she quits in "*tell me nothing of it*" time.

Amy flushed scarlet, the ruby tints hiding her five freckles her face started producing when the hot rays of April sun began to percolate the clouds scattering them white on the bluest bent canvas the planet had ever offered.

- "*Tell me nothing of it*"? Garry attacked. Now what is that supposed to mean?

- It could be that they went for strawberries but something else attracted them into the woods, Amitiel stepped in quickly, before the two boys got in some sort of a fight, or they decided to get inside the guest house... or round about a little further away. I don't think they took ahead of us. The place is no tourists attraction, he said with a weary look on his face, glancing back at Amy whose scarlet face was obstinately going

on with the same ruby shine. Let's try the inside of this house which is a little too quiet this time a day.

- On that we agree, Dean spoke his nose in the wind, proud of himself for some mysterious reason.

They rang the bell one more time also knocking at the door. Still no answer came from the other end.

- I say Dean's right. Let's split and look around, Garry said.

- Maybe they got inside by using the back door, Amy mumbled.

Miranda heard Amy's words as she was close enough and headed towards the back of the house.

- Hey, guys! You might want to see this! Miranda announced. The boys rushed towards the backyard.

- Holy mother of God...! Troy started.

- By the tales and stories of my childhood, Garry spoke mouth in agape.

All of them crowded to the garden in the back of the house where they could see a great hole in which a bright blue light was shining, shifting through greens and blues at precise pulsating moments. The back door of the house was wide open squeaking in the wind. They all gathered around the great hole carefully watching every movement or sound. There was a little tremble of the earth around and down under their feet and they could feel it percolating their bodies, frightening their beings. As they approached, a morose groan could be heard coming from inside the hole. A few squeals were pervading the shining walls of the hole from time to time then the groan again, putting them to silence. Looking down inside the hole they could see its center streaming a white light which's coldness was warmed only by the few little light lemon-green pulsations every now and then. The tremble seemed to be stronger in the proximity of this hole. Attracted by the constant roar coming from the hole Miranda looked deep down into it. Yuri and Garry did the same. Following their example, Dean followed. Amy watched each of them then looked into the hole as well. The others kept the distance at Amitiel's protective gesture.

- Don't get too close, he advised.

From within the hole a fresh air started blowing up to the faces looking down at the spiral of what appeared to be white shadows climbing towards the world of the living. A deformed face yelling without a voice appeared in front of Dean who was grabbed and pulled back by his collar. Garry played the hero here, having the presence to withdraw himself from the magnetising spell making them look deeper into the hole. Yuri made a few steps back too, Miranda being the only one who seemed to enjoy what she was witnessing. Mouth in agape, Amy was looking at Miranda with a dose of admiration. In no time she connected with the power of the spirit possessing this beautiful mysterious girl. Miranda's dark-blue eyes turned white with a light coming from within, the darkest hair strained by waves of energy and blows of wind. Her most perfect olive skin, the body of a model and the face of an angel, were whitening with each spark of energy, the new girl becoming now even more pretty than before; knowing that it was not the proper time for studying competition of any kind, Amy flushed at her faint sentiment of jealousy. She always wished to be as pretty as this kind of a girl but the feeling was with such intensity felt here for the first time. She felt embarrassed and confused - *Why now and why with such power over me?*

- Don't get any closer! Amitiel warned as the sight of Miranda watching deep into the hole, getting more and more beautiful, continued emanating strength, inspiring them to give it one more try and look into the depths of the chasm.

- Everyone, get slowly back! Amitiel yelled but the others, except for Amy, didn't seem to hear him at all. The roar was growing stronger, the tremble of the earth underneath their feet taking over the rhythm of their blood flows. They all watched inside the hole one more time, a tempest of white souls whispering words they could not hear as cold squeals were climbing down their frozen spines. It was frightful and dangerous a situation, still, they felt attracted to the vibrating depths of this underworld. A high-pitched creak smashed the film-spell produced and everyone looked at the back-door.

- Aye! a rusty voice grunted. What are ye doing here!

A weedy old man was standing near the swinging door a rifle in his hands. Everybody paled with the shock of seeing themselves at the danger of being shot.

- We mean no harm, Mr. ... Amy started.

- We come in peace, Amitiel proceeded. We are students who work for professor Forscher.

- Are you the new owner of this place? Amy heard herself asking.

- Neigh! I'm just a guardian! the man replied. What is your business here? he asked in a rough tone.

- We are working on the restoration of the Lauren's Mansion, you know, the large deserted orphanage down in the village, Amitiel provided.

- Ye mean that bloody haunted place! the man interjected.

- Yes, that! Amitiel said glancing back quickly at the others to see where they were as the roar of the hole in the ground stopped. Amy glanced back too and gladly observed that the hole had disappeared. But so had Miranda which was alarming. *I wonder if Amitiel noticed her disappearance.* She kept looking around see if anybody else was missing. Nope. It was only Miranda. *God, what could have happened to her?*

- So, if ye have business ta do at the hoonted Mansion why are ye here? the man's shrill voice cut through.

- We lost our friends, Amitiel proceeded. Three of us are missing and we thought they might be inside the guest-house.

- Ye mean a boy and two girls?

- Yes... did you see them?

- Aye! They're inside.

They all looked around as if inviting someone to make the first step then all eyes stopped on Amitiel. He stepped forward as he advised:

- Watch your steps!

They all carefully shun the place where the great hole was, some of them still in shock by what they'd just experienced. They entered the place one by one watching it round as if they were expecting something bad to come from a dark corner of the hallway.

- Aye, yer friends are here, don't ye worry. Ei! he started in a high-pitched tone. Yer friends are here ta rescue ye! he chuckled then coughed. Ei! where are ye?! Them bloody kids! I told them not ta move!

- Has anyone seen Miranda? Amy asked.

- No, Garry whispered his answer.

- Miranda? Oh, God, I almost forgot about her! Lisa jolted.

- Do you think that the hole devoured her? Yuri asked in a low whispery tone.

A whimsical smile was possessing the old man's face as he turned around and reassured:

- We'll find them, don't ye worry! They must be hiding or somethin' ... ye should have seen the looks on their faces when ah showed them mah gun! he chuckled. Ei, he shrilled. Yer friends are here! Come oout!

They searched in every room but could not find them.

- Are you sure they were here? Lisa started.

- Are ye calling me a liar, lass?

- What did you call me? Lisa rasped.

- He called you *girl* Amy intervened.

- Oh...

- I wouldn't get too edgy and cranky around a guy with a rifle! Amy whispered to Lisa.

- You're probably right, Lisa whispered back, but I'm not going to let anyone talk to me in just any way they like.

- Well, he didn't mean to offend you,... I guess, Amy responded not sure yet of the scoffing tone in the old man's voice.

They kept on looking for their friends in every room of the house. Amy found some space to slick right next to Amitiel and ask him about Miranda.

- Did you happen to see what happened to her?

- I saw no more than you did.

- Where could she be? Do you think she was taken down there?

- I don't know, Amy, Amitiel answered. You should think about our three friends here, hiding away. Don't worry about Miranda. Something tells me she is doing just fine.

- How could you possibly know that for sure?

- I don't know it for sure, I'm just saying that whatever might have happened there it was not something to put her down. She is much stronger than the rest of ...us. She'll be fine. We'll look for her after we find our friends hiding somewhere around here.

Amitiel's answer disconcerted her. She knew him as a very kind and caring, protective person. His attitude facing this problem right now was too loose compared to the image on his character she'd created in her mind. What was going on? Why was suddenly Miranda less important than the other three members in the group. Something was odd and she had to know exactly what was actually going on.

The bony face of the old man was looking back at the group of students revealing slight disappointment. Jaundiced by the evening sunlight pervading the clerestory holes, his expression vaguely chipper, he was as dreadful an appearance as amusing.

- Well, ye looked everywhere for yer pesky little friends, the man spoke his rifle still in his hands. Ah told them not ta move aroound too much. Who knows? Maybe the hole ate them alive like it happened ta that pretty face ye forgot about.

- We didn't forget about her, Dean retorted.

- So, you noticed, Amy asked addressing to the old guardian.

- What, the hole? the rasping voice of the old man scoffed. They appear and disappear all the time here, lately. Ah had one right there in the living room, last month.

- You said last month? Amitiel started. What were you doing here, last month?

- I told ye, I am a guardian here. They dinae' open this house for guests yet.

- That is odd, Amitiel followed. They should have opened it by now.

- Boot they didn't, the man cut it short.

- You say that these portals are appearing and disappearing around here for a while? Amitiel asked trying to get more information from the old man.

- Aye.

- Since when you've been around here?

- Ah told ye. A month. the man was beginning to show irritated with all the question-ing. Amitiel sensed his humour and finally changed the subject of his examination.

- Is there any other place in this house we haven't checked yet? A hidden door to a

secret chamber or a storage room?

- Ye dinae' check the basement! the man uttered.

Yuri and Dean immediately reacted, turning around to check for the door leading to the basement.

-Aye!! the man warned. Ye can't get in there all alone. Ye might be swallowed by a hole! Besides, it is not allowed ta *visit* the basement.

- Why? Are you afraid of being robbed of rats? Dean impertinently chaffed.

The man frowned and said no word tightening his grip on the rifle, his arms' muscles tense. The students felt a frosty breeze blowing over their skins, goose bumps and chilli breaths upon their napes and down their spines keeping them in place.

- We would like to be shown the basement too, sir, Amitiel said in a calm tone.

- Ye really have some nerve, kid! the man groaned back at Dean. Follow me, he said to Amitiel. The others, stay here and dinae' move yer carcasses! he ordered.

Amy didn't feel like being left alone with the rest of the group so she carefully squeezed past the gathering following the two at a safe distance. The man looked over his shoulder and frowned but said nothing. Amy's eyes were begging him to allow her follow them into the basement.

- *No word about all this, okay?* Dean's voice could be heard fading away up and down the hall as they descended the stairs taking to the basement. The deeper they climbed the darker the place. Suddenly the man raised his left arm as a sign for them to stop. At the end of the stairs, squinting eyes carefully, Amitiel and Amy could see a door swung open.

- There's somebody doown there, the man whispered. Ah didn't let the door open!

As his ear caught a flip of draught in the air, Amitiel looked over his shoulder and observed Amy.

- What are you doing here? he whispered.

- I had to come, she said flimsily.

- You should have stayed up there, he raised an eyebrow to point to the living-room above them, keep an eye on them so they didn't move around and disappear God knows where, like the ones we're looking for.

- And what do you think that I could have done in case anything happened? I have no authority over them!

- Alright... he surrendered to the funny childish stubbornness of the girl. Be careful around here!

- You said that what we witnessed earlier, I mean the hole, that was a portal...?

- Not now, Amy, he replied his index on his lip as a sign to be silent. A couple of steps later he promised: I will explain it to you later. Right now we have to see how we'll deal with this guardian, here, okay?

- Okay... Amy whispered as if for herself. The man waved his left arm in sign that it was okay for them to move down the stairs and follow him. They entered the basement where there was no trace of light, watching carefully each of their steps, their eyes desperately looking to adjust to the darkness. A smell of smoked ham pervaded their senses. Short peeps were giving notice of a family of birds nested down there, which was odd. Birds don't nest in basements. Mice do. Maybe it was the sound made by mice and they didn't know. - Watch the birds! Amitiel said. They might attack you if they feel their chicks are in any danger. - What are birds doing down here? Aren't they supposed to nest in attics? she whispered with slight exasperation in her voice. - Not these birds, no, Amitiel said. - What kind of birds nest in basements? Amy protested once more as if for herself before the old man found a lantern to light his way to the commutator to

switch on the light.

- Ei, kids! Come oout! Ah will not hurt ye! Ye need ta get oout! Yer friends came after ye! Ei!!

He went for each door, opening them to glance inside and see if there was anybody hiding in any of the storage-rooms then shutting doors closed - there was nobody there. Just when he was about to open the last door a portal opened right under their feet. All there of them jolted and jumped to three of the corners of the large basement room.

- Oi! a voice came from within the portal. You be more careful and watch your steps, see where you go and whom you disturb! The voice echoed in Ami's being with such power that her heart pounds started reverberating in every cell of her torso, trembling in low wiggling musical notes. She couldn't make anything of it - in the beginning she thought she was dead meat and now was the time her fate was decided. Where will she go? to Heaven or Hell? Catching her breath she managed to recompose herself just in time to see the dark silhouette of a tall man rising from the hole-portal in the basement floor. He was standing on a piece of ground looking like a cliff flipped out the flat surface up, his eyes glittering out the pale light coming from the depths of the hole. The same roar witnessed earlier in the garden was possessing the depths of this portal, the same cold flashing lights switching between shades of light greens and blues. He was brought by the piece of ground to the edge of the portal-hole facing Amitiel and Amy. Right when his foot paced on the edges grounds the old man's rifle discharged. Amitiel jumped over Amy pushing her out of the range of the gunshot. The bullet went through the tall silhouette that started crumbling in front of them. Then the tall man recomposed himself in front of their eyes.

- Now why did you have to do that, Carrden?

- Aedan! the man spit in spite. Can't say ah missed ye! Now why are ye coming like tis ta startle mah friends here?

- You friends, pff! the tall man named Aedan replied scornfully. I come in peace! It is you the one who started the fire! he retorted.

- And missed, as always, the old man identified as Carrden said with disappointment in his voice. Ye need ta learn the few old good manners, Aedan! Dinae' yer mother teach ye ta announce when yer payin' a visit?

- Don't push it, Carrden! the other menaced unsheathing his sword.

- Great, Carrden rolled his eyes frowning back at Aedan. Are ye goin' ta slice me wit' yer light-sword? the old man sneered.

- I didn't come here for you, Carrden! I came to learn why *she* was sent to our world, Aedan said opening a small mirror-portal that was showing Miranda taking control over a demon's fight. He then turned to Amitiel and Amy.

- Wow! Amy flushed scarlet red. She's really good! A flip of admiration possessed her for the price of two seconds before coming back to the good old stinging jealousy making her feel inferior to Miranda. *What did she do to deserve such great qualities?* the thought flashed into her mind putting pressure on her temples. *And what the hell is wrong with me!?* I never had such thoughts and feelings towards anyone in my entire life! In all this time Amitiel protected Amy with his own body standing alert and ready for attack as if a warrior coming from ancient times, a portal expected to gape open for him, from where a weapon would be sent right into his hands.

- Don't move, Amy, he said to her gently, touching her lips with his index finger. And don't say a word. Just stay behind me, he continued whispering, and everything will be alright! Amy blushed then paled. Another portal might have opened right next to her to engulf her as it did with Miranda if Amitiel hadn't started to shine brightly, turning

himself into an angel of light, thrusting a few frightening ghosts and protecting the girl with an invisible energy field. Amy, blinded by the light, began feeling nauseous, her stomach burning as if she had swallowed or produced a tiny sparkling star. The warmth in her stomach growing, she began loosing her nausea being now able to stand straight up on her feet. Flustered by the light of angels she kept looking for some wall to prop herself. Not being able to see a thing, her left arm draping over her eyes, head turned towards the ground, she concentrated on her sense of hearing to learn what was going on.

- So, you finally decided to show your real self, Amitiel! Aedan spoke. What's with you and this world that keeps you so close to them?

- Leave us alone, Aedan! We didn't sent Miranda there. It is your world that took her from ours.

- No, no, no! We do not look for brave strong girls like her who know how to defend themselves! the other one said in a lofty tone. We look for innocent fragile things like your friend hiding there, behind you, like a rat, he scoffed spitting the words with a touch of spite. It is the soul of a frightened girl like the one you're defending now that the famished souls of our shadows-land can feed upon!

- A soul like hers cannot be food for any of the poor lost down there, you should know better! Amitiel retorted.

- Why are you defending her!? What's in there for you, Amitiel?

- Go back from where you came or die by my sword's blade! Amitiel launched.

- As I said, I do not come in terms of war. I do not want to fight today! Our wars died with our times, long lost and forgotten, Aedan said in a conciliatory yet still scoffing tone. I just want you to get that girl, Miranda, back to this world you love so much, alright? he said using a sugary voice.

- On that we agree, Amitiel said.

- ... off my back! Aedan pursued changing his voice, using a brutal tone while spiting thunders out his eyes. She doesn't belong to our world even if she is a damn good warrior!

- And how do you suggest we brought her back? Amitiel asked.

- I don't care how but get it done! the other one rasped. You go after her and take her back to your world. Your friend, Carrden here might help!

- You said she was found fighting in Shadows Land? Where exactly?

- Yes... a few demons escaped with the help of Auria and Miranda got in the middle soon. She's in Alba3.

- I can see why you're mad, Amitiel bantered. Why did Auria do such a thing?

- I don't know, Amitiel, and frankly, I don't give a damn! The woman is mad! She's seeking for revenge even there where there's no need for any!

- Is she? Amitiel wondered. That doesn't sound good!

- It isn't. There's nothing good about this story... nothing good in the world of shadows... but at least it's safer than the underworld!

- If demons got ta Shadows Land it can't be mooch better! Carrden spoke.

- You have three days to get your friend back to your world. If you don't I'll sentence her and the other three little scared rats to the eternal death! I'll come after them! Perdition is what awaits all of them!

- The what? Amy gushed out outraged by what she was hearing.

- Where are the other three? Amitiel asked.

- They are somewhere safe, sleeping after having a generous meal, Aedan mocked. They're hiding like rats behind that door, he said scornfully pointing the door Carrden

was about to open when the portal appeared. Now go get your plan done and take off my wing that bloody human-girl agitating the World of Shadows! The girl, he added pointing at Amy, might be of help! Three days! he said firmly disappearing with the two portals. The bright light coming from within Amitiel's body started fading away. Amy could see now, through her lashes, how the hole in the basement floor was getting smaller, fading away.

- Are you okay? Amitiel asked her. She felt less frightened, now that the hole in the floor disappeared with Aedan but couldn't move or speak a word. Bewildered by the whole situation she kept looking at Amitiel with widened eyes, mouth in agape.

- Come, let's get back up in the living-room, he decided.

- Aye! Ye forgot about the three friends of yours! Carrden groaned. From behind the door they hadn't opened the voice of a girl was heard calling for help! - *Hello! Hello! Is there anybody there? Amitiel! Is that you?!*

- It sounds like Dinah! Amitiel said.

The girl pounded the door with her fists then tried to force the latch with no success. Carrden tried to open it and set them free but the door was locked.

- Tis is strange! the old man said. Ah dinae' lock any of these doors!

- Dinah, is that you?

- *Yes, it's me!* the voice behind the door answered.

- Are Ramon and Laura with you?

- *Yes, they're here, with me?* she confirmed.

- Where is the key to this door? Amitiel asked Carrden.

- I have no knowledge of such ah key. None of the doors down here were ever locked.

Boot I can look for it on the ring of spare keys left by the land-lord.

- Okay, do that, he asked Carrden, the old guardian, then returned to Dinah: - Don't worry. We'll get you out of there!

- *Okay...* the voice tempered.

- *Really, Ramon! How can you eat?* Laura's voice was heard a second later, scorning from behind the door.

- *I'm sorry, I can't help it! I'm hungry,* the young man spoke mouth-full.

Amy could see the girls inside the room rolling their eyes in exasperation. She was close to having a good old laugh - it meant that she was strong a young woman - she was recomposing fast after the shocking encounter happening earlier.

- Are you an angel? she heard herself asking Amitiel with a sudden expression of awareness on her face.

- Something like that, Amitiel answered. Yes...

- What are you doing in our world? Are you on a mission? How come you never said anything about this?

- Relax, Amy. It is not the end of the world. At least not just yet, he smiled benevolently. I only have to help a few souls reach they highest potential.

- Am I on that list of souls? she asked doubtfully.

- Yes, you are, he simply confirmed.

- Is Miranda on the list too?

- She came as a surprise... I didn't expect her to pick our team. Sometimes, some souls make decisions that are unexpected, beyond our power of imagination. I couldn't see it coming until it hit us all back in the hall. I also had no knowledge of the opening of portals until I saw the first one yawned out there into the garden.

- First one for us! Amy corrected.

- Yes... first for us... Amitiel turned pensive for a brief moment then he abruptly re-

turned to earth. We have to go take the others out of here. Something is not right. They turned to climb the stairs to the living-room.

- So..., we will have to go rescue Miranda from the World of Shadows! Amy decided to break the silence as its clouds were starting to get heavy grey, suffocating her spirit.

- We? Amitiel raised an eyebrow showing disapproval.

- Don't you think I'll let you go down there alone! Amy chided.

- I suppose you know how to thrust demons? Amitiel scolded. Amy flushed with embarrassment. No, she did not have knowledge of such a thing but she couldn't let her friend down there alone.

- What is the World of Shadows?

- It's a place where souls that lost their path are sent, he responded.

- So... you prefer to go there all by yourself? she questioned.

- Carrden might agree to *escort* me, he chuckled perspiring mistrust in his own words.

- Have you ever went down there, in the World of Shadows?

- Once...

- Whom did you rescue from there?

- A man who worshiped his wife but who committed suicide...

- Are you talking about Mr. Laurean?

- Yes, I am! he confirmed. You're very quick! Good memory too! You paid attention to the story!

- Thanks. So, am I going to be allowed to help you? she winked like a child waiting to be granted permission for what she believed a great adventure.

- Oh, you'll help, don't you worry! But you'll help up here, not down there.

- But... but..., she stuttered.

- No *but's*, Amy! It is a dangerous place! Amitiel said tersely.

Amy flushed red. Feeling that it was useless to fight for her right to show to herself that she was as good as Miranda, she lamentably sighed acknowledging her defeat. They went back up into the living-room where the others were having a live discussion.

- It is not a matter of who did what to deserve this! Dean was explaining. It is a matter of survival. We are facing a paranormal issue here...

- Dean, Lisa interjected, we all know that! We were all there, in the garden when it happened.

- I wonder how Dinah's doing, Yuri sighed.

- Don't worry, we'll get her back, Troy reassured.

- Look, Garry intervened. We're all mature enough to handle this situation wisely. Let's just wait for Amitiel and Amy to come back from the basement and then we'll look into this new situation.

- What new situation? Amy asked.

- Guys, what happened? Yuri flapped.

- We heard bumps coming from down there? Lisa said wearily.

- It was Laura hitting a door. They got trapped in a storage room, Amitiel clarified.

- Oh, so that's what happened! Garry said with a new light in his eyes.

- Good, everybody, up on your feet, we're leaving soon, Dean flustered.

- Didn't you hear well? Lisa scolded. They're trapped!

- Besides, nobody knows what happened to Miranda, Troy added.

- Perhaps you didn't notice the trench formed around the house either, Yuri scorned, thunders flashing in his burning blue eyes. Suddenly Dean started to look small and frail, the colour on his already pale skin completely vanished. There was a trench around the house, alright; a bright-blue trench surrounded by a field of light-greens

fading into blues creating a shifting draught of ominous air.

- Great, Dean soliloquized, paper-pale after glancing out the window. Whispering as if for himself, his voice started letting him down as his knees weakened: - ... we're stuck here. He carefully moved away two steps backwards, bewildered by the whole situation, slowly sinking into the armchair next to the window behind him. Amy and Amitiel barged in to the window.

- Great, Amitiel said with a slight tremour in his voice, now we need somebody to stay here with you!

- Ah'll stay with yer friends, Carrden offered in a low penetrating voice. Ah wasn't in the mood for Shadows Land anyway! he cleared.

- What do you mean stay here with us!? Dean vexed. We're not children to baby-sit!

- I didn't mean you were... Amitiel defended. I was simply saying that...

- Wait a minute! If we are supposed to stay here then you must have some plans to go somewhere we were not invited to, right? Lisa scolded.

- Look, Lisa, guys... It's a little complicated. I will have to go and get Miranda back.

- Go where, Dean asked with a flinty expression on his face, two eyes thundering with rage.

- Down there, Amy elucidated her index pointing to the floor. It opened again, down into the basement, she explained then furtively glanced at Amitiel not knowing if it was okay to reveal to them everything that she witnessed.

- We were visited by a guardian from the World of Shadows and were asked to bring Miranda back to this world where she belongs to. For this return to happen somebody has to go down there, wake her real self up and convince her to come back.

- Convince her? Garry interjected. That...

- You made it sound as if she made herself comfortable there... Dean huffed.

- ... yeah, that! Garry added. As if she were at home... there... so, ... that is the World of Shadows, what we witnessed, he caught his breath a few seconds after plopping his broken conclusion. A moment of solemn silence followed. Garry decided to break it, intent on changing the spirits a little. So, let's make the group's and decide who stays here and who goes down there, for Miranda.

- There's nothing to decide, lad! Carrden abruptly interrupted. You stay here, the angel goes down there, he said pointing to Amitiel.

- Angel? Pff! Dean scornfully puffed.

All the others expressed astonishment, Lisa recomposing the fastest to ask for details:

- What do you mean, *the angel*?

- I mean exactly what I say, lass! Carrden proceeded. He is yer angel. Ye have no better option boot ta send him ta rescue yer friend!

- But we can't just let him go alone down there! Garry rushed into the conversation. God knows what expects him down..., he glanced at Amitiel furtively, into the World of Shadows!

- From what we experienced out there in the garden, Troy added, things aren't too nice!

- Angel or not, I am not going to let him go down there all by himself, Garry pruned. Amitiel smiled with a warm benevolent expression on his face.

- I'll be alright, Garry..., guys... Don't worry. I've been down there before. I know what to expect and how to deal with what's going on there!

- So, you knew all this but you trapped us all anyway, with your pesky little charms, Dean started thunderously.

- Stop it, Dean, Yuri stepped up angrily. He knew as much as we did about what hap-

pens here.

- How do you know, the other one maliciously replied. Didn't Dinah refuse to work with him for the tedious laws pursuit job?

- Dinah did what she considered more useful for her self improvement, Yuri retorted. Her choices of career are none of your business. Besides, she loved working with Amitiel but had to admit that she was ten times less passionate about the exploration than he was. It was time for her to choose what was right for herself.

- Guys, guys! Let's calm down a little, Garry intervened. Matters of tastes in work activities and career orientation are the last problem we have now. I mean, we are dealing with something paranormal, just think about it! Who would believe us if we mentioned this World of Shadows, who would believe it exists and that one of us got lost there! I still have problems admitting it myself! This whole story, I still can't believe it's even happening to us, right now. But, we have to recompose ourselves and do something about it. We lost three of our friends and a new member of the group to Shadows freakin' Land ... or whatever is called!

- They're trapped in ah storage room, Carrden cleared. They're alright boot a little frightened, yer three pesky little friends ah asked not ta move. They deserved it for not listening ta me!

- Can't you release them? Lisa asked.

- Ah dinae' have the key ta the door!

- Use a hammer to break the lock, for crying out loud! Garry offered his solution.

- Or yer pesky gun, Dean mocked.

- Ah bullet of tis goon might hurt yer friends locked down there. The space is tight. Ye're not that smart a boy as ye like ta think yerself! Carden bantered. Dean puffed in clear contempt refusing to say another word, his head turned back to glance out the window, his eyes solely pensively flickering his inner light out. He was filled with rage and desire to conquer.

- Aye! Carrden alerted, Ye can't go down there alone! he turned around to face Amitiel. Ye might want ta take yer friend there by the window with ye! His rage could be of use ta ye down there! 'asides, I believe he could use ah good lesson!

- You mean Dean? Garry objected. As I see things now he would only cause trouble to us and our friend. If he goes down there, I go too.

- And I, Amy courageously stepped up.

- You might need an extra male helping hand, Yuri timidly offered.

- No, Yuri, Troy said. Dinah is down there worrying both for herself and for us here. Letting her know you went down there would worry her sick!

- Ah'll go look for the hammer while you kids decide what ta do.

- Nobody goes anywhere until we established some rules, Amitiel said firmly.

- I'll come with you, Dean said calmly, the thunders in his eyes under control. I won't let anyone take away a member of my team, that is for sure!

- Really, your team? Garry started.

- There is no time for this, Garry, Amitiel scolded. Please, he changed his tone into a gentle caring one. We need to stick together and work like a real team. Dean is as much of a leader as I am, if not a better one. I just happened to be luckier and work with a couple of managers during this school year. I learned a few things from them and that helped me with the test, that's all. Dean has the same qualities he needs to improve on. He obviously cares about everybody in this team, so, let's decide who goes down there, in the World of Shadows, and who stays here to keep an eye over this place and these portals appearing and disappearing every now and then. We need someone to be here

and handle the situation as much as we need to go down there for Miranda.

- What are your solutions for the ones staying here, Dean said chin tilting up smugly.
- Well, first of all, they'll have to listen to Carrden. He knows what he is dealing with. Then they will have to announce us, the ones down there if anything changes be it good or bad. Prepare yourselves for a heavy night, my friends, he said rounding about his look to check all their faces. Lisa and Yuri were pale with worry. Amy had put on a brave face flushing red when his eyes turned to her. Troy and Dean shared a flinty expression. Garry was possessed by a lucid state of mind.
- So, you have a name! Lisa looked up at Carrden, her petite allure not standing in the way of her courage.
- Nice ta meet ye! the old man scoffed then cauged.
- Alright, team, Amitiel started. Garry, since you were always so eager to help me with my mission I'll depute you to watch over the ones remaining here.
- Oh, man! You must be joking me! Garry crossed arms.
- It is not a joke, Garry. You will have to report me everything, and I mean everything. You'll be in charge here.
- Why can't Dean remain here!? He is the one who always wanted to be in charge and rule over everybody!
- You prick, Dean thundered from the lightened corner of the room.
- What did you just call me? Garry flushed scarlet red with anger.
- If you guys keep things going on like this we'll lose precious time and energy that could be used for our purposes to get our friends back! Amy yelled some sense of respect in them.
- You're right, Garry promptly apologised. Let's just get on with it!
- Garry, you take this! Amitiel said handing a pocket watch to his friend. Garry opened it to discover that it was not only a pocket watch but a compass to, a piece also hiding a mirror inside. It will help you establish and maintain the connection with us.
- Are ye done? the ragged voice of Carrden pervaded the room. Ah found some old rusty key that might open the door. Also got ah hammer. Are ye oop for it? he asked blinking at Yuri. Come on, lad! We shall get yer sister outta there soon!
- You may follow Carrden into the basement, Yuri. Amitiel said. But be very cautious. It seems that portals open everywhere and we have no clue why is that happening.
- Maybe it's because of girls like Miranda, Amy said.
- That could be true, Amitiel agreed, but then that means the World of Shadows is under some sort of demon's attack which prompted Auria into seeking the soldiers to fight.
- Is Auria like a ruler over Shadows Land? Amy asked.
- Yes, she is and a pretty good one. Under her command the World of Shadows was kept safely away from humans' land for centuries.
- Until now, Dean completed.
- Yes, until now... and we also have to find out why, Amitiel announced.
- Good luck with that, Dean spat back. I'll help you bring Miranda home, that's all. I want all my team members safely away from any of your Shadow God damned worlds or lands or whatever you call them! ...'Want nothing to do with your other missions!
- Cut it off, Dean! Amy harshly interjected. There is no time for fights for territories! The matters are serious. As Aedan said earlier, we must focus on bringing back Miranda which appears to be a hard task to complete.
- Aedan? Who's Aedan? Garry asked. Dean raised an eyebrow turning his head around, his eyes asking Amitiel the same question.

- He is a guardian of an area in the World of Shadows. Apparently Miranda is giving him headaches since she's fighting his demons and shadows there.
- His demons? the others dazzled.
- Yes... it's a long story and we don't have time for this. I'll explain it to you after we get out of this situation, Amitiel promised.
- Okay, then, let's see who stays here and who follows you into the World of Shadows, Amy took over. Amitiel was about to start saying something when she decided to take another chance: - You might need a girl down there, into this World of Shadows to help you convince Miranda come back. I mean, I can understand her a little, I'd jump and kill demons like she did if I were there but I also think I know how to help her come back to her human senses.
- Okay, Amy, Amitiel sighed, I'll take you with me down there but you must follow all my instructions, okay?
- I will, Amy said with restrained excitement.
- Dean, if you feel like being bossed around by me you're welcome to join us. Dean said nothing but rolled his eyes in exasperation. Well? Amitiel was expecting an answer.
- I said I'll go! Dean tersely responded.
- Okay, Let's wait until our fettered friends come out of the basement, Troy pursued, and decide then who stays and who goes.
- There's nothing to decide! Amitiel cut it short, rather harshly, handing to Amy and Dean each a compass-watch. The rest of you will stay here. This is not a journey with touristic attractions. From bellow the floor they could hear the blows of the hammer breaking the lock. Apparently the old rusty key was useless. A couple of minutes later, Laura, Dinah and Ramon were up in the living-room.
- Okay, Dean started catching a fleeting glimpse at his fellow-mates in the room. I believe that it is time for us to take off.
- We can't, Ramon warned. The demon that trapped us in the basement said there is no way for us to escape this place anymore.
- A demon? Lisa started.
- Garry, will you explain to them what all this is about, Dean waved a hand dismissively.
- That must have been Aedan, Amitiel clarified. He is not a demon but a guardian of a specific region in the World of Shadows, named Alba3.
- The World of Shadows? Ramon inquired. You mean that hole down there ...?
- Yes, Ramon. That would be a portal to the World of Shadows, Amitiel informed in a calm tone. We will have to go and recover Miranda from there.
- Oh, I'm not going anywhere! Ramon started, a shrill of fright coming out his mouth, his chest pounding hard.
- Don't worry! You were not invited, Dean adressed contemptuously as he walked passed him, his pert nose piercing the air with pride.
- Ye'll soon lose that attitude, lad! Carrden chuckled mockingly. Ye dinnae know what awaits ye down there, ye proud little pesky prick, he said then spat a bullet into the floor. A pathetic squeal was heard reaching abruptly the point of eternal silence. Damn rats! He clarified.
- Dean, Amy...? Amitiel announced, let's go.
- Out there? Dean asked his eyes pointing to the portal surrounding the guest-house.
- Yes, Amitiel nodded then sighed. Down that portal.
- Good luck, guys, Laura said eyes teared with worry. The three headed to the back door quietly.

- You do as I say and everything will be alright, Amitiel reminded his two fellow-companions.

- It is you the angel, Dean said with a slight touch of spite in his voice.
- We'll do as we're told, Amy reassured.
- Just let's get on with this, Dean closed.

The surroundings of the portal were becoming more and more restless as feverish ghosts were climbing up from the sea of tormented souls' remains then plunging back down into the hollow space. It was as if they were trying to say something that couldn't be heard, showing sounds that were extraneous, at times seeming wild and lost. As the winds of the portal were blowing frosted air into their faces ominously, Amitiel became more and more tall, the light within him showing bright and strong.

- You keep yourselves attached to my waist and to each other and don't let go! No matter what. You'd better keep your eyes closed too and take your breaths easily and slowly; don't panic if at times the wind blows too hard and the air is too cold to breathe... Just smoothly let it come to you. They tend to feel fear and surround the restless, gathering around them for abduction. Don't let that happen. If you're calm they won't be able to harm you in any way!

- Okay! Dean and Amy answered. They put their arms around Amitiel's waist and grabbed each others' arms tightly.

- Now, do not panic! A golden rope is going to wrap around us so it kept you firmly attached to me. Don't be scared! Let it do its job. Just when he finished the sentence a rope of golden light started slithering on their arms down to their bodies, tightening their bond with Amitiel. A large pair of wings made of light appeared on the back of their leader. Dean couldn't prevent the wave of admiration coming from within his inner self. - Here we go! He spread his wings and plunged into the sea of ghosts.

- What are these ghastly faces? Ghosts of the souls that passed?! Amy yelled her questions to Amitiel through the storm of cold-white faces expressing horror. As she finished her sentence a voice started to talk to her from within her own self. It wasn't hers but Amitiel's warm and kind angelic voice: - Keep all your questions for later. Gather your forces and focus on your breath. Make it as calm as you can. You may call them ghosts, if you like but they are simple remnants of the feelings felt once by souls that got sentenced to eternal damnation. Most of them are harmless but they do have a ghastly way of haunting a human soul. They are used though, by some hungry demons to attract human souls into their world and trap them. If they happen to be too weak, they succeed in doing so; some of these empowered spirits are more hungry and thirsty for a connection with a living being than you would believe. So, do follow my earlier instructions and preserve your forces for what's to come down there, into the Shadows Land. She obediently closed her eyes and started sipping the air with slow continuous breaths, her chin into her chest waiting patiently for their landing. From time to time she felt voids gaping in her stomach as they were plunging into nothingness, her stomach brought then up to her heart, the heart up to her throat not knowing which one was pounding and which was numbly expecting the next bump-up. It was a good thing that she had no lunch or snack before. She opened her eyes a couple of times to check on their status but could see faces screaming in loud desperate silenced words that she could albeit read as grief. They were vicious and terrifying so she closed her eyes and focused on staying calm. One couldn't say how long it took to Amitiel to reach the safer zone but they could feel the winds tempered, whistling when they approached the grey lands of the World of Shadows.

RESTLESS FIGHTS I

Miranda was killing demons with the thirst of a victim that's been offered the chance for revenge. Possessed by the spirit of a great warrior she engaged into demon's fights the moment a sword was handed to her. In her human life she had never touched a sword unless it was a wooden toy to handle against the enemy squad on the playground. But that was years ago and things were as different now as legends told and written and theories on the creation of Earth can differ.

- She's been keeping it like this ever since she got here! Auria, the queen over the World of Shadows said. She's been indefatigably fighting against ghouls and demons without a word spoken to any of us. It's been more than twelve human hours, now, she should have felt tired yet she never showed any trace of fatigue.

- Who took her here and why? Amitiel asked.

- Under my command, Aife brought her here and Ulfred handed her the sword, Auria admitted. After that there was nothing more to do. It was as if she already knew. It was my request to gather our forces and unite as a team against the demons coming from the dark, attacking the poor lost souls that are peacefully trying to survive out here. Still, I didn't expect her to know what to do without a proper training, given the fact that she is just a human being who also lived in times of peace...

- So, you're innocent, Amitiel asked doubtfully.

- Innocent? Auria burst into a mocking laughter. Around here nobody is innocent. You should know better!

- Do you suspect that something went wrong during the escort? A demonic intervention, perhaps? Amitiel asked.

- It's something in between, Auria said. You see, I suspect a strong spirit got to her first. There is a rumour circulating for a while around here, saying that deep down into the Underworld the soul of a warrior who was trapped and tormented by demons grew stronger, turning into a demon himself, and killed his guardian then fought against as many demons he met, killing each and every one of them. But an army of demons formed to stop and trap him again. When they managed to corner him, he committed suicide, knowing that becoming a prisoner again was not an option thus liberating himself from the heavy chains of perdition. His soul vowed, though, revenge - before his departure he promised he would return under a different identity and punish all the demons for the suffering he endured. It is known that he fears death not and that he already possessed a couple of souls to his mission leading them to the relentless sort of fights Miranda is engaged into just now. For a second Amitiel seemed to have mused.

- Then you suspect this warrior got to her first, he resumed, before you took her down here.

- It is one possible explanation for her impressive skills and relentless dedication to the fight. Albeit, killing demons seems to give her the sense of control, more and more power rushing through her veins, she seems to enjoy these fights, a thing that is both good and dangerous. Warriors like this have their victims fight until exhaustion. Then they go for the next body to possess for their relentless fights.

- Don't you think that this is a bit unprincipled to use her like that, for your purposes? Amy asked.

- Well, it is either this or the free-way down to the underworld, Auria said raising a sardonic eyebrow.

- You mean hell? Dean said putting up a flinty expression.

- Yes, you call it hell, Auria grinned, which can be that - a place, if you want.

- To us, Amitiel followed, hell is nothing but a state of mind. In the world of humans all the individuals go through stages of heaven as well as hell and take them as they can, fighting for what they believe in. It is the case with every soul, be it in that place named heaven or down in hell - as long as they are feeling good with themselves and what they do it doesn't really matter where they are. It starts to matter when there is discontent, discomfort or even rage. And that, my friends can happen anywhere. Just name your injustice and see who reacts well and what does *well* mean. Take demons for example: when they make somebody else suffer they enjoy it so much that it doesn't matter if they were hurt at their turn - it's heaven for them, they enjoy it. Sometimes they even look for ways for themselves to get hurt knowing that this will bring more sorrow and pain to another being. It is only when they know they had failed completely that they become upset and truly suffer.

- Amitiel, dear, Auria pursued after a short pause, I suspect you came here to save your human-friend Miranda and not this World of Shadows, confronting with distress nowadays.

- I am ready to take her place and help you thrust demons off your way. I'd be more than glad to send them back to where they belong, Amitiel answered.

- I advise you took your friends to see Triton and Torsten, she followed. They will provide each with the proper sword and the proper training. You will also need Varian and Trina as guides to their dwellings and back. They both live in perfect isolation, Triton and Torsten, protected by their druid friend Menw who will show you what the power of a magic sword can do on these lands.

- I will protect them, Auria.

- No offense to you and your powers, Amitiel. I know that you have been invested with great traits and an unmatched force but your friends haven't and they can become a burden to you at any time here. It is better to have them trained and protected. Don't worry, their souls will be set free once you completed the task.

- I'd be more than honoured to receive training and guidance from your world, Dean said with reverence.

- I guess it would be nice to be able to defend ourselves, Amy said shifting glances from Dean to Amitiel to Auria and round again.

- What kind of bargain was that? Trading your services for Miranda's and trying to put us...? Dean scolded but was cut short.

- I wasn't trading anything, Amitiel interjected. You don't understand how dangerous a connection with this world is for you, that's all. I am here to protect your freedom, Dean, your human freedom, but if you want to trade it for super-powers around here, be my guest, Amitiel cut Dean's words harshly.

- Couldn't you purify us, after all this is done? Amy asked. Amitiel glowed in surprise. He didn't expect Amy to have such great faith in him.

- You're right, Amy. I might be able to help you with that after all this is over, he smiled.

- Good then, that's settled! We'll do everything we have to do to reestablish order around here then we'll get back to our world! Her voice sounded so innocently hopeful that Amitiel couldn't confine the warm wish to protect this child invading his being. It's going to be fine! he said.

- I a little puzzled. Auria didn't seem to be a friend of yours!

- She isn't, Amitiel answered tersely.

- What's in for her? Why would she help us? Amy asked with mistrust in the tone of her voice.

- As long as someone fights demons sending them back to the Underworld or killing them she is more than satisfied. She'll help anyone who'd help her regain her full domination over the World of Shadows. Unfortunately she made a few mistakes out of greed and now she's loosing grounds.

- How can a creature feel happy when they're hurt? Amy dazzled.

- They have a purpose, a reason to exist and their reason is chaos and destruction. Their purpose is to bring desperation and sorrow to every single creature they can get their stained with blood hands on.

- That is horrible, Amy concluded.

Varian was not in the mood for conversation. He was faithfully following Auria's instructions, quietly showing them the way, giving notice on possible dangers every now and then. For a considerable part of their trek they walked in a heavy silence broken by muffled squeals every now and then. A few shadows were agitating outside the building, on the streets and in the derelict parks of Alba1, where the many entities present there were simply shifting through walls and trees avoiding to hit anything in their way.

- Are they all body-less? I mean, these shadows! Amy muttered.

- They are new around here. They haven't got time to get used with their situation, Amitiel said in a low voice to Amy and Dean as he read a certain amount of confusion on their faces.

- They sometimes seem to behave like human bodies, she went on with her observations, other times they're simply passing over like... well... normal shadows.

- Those who are new in this form of existence usually keep their hopes-up, trying to think of a way back into the human world. You sometimes see them walk their chins dipped to their chests, determined to help themselves out of here.

- Is there any way out? Dean asked.

- They often receive a body in exchange for their services down here but most of them end-up being disappointed, like our friend Carrden, up there, Amitiel clarified.

- You mean the old man is a shadow? Dean shuddered.

- Yes, if we speak of the same Carrden I used to know! He spent quite a while as a shadow here. We could say that he is still nothing but the shadow of the ancient Celt he used to be. He used to live in the Blackstone Fortress of Abbadon, a territory he deserted in the quest for a better life out on the surface where the light of day could become his greatest companion. He lived alone for a while, in a dwelling created with his bare hands in the proximity of the Evergreen Forest. He engaged into hunting and saving the lost in the woods. One day, after helping the son of a noble man, he was invited to The Castle and offered a job as a personal guard of the twelve years old prince who needed guidance and training. Soon he proved himself much more useful to the king than anyone expected him to be and worthy he was of the titles he was invested with. He received a land of his own when he saved the young king's life in a battle with a wild beast, a bear he killed to offer the head and fur as trophies to his royal highness. But, with great possessions and noble titles came great trouble, jealousy nesting in some noble's souls eating them alive so, many tried to set him traps and make him fall into disgrace. Nevertheless, he remained the same loyal servant and couldn't be eliminated from the court provided lying and trickery used. After eventually losing his lands and titles to old tricks and traps, he returned to his humble dwelling where he found an old enemy from the Blackstone Fortress waiting for him. They fought and he won the fight, killing his enemy which brought thus more enemies to his way. One day, found on

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