

# ENTER THE FANDOM

EXCERPT SAMPLER



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SPRING 2021

Graphic Novels,  
Sci-Fi, and Fantasy  
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and Fangirl!

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Excerpt from *The Future Is Yours: A Novel*  
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Excerpt from *The Witch's Heart*  
© 2021 by Genevieve Gornichec

Excerpt from *Sleeping Beauties, Vol. 1* (Graphic Novel)  
© 2021 by Stephen King and Owen King; Adapted by Rio Youers; Illustrated by Alison Sampson

Excerpt from *The Memory Theater: A Novel*  
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Excerpt from *Malice: A Novel*  
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Excerpt from *Afterlift*  
© 2021 Written by Chip Zdarsky, Illustrated by Jason Loo, Colored by Paris Alleyne, Lettered by Aditya Bidikar

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THE  
FUTURE  
IS

YOURS

A NOVEL DAN FREY

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# CHAPTER 1

## EMAIL

From: Ben Boyce  
To: Ben Boyce, Adhvan Chaudry

My Dudes,  
IT WORKS! Seriously. You did it.

This is so weird—I'm sending this on Feb 28, 2022, knowing that I'll receive it (already DID receive it) on Feb 28, 2021. Pretty trippy, right?

So listen up, Past Ben . . . First of all, high-five! You were right to believe this whole time—in yourself, in Adhi, in all of it. Your dream of becoming the first Black CEO to launch a billion-dollar company is gonna come true . . . and I can say that with certainty, because for me, IT ALREADY DID.

And Adhi. Bro. You're the brilliance that makes it possible. I always said you'd do something to change the world and I was right. It's crazy—you're sitting across the room as I write this, but I still remember your face the day you read it. Pick up your jaw and keep reading.

Now, I know you're both about to flip out and start using the Prototype to look up everything you can, so lemme just save you a little suspense.

1: Stanford's season is gonna be terrible, so just detach

yourselves from that shitshow right away and save yourselves the heartache.

2: Stock tips—wise, yeah, of course, you **COULD** get into some foolproof investments today. But I promise you'll be better off not mucking around with all that, cause the main thing you gotta do is invest in your moth-erfuckin SELVES.

I just wanna take this moment to say: everything is gonna be fine. The Prototype works (obviously). And whatever happens, don't trip. Not about money or respect or prestige, any of it. Just pop that cork and enjoy the best shitty champagne of your life, I remember it well. From here on out—trust the process, enjoy the ride, and most of all, stick together.

Sincerely and eternally your friend,  
Ben from the future

## **EXCERPT FROM TRANSCRIPT OF CONGRESSIONAL HEARING — DECEMBER 1, 2021**

**SEN. GREG WALDEN (D-OR):** The Committees on the Judiciary and Commerce, Science, and Technology will come to order. We welcome everyone to today's hearing on the new commercial venture known as "The Future," and the potential legal, ethical, and policy ramifications of its technology.

Though not unprecedented, this hearing is a unique opportunity to anticipate and address serious social consequences of a new consumer technology. This legislative body has a history of playing distant catch-up to new innovation, as evidenced by last year's hearings about social media and privacy issues. The hope is that we can be ahead of the curve—especially in light of the recent whistleblower leak, which seems to suggest that this technology may pose an existential threat to our nation and our people.

**BOYCE:** Mr. Chairman, I object to characterizing it as—

**SEN. GREG WALDEN (D-OR):** You have not been invited to speak yet, Mr. Boyce. And regardless of your objections, we have seen data, from your own company, which many reputable scientists interpret to mean that we are on a course toward the obliteration of civilization as we know it, on a time horizon of less than two years. Now if that's not an existential threat—

**BOYCE:** I just think it's irresponsible to call it that, without proper consideration of all the factors.

**SEN. GREG WALDEN (D-OR):** Do not lecture me on *irresponsible*, Mr. Boyce. And if you will not adhere to parliamentary rules of decorum, you will be charged with Contempt. Understood?

**BOYCE:** . . . Understood.

**SEN. GREG WALDEN (D-OR):** Good. Now, the members of this body have called two witnesses, the founders of the company called The Future: Mr. Benjamin Boyce and Mr. Adhvan Chaudry. However, let the record show, at the time of this hearing, only Mr. Boyce has appeared before the committee. Mr. Boyce, can you answer for the absence of your colleague?

**BOYCE:** No, I cannot. And I'm worried. If Adhi's not here, clearly something is wrong, and it would be best if we can adjourn for now.

**SEN. GREG WALDEN (D-OR):** This is not a meeting held at your convenience. You are answering a subpoena before forty-four members of Congress. Since one of you has failed to appear, a warrant will be issued for the arrest of Mr. Chaudry, and he will be charged with Contempt of Congress. Now, if you wish to avoid similar charges, are you prepared to proceed with the hearing?

**BOYCE:** . . . Yes, sir. I would just like the record to reflect my request for postponement.

**SEN. GREG WALDEN (D-OR):** Duly noted, and we can all hope that at some point today, your co-founder will deign to join us. He is certainly earning his reputation for intellectual hubris.

**BOYCE:** I just want to point out, it's not really hubris if it's earned, is it? No offense or anything, but Adhi is smarter than anyone in this room.

**SEN. GREG WALDEN (D-OR):** That may be the case, Mr. Boyce. But this body is convened because trusting people who are ostensibly "smarter" has gotten us in quite a bit of trouble in the past. No doubt the data scientists at Cambridge Analytica were very proud of their intelligence, as were the eugenicists of a century ago.

**BOYCE:** Come on, is that really a fair comparison?

**SEN. GREG WALDEN (D-OR):** We are dealing with a technology that apparently has the potential to end the world as we know it. So excuse me if my comparisons offend, but it is well worth discussing how Mr. Chaudry's intelligence has created problems in the past.

## **ADHVAN CHAUDRY'S COLLEGE ADMISSIONS ESSAY**

Submitted January 12, 2012, to Stanford University

Education is bullshit.

I know it may be ill advised to say so in this particular forum, but I hope that Stanford recognizes rigor and rewards honesty. Allow me to explain how I reached this particular conclusion.

My parents came to this country shortly before I was born. They were seeking to escape the caste system of India. It had been formally abolished in 1950, but was, for practical purposes, still firmly in place twenty years ago. Since my parents were Shudras (poor laborers), they never had any hope of becoming Rajanyas (rich merchants). But they believed in America they could.

When they arrived in San Francisco, they tried their best. But they were frustrated to discover it is just as impossible to move up in the world here. Not only that, they learned that the Indian system had been preferable in a way—because no Shudra is ever made to feel *guilty* about being poor. It is their lot in life. But in America, poverty equates to failure. It is a source of deep and abiding shame.

So they pinned their hopes on me. They sacrificed and worked

long hours. They instilled the value of hard work in the hope that I would go to a great college and win for myself a job better than either of them had the privilege of having. They saw education as the way out.

However, from my experience in the academic world so far, I have seen that it is all a facade. A rigged game. A system of smoke and mirrors, to separate the wheat from the chaff, and perpetuate an oligarchic system that rewards privilege generation after generation, just as much as the caste system did. At the “prestigious” prep school that I attend (on a full academic scholarship), the vast majority of my fellow students are from wealthy families. And cheating is rampant among my peers. Most parents are complicit in a system that values perfect grades, test scores, and a robust résumé of activities . . . but does not give a damn about integrity.

We are admonished to be scholars and gentlemen “at all times,” and students are threatened with expulsion for their conduct on the weekend. Of course, when our school president’s son (one of my classmates) got so drunk at a school basketball game that he stumbled onto the court and vomited on the foul line, he was merely given detention, and the incident was swept under the rug.

With all this said, you are probably wondering—does this kid even want to attend Stanford? And the answer for me is unequivocally yes.

I know that my low opinion of education will always sound like an excuse, unless it is backed up with experience. I know my earning potential will be bolstered by the diplomas, even if they don’t mean a thing. I intend to get the best schooling I can get, all the way through a PhD, so I can assert with utter confidence that education, top to bottom, is total fucking bullshit.

## **EXCERPT FROM CONGRESSIONAL HEARING — DECEMBER 1, 2021**

**REP. CORINNE SOTHEBY (R-NE):** Mr. Boyce, I’d like to discuss the origins of your connection to Mr. Chaudry. I understand that you met in college.

**BOYCE:** Yeah, that's right. Freshman year. Well, Adhi was actually a year older than everyone, but he still had to come in as a freshman. He'd been rejected by Stanford his first time applying, believe it or not. Even though he had perfect grades, SATs, all of it, they turned him down. Because of his essay, supposedly. Which really just means, he didn't know how to play the game, how to tell people what they want to hear.

So he did a year at a junior college, somewhere in the East Bay, and then he applied again. And since he was out there publishing math papers as a freshman at a JC, Stanford saw they'd missed out on something, and they let him in the next fall. He was not happy about having to take all his core requirements again, or being a year older than everyone else. But under all the bitching, I could tell, he was happy to be at Stanford. And so was I.

That's when we met. Randomly assigned to the same dorm. And right away, first day, we hit it off.

**REP. CORINNE SOTHEBY (R-NE):** Were you immediately interested in a professional partnership with Mr. Chaudry?

**BOYCE:** When I was eighteen? I wasn't interested in professional *anything*.

**REP. CORINNE SOTHEBY (R-NE):** It's just, the two of you seem like rather unlikely friends.

**BOYCE:** You've never been friends with anyone different than you? Personally, I liked that Adhi was quiet. These days we'd probably say "on the spectrum." Which is why he'd never really connected with anyone before.

But I liked him right away. Even though not everybody saw it, I thought he was funny as hell. Since he wasn't really the talkative type, we'd be at our computers, same dorm room, chatting over IM for *hours* while we were supposed to be studying, and I would just lose my shit cracking up.

What I'm trying to say is, we might've been different on the surface, but we were in the same boat at Stanford. Neither of us fit in. I wasn't as smart as all the other superachievers around us . . . and Adhi, to be honest, he was *smarter*. Smarter than the other students, smarter than the professors. Too smart for his own good, sometimes.

It was us against the world. I helped him meet people, he helped me with my homework. Six months in, we were best friends.

**REP. CORINNE SOTHEBY (R-NE):** That's very sweet. But it's also when the trouble started, isn't it? Even early on in your college career, you two seem to have developed an attitude that the rules did not apply to you. Would you care to elaborate on that?

**BOYCE:** You're bringing up, what, the library thing? I don't see what that's got to do with any of this.

## GCHAT CONVERSATION

MAY 4, 2014, 8:16 PM

**Benjamin Boyce:**

YO! Where r u bro?

**Adhvan Chaudry:**

Library

Art history final tmrw

**Benjamin Boyce:**

Laaaaame. Come back.

Picked up Nattys.

U gonna make me drink n Halo by myself?

**Adhvan Chaudry:**

I'm srsly gonna fail this class if I don't learn all of it tonite

So annoying.

I took art history last year

But these snobs won't count any of my transfer credits

Which, lets be honest, is bc I didn't pay a Stanford premium for them

**Benjamin Boyce:**

Dude lets be honest, neither of us actually payin tuition here

**Adhvan Chaudry:**

It's the principle that counts.

**Benjamin Boyce:**

Come on back bro

I have world myth final tmrw, don't see me stressin

**Adhvan Chaudry:**

Not all of us can get by on charm

**Benjamin Boyce:**

Hey I bet we could both get out of our finals if the library floods

**Adhvan Chaudry:**

Haven't checked the weather but seems highly unlikely

**Benjamin Boyce:**

Dr. Dark could make it flood tho

I bet Dr. Dark controls the weather

**Adhvan Chaudry:**

Hahaha yes.

And there's nothing his nemesis Benny-Boy could do to stop it.

**Benjamin Boyce:**

Benny-Boy would join forces w him for that one

**Adhvan Chaudry:**

Actually . . . I think I could manage a flood in the library.

Or at least, a storm.

If called upon.

**Benjamin Boyce:**

Uh, consider yourself called upon then.

U serious? That would be so fuckin sick.

**Adhvan Chaudry:**

Worth a shot.

Meet me up on the 2nd floor

**Benjamin Boyce:**

Bro if this gonna work I'm gonna get the word out . . .

## SOURCED FROM STANFORD UNIVERSITY STUDENT RECORDS

### INCIDENT REPORT

#### Student Disciplinary Board

Student: Adhvan Chaudry

Major: Computer Science

Standing: Freshman (Transfer)

Time: May 4, 2014. 11:20 PM.

Location: Wilkes Library, 2nd floor stacks.

Nature of Offense: Student unlawfully gained computer access to building's system controls and set off fire-control sprinkler systems in the library.

Actions were clearly premeditated, and plans had been publicly shared, as students were present in the library with bathing suits and water guns.

Damage to property is estimated in excess of \$50,000 due to water damage to facilities and books.

Action also resulted in two students being treated at the Health Center as a result of falls sustained due to water present on tile floor.

University also incurred liability damage due to arrival of the Fire Department. Damage to systems and necessary investigation and patching of online systems vulnerabilities estimated at \$12,000.

Actions were also disruptive to other students who were studying in the library during Finals Week.

Damage also incurred to University's reputation and good public standing, due to news coverage and Internet circulation of "Library Water Party" videos.

Student Disciplinary History: This is the second time Student has been caught illegally breaching University computer protocol. First offense involved the projection of lewd messages on stadium scoreboard during Stanford-UCLA football game in Fall 2013.

Recommended Action: Due to the severity of the damage, the repeat nature of the offense, and the brazenly illegal nature of the crime, SSDB unanimously recommends expulsion, effective end of this semester.

## LETTER — SENT MAY 13, 2014

Esteemed Members of the Student Disciplinary Board,

I am writing to you in regard to Adhvan Chaudry, or as I have come to know him, Adhi. Adhi was brought before the Disciplinary Board for his role in the prank that took place in the library last week, and he's looking at potentially getting expelled from this University.

First, I want a chance to speak to Adhi's character. I have first-hand knowledge of it due to the fact that I share a dorm room with him—and as you all may hopefully remember, there are few secrets between two guys living in a 10 by 20 foot room.

Adhi is a man of great moral principle. He is totally uncompromising in living by values he believes in. Everybody on our dorm floor recognizes that while he might not be the most outgoing guy around, he's helpful to almost all of us. People even call him "IT" because he's been so generous in troubleshooting technical problems for everyone.

Even more than that, Adhi is a great friend. The transition to college has been exciting for me; I honestly never wanted anything more than to come to Stanford. Adhi has helped me keep some perspective. He and I took philosophy together this semester for one of our core reqs, and he helped me study. I have ADHD and dyslexia, so it's not easy for me academically here. Adhi has been a patient tutor, but also never helped me in any way that might possibly verge on cheating, because he is a man of integrity. I will have to find some new person to proofread this letter, because Adhi has always been the one to do it for me, and never asked anything in return.

Now, with regard to the prank Adhi is being disciplined for, I know it was a mistake. He never anticipated the level of damage it would cause. And I can say that with total certainty because I was

part of it too. To be honest, the whole thing was my idea. I pretty much talked Adhi into it.

Now I'm aware that by disclosing this, I am setting myself up to be punished along with Adhi, and yes, even potentially be expelled with him from this school that I love so much. As the first member of my family to attend a university, I do not take that lightly, and I know that my mother (who passed away last year) would be immensely saddened to see me go.

But she would also be proud of me for doing what is right in this situation. And it is only fair that I be treated in the same way as Adhi. So I would like to leave you with this quote by Aristotle from the *Nicomachean Ethics*:

Between friends there is no need for justice, but people who are just still need the quality of friendship; and indeed friendliness is considered to be justice in the fullest sense.

I hope you will find it in your hearts to do what is just and allow me and Adhi to stay on at this beautiful University.

Sincerely,

Benjamin Boyce

## **EMAIL — MAY 22, 2014**

From: Stanford Disciplinary Board

To: Adhvan Chaudry

Mr. Chaudry,

On behalf of the Stanford Disciplinary Board, I am writing to inform you of the outcome of the Hearing regarding your conduct on 5/4/14, with regard to the damages incurred to Wilkes Library.

The SDB has determined that you will be placed on Disciplinary Probation for a period of at least 1 year. That means that if you are involved in any other disciplinary incident, you will be expelled from the University.

Additionally, you will be assigned a Behavioral Counselor, whom you will meet with a minimum of sixteen times per semester. Your continued enrollment will be contingent on clearance from your Behavioral Counselor.

Thank you,  
Mary Kleeman  
Vice President of Student Affairs

## EMAIL (DRAFT)

From: Adhvan Chaudry  
To: Ben Boyce

B—  
Just got word from the bigwigs . . .  
No expulsion. Fuck yeah.  
See ya in the fall after all.  
I can't really express how  
The way that you stuck your neck out  
Dude that was above and beyond, I

*The foregoing draft was composed May 22, 2014, but never sent.*

## EMAIL—MAY 23, 2014

From: Tumblr Admin  
To: Adhvan Chaudry

Welcome to the Tumblr community! Thank you for registering your new page: *The Black Hole: Musings of an Anonymous Sci-Fi Superfan*

As a member, you are expected to abide by all terms and conditions of our User Agreement. All material that

intellectual property, and is subject to takedown in the event that it violates any of our community standards or guidelines surrounding IP.

Happy blogging!

## TUMBLR BLOG POST — MAY 23, 2014

### THE BLACK HOLE: MUSINGS OF AN ANONYMOUS SCI-FI SUPERFAN

#### “The Head and the Heart”

The greatest love story of our time is not between a man and a woman or even between two people at all.

It is between a human and a Vulcan.

The brash, emotional Kirk, and the stoic, logical Spock.



Kirk has always been seen as the main character, of course.

The swashbuckling captain, the fearless leader.

But Spock is the more compelling character.

For Spock, it is initially painful to find himself on the *Enterprise*.

He doesn't fit in.

His logic and intelligence make him anomalous. Even threatening.

Kirk recognizes his value but cannot understand him.

Yet over time, Kirk sees that Spock's way of being is not a *lack* of feeling.

It is merely a necessary compartmentalization.  
The Vulcan feels deeply . . .  
but his feelings are not allowed to make his decisions.

They balance each other out.

They get each other's backs and save each other's lives, time and again.

Gene Roddenberry sought to make a show about ideas,  
but it is the emotional bond between those two that has made it last.  
When it comes to the films, *Wrath of Khan* is undeniably the best.

The martyrdom of Spock, when he dies for Kirk and crew, is touching.

But *Search for Spock* is the one that cuts the deepest.

When Kirk risks his captainship to rescue his first officer—  
when we see that the love between them transcends rank and duty—  
when even death cannot break their bond,  
and the reborn Spock, cleansed of his memory,  
nevertheless recognizes his old friend and says, “You are . . . Jim,”  
even the most hardened Vulcan heart swells with joy.

## EXCERPT FROM CONGRESSIONAL HEARING — DECEMBER 1, 2021

**SEN. BOB HOLDER (R-AZ):** I'm sure it felt very noble, to stick up for him like that. But the incident with the “library party” was brought up to help paint a picture, for the committee, of the nature of your relationship.

**BOYCE:** We were friends. Adhi would've done the same for me.

**SEN. BOB HOLDER (R-AZ):** That is certainly one way to view it. Another is that Mr. Chaudry carried out a publicly damaging use of technology, while you sheltered him from the consequences. That pattern of behavior seems to be very much in line with what has happened with your company.

**BOYCE:** Is there a question in there that I'm missing?

**SEN. BOB HOLDER (R-AZ):** I'm trying to illuminate the nature of your partnership—especially in light of the fact that you were both lawfully summoned before this committee, yet you are the only one who appeared.

**BOYCE:** I wish Adhi were here too. But he's not. And I honestly don't know why. I haven't heard from him in a couple days.

**SEN. BOB HOLDER (R-AZ):** You're saying, Mr. Chaudry has . . . what, disappeared? Should we be alarmed?

**BOYCE:** Look, he does stuff like this sometimes. He gets in his head, and . . . Adhi's just not really made for the real world, you know? People like him thrive in a controlled environment, like school. By the time we graduated, I was eager to get out, but Adhi went straight into the grad program. And that's where he started cooking up the ideas that led us here.

**SEN. BOB HOLDER (R-AZ):** So an antisocial introvert doing everything in his power to avoid the world . . . may have created a technology that will end up destroying it? Interesting. I have no further questions.



MEN DIE. GODS DIE. SHE LIVES ON.



A NOVEL

GENEVIEVE GORNICHEC

ACE  
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**L**ONG AGO, WHEN THE GODS WERE YOUNG AND Asgard was new, there came a witch from the edge of the worlds. She knew many ancient spells, but she was especially skilled with *seid*, a magic that allowed one to travel out of body and divine the future. This greatly appealed to Odin, the highest of the Aesir; when he learned of her abilities, he offered to impart upon the witch his knowledge of the runes in exchange for teaching him *seid*.

She was uncertain at first. She'd heard enough about Odin to make her hesitate. But she knew he did not share his secrets lightly, which meant her knowledge of *seid* must be of great value to him indeed. So she swallowed her suspicions about this grim one-eyed god and accepted his offer.

As they practiced *seid* together, the witch found herself drawn farther down than she'd ever traveled before, where she brushed

against a place darker than the beginning of time itself. This place frightened her, and the secrets contained there were great and terrible, so she did not dare go deeper—much to Odin’s displeasure, for the knowledge he sought above all else was hidden there, and it seemed to him that only she could reach it.

The witch was also teaching her magic to the Aesir’s rivals, the Vanir, a sister race of gods whose home she had passed through on her way to Asgard. The Vanir could think of naught but gold with which to reward the witch for her services, though she cared little enough for it.

But when Odin realized she was traveling between Asgard and Vanaheim, he saw an opportunity. He turned the Aesir against the witch and called her Gullveig, “gold-lust.” They drove spears through her and burned her three times, and three times she was reborn—for she was very old, very hard to kill, and far more than she appeared. Each time she burned, Odin tried to force her down to the dark place to learn what he wanted to know, and each time she resisted. And when the Vanir heard of the Aesir’s treatment of her, they became furious, and thus was the first war in the cosmos declared.

The third time she was reborn, Gullveig fled, though she left something behind: her speared heart, still smoking on the pyre.

That was where *he* found it.

Some time later, he tracked her to the deepest, darkest forest at the farthest edge of Jotunheim: the land of the giants, the Aesir’s bitter enemies. This forest was called Ironwood, where the gnarled gray trees were so thick that there was no real path through them, and so tall that they blocked out the sun.

He did not have to venture into those woods, though, for by the bank of the river that divided Ironwood from the rest of Jotunheim he found the witch, staring across the water at the dense forest and

mountains beyond. She sat upon on a rough woolen blanket with a thick cloak about her shoulders and a hood pulled over her head. The sun was shining, but she sat in the shade, hands folded in her lap, leaning against a tree trunk.

He watched her for a time, shifting from foot to foot, scratching his nose, listening to the quaint gurgling of the river and the whistling of songbirds. Then he sauntered up to her, hands folded behind his back. He could see only the bottom half of her face, but her skin looked pink—tender, healing, *new*. When he got closer, he noticed her hands were the same. She seemed to be resting peacefully. Part of him didn't want to disturb her.

Then again, he'd always found the idea of *peace* to be quite boring.

"How long are you going to stand there?" she rasped. She sounded like she hadn't had anything to drink in an age and a half. He figured that breathing in the smoke from one's own pyre three times in a row would have that effect on a person.

"You're a difficult woman to find," he replied. Truth be told, he wasn't sure how to proceed. He'd come to return what she'd left in Odin's hall—and for something more, though he didn't know exactly what.

Something had drawn him to Ironwood that day with her heart tucked into his haversack. And he had a feeling that whatever was pulling him down this path was important, was special, was *interesting*, for he was so very easily bored.

And now here he was, enticed by the possibility of some excitement and hoping the witch would not disappoint.

SHE didn't reply at first, opting instead to study the strange man who'd approached her. The sun was shining behind him, so she

couldn't quite make out his features: just a deep green traveling cloak and hood, brown pants, brown leather shoes, and the silhouette of wild hair.

"I really admire your work," he said conversationally. "You know—sowing chaos wherever you go. Making mighty beings fight over your talents. It's impressive, really."

A moment passed before she said, "That was not my intention."

"What was it, then?"

She did not reply.

"Well, if you're planning on doing it again," he said, "I would *love* to watch and possibly participate, so long as I don't get caught. But I'll let you know up front that I shall not, under any circumstances, make you a promise I can't talk my way out of. I'm not usually this straightforward about it, so consider yourself lucky. I'm letting you know as a friend."

"A friend?" The word was foreign to her.

"Yes. I've decided it just now." He cocked his head. "Am I your first friend? What an achievement for you."

She ignored the question. "Seems a rather one-sided decision on your part."

"Well, I see you're not exactly surrounded by admirers." He studied her. "You seem to me to be nothing more than a harmless witch from the backwoods—I haven't heard anyone talk like you for a very long time. I'm surprised the Aesir could even understand your accent. Who are you? Where do you come from?"

"I don't know," she said after a moment. She inclined her head such that she could see him, but he couldn't quite see her. "I could ask you the same question about yourself, but you probably wouldn't know the answer, either."

"Oh yes?" He settled down on his haunches and peered at her.

She could see now that he had a pale, angular face, a sharp, slightly upturned nose that gave him an impish look, and shoulder-length dark blond hair that fell somewhere between wavy and curly. His eyes were grass green; his smile was mischievous.

The witch nodded once in reply.

The smile faltered a bit. “And how could you possibly know that?”

“I know things,” she said. “You may have heard.”

“I *may* have heard that your knowing of things was what got you stabbed and lit on fire, multiple times. Perhaps from now on you should just play dumb.”

“Well, that’s no fun,” she said, only half joking, her hand moving instinctively to the vertical slash between her breasts—the place where they’d stabbed out her heart.

“That’s the spirit!” He laughed as he rummaged around in his bag. After a moment he pulled out a wad of cloth and held it out to her.

She took it—and started when she felt the bundle pulsing rhythmically in her hands.

“Your heart,” he explained. “I was going to eat it, for some reason, but I decided that maybe you should have it back.”

“*Eat it?*” she asked, making a face. “Why?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. To see what would happen.”

“You would’ve eaten the heart of a witch, and that cannot be good for your well-being,” she said dryly; she frowned as she unwrapped it. “It seems to have healed quite a bit from the fire. But . . .”

“But there’s still a hole in it,” he finished for her. “You got stabbed. Perhaps it shall heal completely if you put it back where it belongs. Do it now—I won’t look.”

“It can wait.” She replaced the cloth and looked at him. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” He sat down now, stretched one leg out and propped his elbow up on the other knee. “So, I take it you’re not going by Gullveig anymore. What do they call you now?”

“I’m not sure.” She looked at him sideways as he plucked a long piece of grass out of the ground, put it in his mouth, and let it dangle lazily there, and she noticed the splash of freckles across his nose and cheeks, and how the sun behind him turned the outline of his curls a violent orange.

She was still not sure what to make of this man. It was difficult to decide how much she should tell him.

“You don’t know your own name?” he asked, raising his eyebrows.

She shrugged. “I thought I would like to travel, in which case they would call me something depending on the nature of my wanderings.” She cast a glance across the river at the gray thickets of Ironwood. “Though I may yet decide to rest here for a time.”

“And what will you call *yourself*, then, if you stay?”

She considered this for a moment or two before she said, “An-grboda.”

His wrinkled his nose, and the blade of grass drooped. “What? ‘Proclaimer of sorrows’? That’s an odd name. Why would I want to be your friend if that’s all you’re going to do?”

“*You’re* the one who decided we were friends,” she said. “And besides, it’s not you to whom I’ll bring sorrow.”

“Are all witches as cryptic as you are?”

“I don’t know if I’ve *met* any other witches, though I think some used to live in these woods, too, long ago.” She looked to the other side of the river again and lowered her voice almost reverently.

“They say there was one witch here who bore the wolves that chase the sun and moon, and raised many others still.”

“Right. I’ve heard stories about them, growing up. The Old One and her wolf-children.”

“You heard those stories in Asgard?”

“Well, I’m not *from* Asgard. Anyway, everyone knows the stories out here.”

“You’re a giant,” she said. It was a guess on her part, but she did not make it sound like a question. “Giant” was a misnomer: a name, not a descriptor, for giants were often no larger than the average person. And while her visitor was certainly dressed like one of the Aesir, sometimes there was no physical way to tell a god from a giant.

But this man, traveling alone and undisguised . . . There was something wild about him, something about his eyes that spoke of deep forests and midsummer nights. Something untamed, unharnessed.

*He cannot be a god, can he?*

He shrugged a shoulder at her deduction. “Sort of. Anyway, it seems rather empty around here now. No wolves . . . no witch-mother . . .”

“Indeed.” She looked across the river again, feeling a pang in her empty chest. “But maybe it was me. Maybe I was their mother.”

“You don’t remember, though?”

She shook her head. “I don’t.”

Silence fell between them, and he shifted. She got the feeling he hated when conversations lulled; he had the air of one who enjoyed hearing his own voice.

“Well,” he said at last, “I’ll have you know that I’m going to make it my personal mission to ignore all your depressing prophecies and do whatever I feel like doing.”

“You can’t just *ignore* prophecies.”

“You can if you try hard enough.”

“I’m not quite sure that’s how it works.”

“Hmm.” He put his arms behind his head, leaned against the tree, and said haughtily, “Well, maybe you’re just not as clever as I am.”

She gave him a sidelong look, amused. “What do they call *you*, then, Sly One?”

“I’ll tell you if you show me your face.”

“I’ll show you my face if you promise not to recoil in horror.”

“I said I’d tell you my name. I can’t promise anything more. But trust me, I have a strong stomach—I was going to eat your heart, after all.”

“My heart is not so full of vile things, I promise you.” Nevertheless, she lifted the hood, revealing heavy-lidded blue-green eyes and the brown stubble of her burned hair. These had not been Gullveig’s colors, but Angrboda figured that she should leave *that* particular name and all its associations behind her and never mention it again.

This was a new phase in her existence. She was going to keep the witchery to herself from now on, thank you very much. No more *seid*, no more prophecies, no more getting into trouble. She’d already had enough of that for several lifetimes.

“And here I thought you were going to be some hideous ogress hiding under there.” He raised his hands and curled them into claws. “Angrboda Troll-woman, so ugly that men flinch away in terror to look upon her face.”

She rolled her eyes. “And what’s *your* name? Or do you intend to break your promise?”

“I intend no such thing. I am a man of my word, Angrboda. I’m

the blood brother of Odin himself,” he said loftily, and put a hand to his chest.

*Ah, there it is*, she thought. She did not remember Odin taking a giant for a blood brother when she was in Asgard. But then again, that could have been centuries ago, for all she knew—she remembered very little of her time in Asgard and next to nothing from the time before that. Perhaps her strange visitor just hadn’t been present in the hall where she’d been burned.

*Or maybe he was and was watching it, rapt. Like all the rest.*

“And I can’t *believe*,” he went on, “that you would besmirch my good name by implying that I’m an oath-breaker—”

“I would have to know your name in order to besmirch it, would I not?”

“You’re besmirching the *idea* of my good name.”

“The idea of your name itself, or the idea that it’s a good name?”

He blinked at her and mouthed the word *Oh*.

“I shall make up a name for you if you don’t tell me what it is,” she said.

“Ooh, very interesting.” He wrapped his arms around his knees like an excited child. “What did you have in mind?”

“You won’t like it, that’s for sure. I’m going to call you the worst name I can think of, and use my witchy magic to make everyone else call you that, too.”

“Witchy magic? Oh, I’m *so* frightened.”

“Don’t *make* me make you eat this,” Angrboda said warningly, holding up her cloth-wrapped heart.

“Hmm, maybe that’s what I should’ve done in the first place.” He sat up straighter and gave her a mock-predatory leer. “Maybe I’ll gain your power. Here, give it back.”

She held it away from him when he reached for it and said, in

her most ominous voice, “Or maybe something much, much worse will happen.”

“How do you know?”

“I don’t. I’m only saying.”

“Well then, I suppose I can’t blame you for wanting to hang on to it after what happened.”

“I won’t be parting with it anytime soon—that’s for certain.” She put her heart back in her lap and looked down at it. *Not ever again.*

Another few moments passed. When she looked up at him again, he was giving her a crooked smile. She returned it hesitantly—she didn’t know what her smile looked like now, if it was grotesque or unbecoming or just frightening.

But his smile only widened, betraying none or all of his thoughts.

“My name,” he said, “is Loki Laufeyjarson.”

“You use your mother’s name instead of your father’s?” she asked, for Laufey was a woman’s name.

“I do. And I honestly can’t believe you don’t know of me, for all the time you spent in Asgard. The gods are *so* very serious, and it gets quite boring sometimes, so I’m prone to amusing myself to keep things lively—mostly at the expense of others, but that’s neither here nor there. They can’t help that I’m rather the wittiest person around, after all.”

“And the most humble, too, no doubt,” Angrboda observed, with straight-faced sincerity.

Loki studied her for a moment as if trying to decide whether she was joking. When her expression didn’t change, his wry smile widened into an appreciative grin.

“You know, Angrboda,” he said, “I *do* think we’re going to be the best of friends.”

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Stephen King  
& Owen King

*Big Hours • Alison Simpson*

**Sleeping  
Beauties**

*a graphic novel*

Includes  
Content  
Published for  
Adult Readers



# Sleeping Beauties

BASED ON THE NOVEL BY STEPHEN KING AND OWEN KING

ADAPTED BY RIO YOUERS

ART BY ALISON SAMPSON

COLORS BY TRIONA TREE FARRELL

DESIGN & LETTERS BY CHRISTA MIESNER

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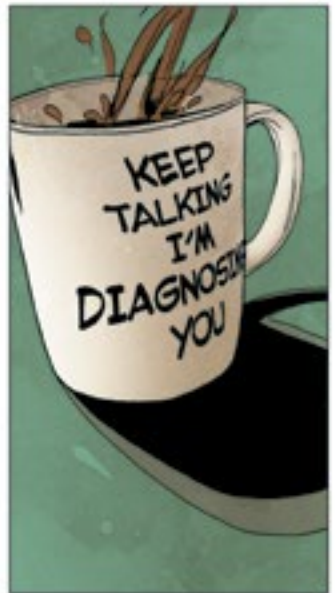




























*Scared to death!*







AT THIS HOUR, WE'RE CONTINUING TO FOLLOW A BREAKING STORY THAT BEGAN IN AUSTRALIA.

MEDICAL OFFICIALS IN CALIFORNIA, HAWAII, ARE REPORTING THAT THE OUTBREAK OF WHAT SOME ARE CALLING ASIAN FAINTING SICKNESS AND OTHERS ARE CALLING AUSTRALIAN FAINTING FLU CONTINUES TO SPREAD.

"NOW WE'RE GETTING WORD THAT CASES HAVE POPPED UP HERE IN THE U.S., FIRST IN CALIFORNIA, THEN IN COLORADO, AND NOW IN THE CAROLINAS."

"HERE'S MICHAELA MORGAN WITH MORE."



THANK YOU, GEORGE.

IT APPEARS NOW THAT THIS PHENOMENON, KNOWN BY SOME AS THE AUSTRALIAN FAINTING FLU, HAS QUICKLY REACHED OUR SHORES.



"WE ARE HEARING FROM TRUSTED SOURCES, COAST TO COAST, THAT WOMEN WHO HAVE FALLEN ASLEEP ARE NOT WAKING UP."



"INFORMATION IS SPARSE, BUT ONE THING EVERYONE AGREES ON IS THAT THIS ONLY AFFECTS WOMEN... AND MANY WOMEN ARE WORRIED TO HAVE SOLD ME THAT I MIGHT BE AFRAID TO FALL ASLEEP."

SLEEP YES, JUST A LITTLE... LITTLE...



"WHAT'S MORE, WE ARE ALSO HEARING REPORTS OF... STICKY, WEB-LIKE GROWTHS ON THE FACES OF THE SLEEPING WOMEN. A MYSTERIOUS DEVELOPMENT THAT HAS UNDERSTANDABLY INCREASED THE LEVEL OF CONCERN."

...ZZZZZ...



SO?

SHE'S ALIVE, HER VITALS ARE STRONG.

I DON'T KNOW WHAT THAT STUFF IS. IT'S SACKY LIKE SAE, AND IT'S ALSO TOUGH, AND YET IT'S EVENTUALLY REMEDIABLE BECAUSE SHE'S BREATHING THROUGH IT.

IF YOU PRESSED ME, I'D SAY IT WAS SOME KIND OF FUNGUS, BUT IT'S NOT BENNYMOR like ANY FUNGUS I'VE EVER HEARD OF.



THIS IS FUCKING SCARY, AND THAT IS NOT A PHRASE I USE LIGHTLY.

I'D LIKE TO CONTACT THE CDC, ASK THEM TO SEND SOME BOYS IN HAZMAT SUITS TO COME IN AND LOOK HER OVER, BUT IF THIS AUSTRALIAN HANTSA FLEU IS AS WIDESPREAD AS THE NEWS SUGGESTS--



THEY'RE CALLING IT AURORA HERE. YOU KNOW AFTER THE PRINCESS IN SLEEPING BEAUTY, AND YES, IT'S EVERYWHERE.

THIS IS A BIG GODDAM DEAL, CURT. WHEN PANIC SETS IN--AND IT WILL--WE'RE GOING TO HAVE A SITUATION ON OUR HANDS.

IT'LL TAKE EVERYTHING TO KEEP OUR PRISONERS SAFE TO KEEP OURSELVES SAFE.

WHICH REMINDS ME...

**FEAR GRIPS THE NATION AS AURORA FLU CLAIMS MORE VICTIMS.**



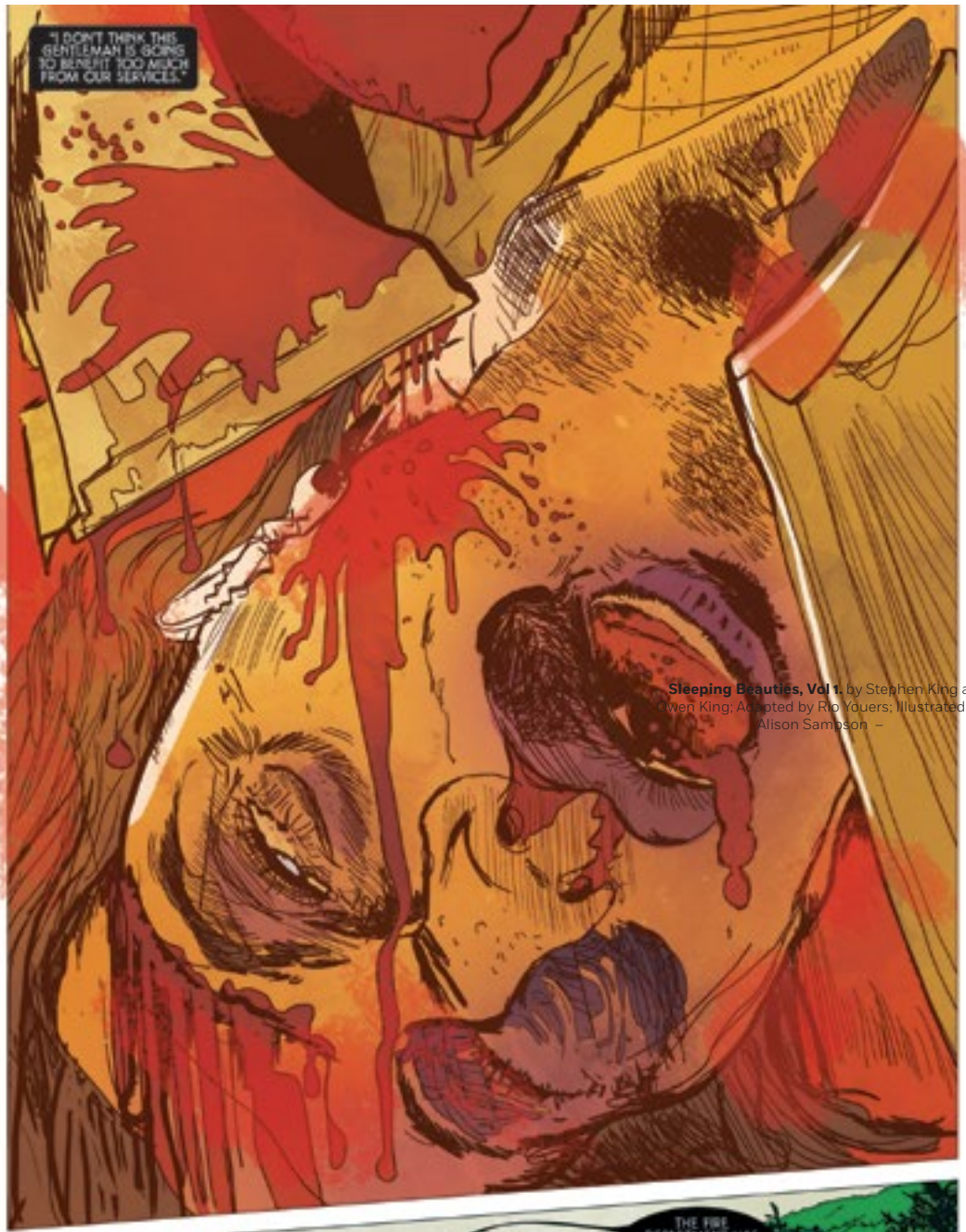
YOUR WIFE CALLED. SHE SPREADSHEED A WOMAN ON SAIL'S HILL ROAD, SUSPECTED OF AISON AND DOUBLE HOMICIDE.

IT'S AGAINST PROTOCOL BUT WITH THINGS BEING THE WAY THEY ARE, I SA I'M BRINGING HER HERE FOR PSYCHIATRIC EVALUATION.

ANOTHER PRIMAET?



"THAT'S ALL WE NEED."



**Sleeping Beauties, Vol 1**, by Stephen King and Owen King; Adapted by Rio Youers; Illustrated by Alison Sampson –







# Sleeping Beauties

Rio Youers • Alison Sampson • Fiona Farrell

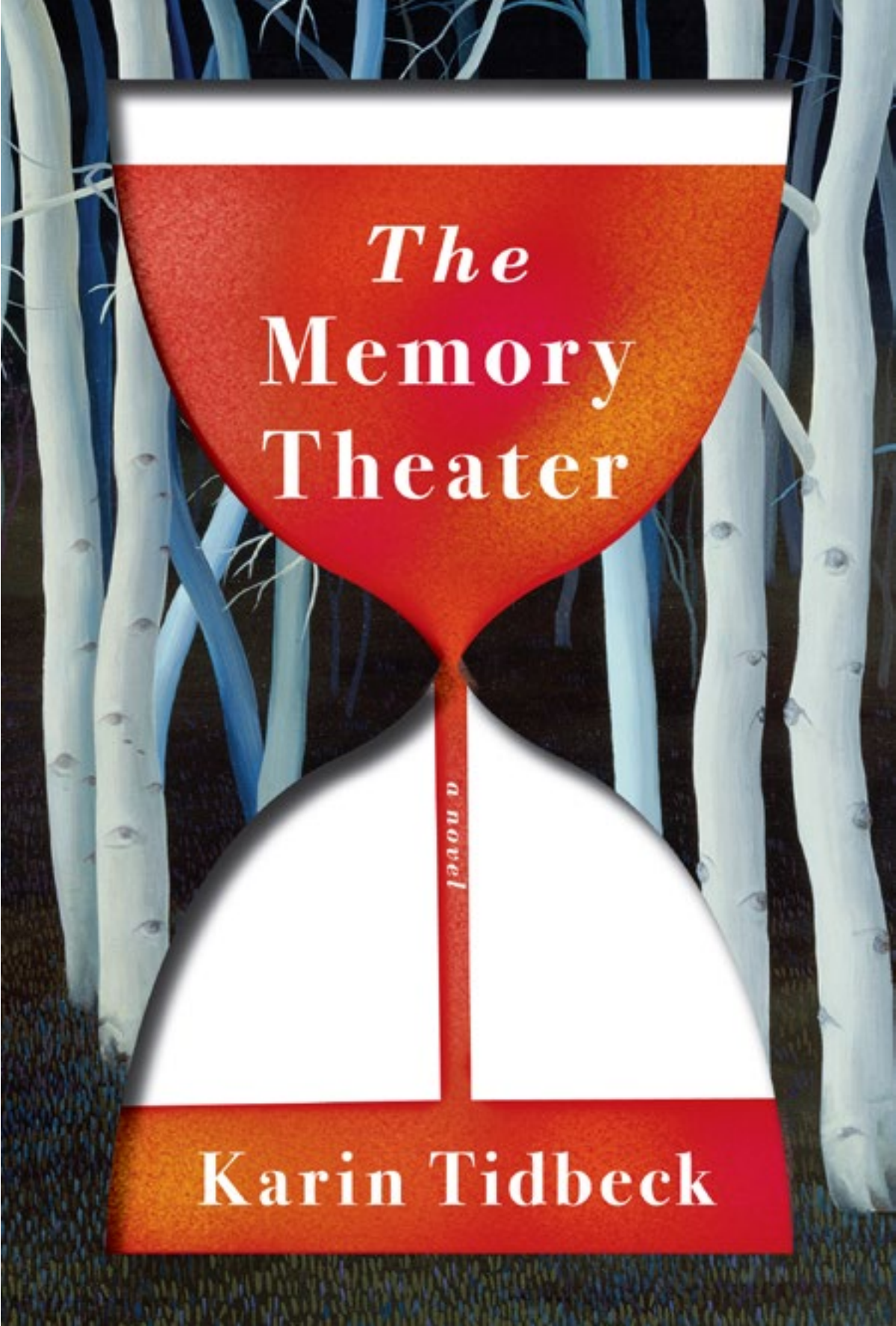


THIS OFFICIAL GRAPHIC NOVEL ADAPTATION OF THE HORROR NOVEL BY **STEPHEN KING** AND **OWEN KING** IS A HAUNTING INTERPRETATION OF THE CHILLING, TIMELY BESTSELLER.

A BIZARRE SLEEPING SICKNESS, CALLED AURORA, HAS FALLEN OVER THE WORLD. ITS VICTIMS CAN'T WAKE UP, AND ALL OF THEM ARE WOMEN. AS NATIONS FALL INTO CHAOS, THOSE WOMEN STILL AWAKE TAKE DESPERATE MEASURES TO STAY THAT WAY, AND MEN EVERYWHERE BEGIN TO GIVE IN TO THEIR DARKEST IMPULSES.

MEANWHILE, IN THE SMALL TOWN OF DOOLING, A MYSTERIOUS WOMAN HAS WALKED OUT OF THE WOODS; SHE CALLS HERSELF EVE AND LEAVES A TRAIL OF CARNAGE IN HER WAKE. STRANGEST OF ALL, SHE'S THE ONLY WOMAN WHO CAN WAKE UP.





*The*  
Memory  
Theater

*a novel*

Karin Tidbeck

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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## 1

Dora and Thistle spent the party hiding under a side table. The lords and ladies twirled between the marble statues on the dance floor, heels clattering on the cracked cobblestones to a rhythm that slid back and forth in uneven and hypnotic syncopation. *One-two-three-four-five, one-two-three-four-five-six.* Satin skirts brushed against brocade coats; playful eyes glittered in powdered faces. Lady Mnemosyne, resplendent in her laurel wreath and leafy dress, watched from her throne. It was like any other feast in this place, in eternal twilight, under a summer sky. At the edge of the dance floor, servants waited by buffet tables laden with cornucopias and drink.

Thistle sighed. “You’ve got grass all over your front.”

Dora blinked and peered down at her pinafore. It did have grass on it. The dress itself smelled sour and sat too tight over her chest and upper back, and the edges of the veil around her shoulders were frayed. She was not at all as clean and neat as Thistle,

who sat with the coattails of his celadon livery neatly folded in his lap. His lips and cheeks were rouged, his hazel eyes rimmed with black, his cropped auburn curls slicked against his skull.

Dora reached out and rubbed the collar of Thistle's coat between her fingers. The velvet felt like mouse fur. Thistle gently pried her hand off.

"You need to be more careful," he said.

A loud crash made them jump, and Dora lifted the tablecloth to peek outside. One of the ladies had upended a buffet table and sprawled in the ruins of a cornucopia. She laughed and smeared fruit over her skirts. Thistle took Dora's free hand and began to clean her nails with a small rosewood stick.

"Servants!"

Heels clicked over the stones. A hoarse voice called out: "Servants! Servants!"

It was Lady Augusta, Thistle's mistress. Dora dropped the tablecloth. Thistle quickly veiled Dora's face and crawled away to find his lady. A shock of lily of the valley perfume stung Dora's nose, and she tried to stifle a sneeze. There was a rustle and Thistle returned and settled down next to her. He folded the veil back again.

"It's nothing. Nothing you have to worry about. Here, dry your nose."

Thistle smiled at Dora and gave her a handkerchief. His face was pale under the rouge. He continued Dora's manicure, and she gnawed on the cuticles of her other hand. Somewhere above them, Lady Mnemosyne's voice boomed in the air: "Drink to eternal beauty, my friends! Revel in our glory. Now dance and kiss and be joyful!"

Dora let the noise of applause and shouts wash over her and

relaxed into the good little pain of Thistle digging for dirt under her nails.

When she opened her eyes again, it was quiet.

“They’ve gone to sleep,” Thistle said. “We can go.”

They crawled out from under the table and picked their way across cobblestones littered with cups and crystal shards.

Thistle led Dora in an arc around the debris to where the dance floor ended and the path through the birch grove began. The black soil swallowed the sound of their footsteps, and Thistle let out a long breath. Dora took his hand as they walked between the trees in silence.

In the middle of the grove, Porla was asleep in her pool. She floated just under the surface, blond hair waving in the water like seaweed. Her greenish face looked innocent: you’d never know that her teeth were sharp and she kept the body of a dead servant under the roots of a tree that grew next to the water. She had been a lady; then she dived into the water and never left. She had tried to lure Dora and Thistle in for “tea” more than once. They gave the pool a wide berth.

A breeze wafted into the grove, thick with the smell of apples. Dora and Thistle stepped out from between the birch trees and into the orchard under the big ultramarine bowl of sky. The air bit into Dora’s lungs.

The orchard’s gnarled apple trees were planted in neat rows. You could stand in any spot and stretch out your arms and pretend that the trees streamed from your fingertips. The branches hung heavy with fruit: every other tree carried big red apples, and the rest juicy-looking green ones. Dora had compared most of the trees. They all looked the same, down to the smallest twig and fruit. The apples tasted the same, too: hard and tongue-shriveling

sour for the green, mealy and sweet for the red. Dora sniffed an apple on the nearest tree, then bit into it. It smelled better than it tasted. Her feet made a swishing noise in the damp grass. Next to her, Thistle was quiet. She glanced at him. His steps were so light; he moved like a wading bird, like the lords and ladies. He looked so frail next to her, little stolen boy. Dora should be minding him instead of the other way around. She didn't say this out loud, just stopped and held him close.

"What are you doing?" Thistle mumbled against her shoulder.

He had stopped speaking in the boy voice now that they were alone. Male servants with low voices were doomed. The lords and ladies hadn't noticed because Thistle was short and good at shaving.

"You're so small."

He chuckled. "I can't breathe."

Dora let go again. Thistle looked up at her and smiled. The paint around his eyes was smudged.

"Come on, sister." He took her hand.

At the edge of the orchard, the conservatory's great cupola loomed against the wall of forest that surrounded the Gardens. It was the biggest structure in the realm, a complicated wooden lattice inlaid with glass panes that reflected the hues in the evening sky. In the conservatory, little orange trees stood in a circle around three divans, lit by flickering wax candles. Here rested the enormous Aunts, attended by their Nieces. The Aunts ate and ate until they could grow no bigger. Then they died, and their Nieces cut them open to reveal a new little Aunt nestled around the old Aunt's heart. The old body was taken away to make food for the

new little Aunt, who grew and grew, until she was done and the cycle repeated itself.

The lords and ladies didn't come here. Neither did the other servants, who said that the Aunts were too strange. Whenever their masters slept, as they did between parties, this was a good place for Dora and Thistle to sit in peace. One of the apple trees grew close to the dome's side, and that was where Dora had made a secret place: a little nest made of discarded pillows and blankets in the hollow between the tree and the wall.

Thistle sat down and leaned back against the tree trunk. Dora lay down next to him and rested her head in his lap. She took one of his hands and slid her fingers up inside his sleeve where the skin was warm. The ornate scars on his skin felt silky under her fingertips. Thistle flinched a little, then relaxed again.

"I saw something," he said. "When Lady Augusta called for me."

"Oh." After a moment, Dora realized she should probably ask, "What did you see?"

Thistle shook his head. "I'm not sure."

Dora waited. Thistle took so long that when he spoke again, she had stopped listening and had to ask him to repeat himself.

"My mistress looked at me and said, 'How are you alive?'" Thistle said.

His hand gripped Dora's hair so hard it hurt.

"Ow," Dora said.

Thistle didn't seem to notice.

"She's going to do something to me," he said. "Or she thinks she's done something. She might try it again."

The lords and ladies didn't move through time like others did. They lived through the same evening, over and over again. They rose from their beds, threw a party or organized a game, and rev-

eled through the twilight until they fell asleep. Then they awoke from their stupor, and the party began anew. Their minds worked in loops; they would forget what they had done and remember things they hadn't done yet.

Their servants, however, were children who had wandered into the surrounding forest from the outside, lured in by fairy lights and the noise of revels. The lords and ladies stole the children's names, marking and binding each child to its new master, taking all but the faintest memories of their former lives away. But the children weren't touched by the same ageless magic that surrounded their masters. They grew up, and the patterns that were carved into them became complete. When that happened, they were killed for sport and eaten.

"If I just had my true name back," Thistle said, "I would be free from Augusta. We could run away from here before anything happens. And with my name I would remember where I came from and find a way back to my parents. You could live with us."

"You've looked for your name everywhere," Dora said. "You said it's not written down, it's not caught in a jar, it isn't embroidered on a handkerchief."

Thistle hung his head.

Dora pried Thistle's fingers loose from where they were stroking her hair. "I won't let her hurt you. Now tell my story."

Thistle let out a shaky laugh. "How many times do you need to hear it?"

Dora smiled. "I like hearing it."

"All right," Thistle said. "Once upon a time there was a lonely lord called Walpurgis. He was rich and beautiful and comfortable, but he wanted a child. In this land, however, no one had children, for they had become timeless and forgotten how to make them.

"'Oh, how I wish I had a child of my own,' Lord Walpurgis

would say, and put his head in his hands. ‘Someone who was part of me.’

“So it came to pass that a visitor arrived, a traveler who called herself Ghorbi, and she came from far away.

“Walpurgis sought her out, and said, ‘My good woman, will you help me? For I would like a child of my own.’

“‘I will help you,’ Ghorbi replied, ‘but you must know this: if you mistreat her, she will not be yours.’

“Still, Walpurgis insisted, and he paid Ghorbi in precious stones. She took a bottle of his seed and went away. Then she returned, and she wasn’t alone.

“‘Walpurgis, I have your daughter,’ Ghorbi said. ‘This is Dora.’

“She stepped aside, and lo! There was a girl. She was as tall as Walpurgis, her shoulders broad and strong, her eyes dark as the earth, and her hair like white feathers.

“‘Father,’ said the girl, and her voice was like the blackbird’s song.

“‘She was grown from your seed in the earth,’ Ghorbi said. ‘She is half of the mountain, and half of you.’

“But Walpurgis hesitated. ‘I thank you for this gift,’ he said. ‘But this creature is too precious. I am not worthy.’

“‘A bargain’s a bargain,’ Ghorbi replied. ‘I have delivered what you asked for.’

“And then she was gone.

“Walpurgis had a good heart, but even though he tried, he couldn’t take care of Dora. He was simply not very good at being a parent, since he couldn’t recall ever being a child. The court was angry with him and demoted him to chamberlain, for they had all sworn not to bear children of their own.

“Walpurgis found a friend for Dora, a boy called Thistle, who was a page to the lady Augusta.

“The lords and ladies said, ‘You can take care of her better than we. Let her be veiled, lest we are reminded of our failure.’

“Thistle was happy to care for Dora. They loved each other like brother and sister.”

Dora closed her eyes. Her favorite part was coming.

“Finally, after being a terrible father, Walpurgis began to understand,” Thistle continued. “He finally understood what love was, and that he must take care of Dora. And so he took her back, and he saw how well Thistle had cared for her. And he promised to love her and asked her forgiveness for his neglect.”

“Really?” Dora asked.

Thistle stroked her hair. “Really.”

Far away, someone blew a whistle. Thistle carefully lifted Dora’s head and stood up.

“There’s a croquet game,” he said. “I have to go.”

Dora watched him walk out into the orchard, then followed at a distance.

## 2

Hidden behind an oak at the edge of the game lawn, Dora watched them play. She kept her veil drawn over her face. The pale lords and ladies loitered on the grass, leaning on croquet clubs and each other. Lady Mnemosyne watched from her seat on the podium, eyes shadowed under her wreath, her skirts spread out like a willow tree. Walpurgis lay on the grass at her feet, propped up on his elbow. The left half of his white coat was spattered with something sticky-looking. Next to him, the twins Cymbeline and Virgilia embraced on their divan. Cymbeline's crinoline was covered in chestnut leaves; Virgilia's dress was woven out of peacock feathers. At the edge of the lawn, Augusta's sister Euterpe was already drunk, rolling around in the grass dressed only in a thin shift. Hyssop, Virgilia's page boy, stood at attention nearby, holding a tray of drinks and sweetmeats. Like the other servants, he was good at not moving. Moving drew attention.

In the center of the lawn, surrounded by little arches stuck into the ground, the lady Augusta stared at a striped ball by her feet. She looked formidable in her brilliant blue coat and knee pants; her mahogany hair was freshly curled, her face a work of art. Thistle stood at her elbow, hands clasped behind his back, eyes wandering over the lawn. He looked into the trees and briefly met Dora's gaze. His eyes widened a fraction, and he shook his head almost imperceptibly.

Augusta swung her club. The ball flew in a high arc and hit Hyssop. He dropped his tray and clutched his arm with a groan. The crowd on the lawn burst into cheers and applause. Mnemosyne smiled and nodded from her podium. When Hyssop straightened, Virgilia got up from the divan and slapped him. She pointed at the mess. Hyssop immediately kneeled to pick it up, his left arm shaking.

Dora watched as the game progressed. She had never understood the rules, but everyone broke into applause when the players hit the servants.

Augusta swung her club with flair; Thistle had to duck several times to avoid getting smacked. He fetched drinks when asked to and mopped the sweat from Augusta's brow with a small handkerchief.

Dora almost ran out across the lawn when Lord Tempestis landed his ball in the face of Euterpe's little page, Calla, but she knew she mustn't. It would make things worse. Calla bled all over her doublet and spat something into her hand.

At cake break, they punished Hyssop for dropping the tray. Virgilia took his jacket and shirt off. Two flower stems reached up along Hyssop's shoulder blades, and more of them meandered down his arms. Each servant had their special art, carved

into them with teeth and nails: hyssop, calla, vetch, foxglove, others. And thistle.

Walpurgis and Cymbeline took each of Hyssop's arms. Virgilia sank one of her long fingernails into her page's right shoulder. Dora forced herself to watch. Hyssop deserved her bearing witness, at least. She had barged in, once, to defend a page. The lords and ladies had reacted quickly. They wouldn't strike her like they would a servant; instead, they had immobilized her with their words, but not before Dora had knocked Cymbeline to the ground and made her cry. And for Dora's rebellion, they had hurt Thistle.

Eventually, Virgilia stepped back and licked at her bloodied hand. Dora lost sight of Hyssop as the other nobles crowded in to inspect Virgilia's work and mumble their appreciation.

"His pattern is done," Walpurgis announced over the murmur.

"A hunt!" Virgilia shouted. "I call for a hunt!"

"Excellent," Mnemosyne said from her throne. "We shall have a hunt when this game is complete. Come here, little Hyssop, and sit at my feet."

Hyssop shambled over to the dais and sank down on his knees. Dora could see his face now, twisted and tearful. He knew what awaited him. So did Dora. And there was nothing she could do. Hyssop was all grown up, and his flower was finished, and so he must die.

Walpurgis waved off all the servants except Thistle, who was ordered to move the hoops around. Then Walpurgis clapped his hands, and the game resumed.

Cymbeline and Virgilia gripped their club together and swung it. Their ball hit Augusta's so hard that it rolled into the woods. The others jeered. They continued the game as Augusta walked

in among the trees. She walked past the spot where Dora was hiding and deeper into the woods. She was gone for a long moment.

When Augusta came back, she was carrying a small locket in one hand and her ball in the other. She paused at the edge of the trees and peered at the people on the lawn. From where Dora was crouching, she could see the sweat that scored a pink trail down Augusta's temple. Augusta flipped the locket open. She froze, staring at whatever it was she saw, and frowned.

"I know what this is," she muttered. "What is it?"

Then she closed the locket again and slipped it into a pocket on her waistcoat. She glanced briefly over her shoulder, shrugged, and returned to the lawn.

Dora walked back the way Augusta had come. It wasn't far to the dog-rose bush where a dead man lay on the ground, faceup. He looked different: his face was lined and his hair salt-and-pepper. He was old. His clothes looked strange, the black coat oddly cut. Dora had never seen anything like this before. Children had wandered into the Gardens. Never a full-grown man. How had he gotten here? Had someone let him in? Dora left the dead man as he was.

Dora had sat down by the conservatory again when Thistle came wandering between the trees.

"There you are," he said.

He sank to the ground next to her. His kohl was running.

"Hyssop is gone," he said. "They chased him into the woods and killed him."

"I know," Dora said.

"The servants are not real people to them. Just playthings."

"Maybe you could run away again," Dora said.

Thistle looked at her. “You know what happens. We walk into the forest, and walk and walk, and then we end up in the orchard again.”

It was true. Dora and Thistle had tried, many times, when everyone else was asleep. It was always the same: a long walk through the woods, in a seemingly straight line, and then in not too long the conservatory rising beyond the trees. As if the path turned back on itself. As long as Thistle was still in Lady Augusta’s service, as long as she kept his true name hidden from him, he could never find his way home. And because Dora was Walpurgis’s child, she was stuck, too. She wasn’t a servant, yet also not a lady. Just a reminder of failure and grief, free to exist but not to be a part of anything. Walpurgis renounced her every time he saw her. But perhaps not next time. Perhaps he loved her a little. Or so she hoped.

“Thistle,” Dora said. “I found something.”

Thistle cleared his throat. “What did you find?”

“When they knocked the lady Augusta’s ball into the forest. I saw that. And Lady Augusta walked after it, and then . . .”

Someone clapped their hands: once, twice. Calla was standing a little distance from the apple tree. Her mouth was still swollen from the ball that Lord Tempestis had shot into her face. She didn’t speak; she had no tongue. It had been cut out. Her mistress liked her page mute.

Calla held her hand out to Thistle.

“Please tell me later, Dora,” he said. “I have to go.”

Dora followed a few steps behind Calla and Thistle. As they arrived at Augusta’s pavilion, Dora snuck around to the back, where she could peek between the lavender lengths of silk. A

smell of musk and lily of the valley wafted out from the interior. Augusta sat by her desk, the shiny locket in her hand. Her curls were piled high on her head, strands of them tumbling down the sides of her face. Her eyes were such a light gray that they were almost translucent. She turned around when Thistle rang the little bell above the opening.

“Boy,” she said in her hoarse voice, and stood up.

Thistle looked her in the eyes; his jaw was clenched. Augusta slapped him. Thistle lowered his eyes and walked over to the bed, preparing to remove his coat. He must have been expecting her to carve him. Dora had seen it before. Thistle never complained, never asked Dora to intervene. Dora wondered how much Augusta would scream if Dora did the same to her.

“No, not now,” Augusta said.

Thistle turned around. Augusta tossed the locket at him. He caught it with both hands.

“You will tell me what this is,” Augusta said.

Thistle frowned at the locket and opened the lid.

“It’s a watch,” he said. “I have seen one, maybe before . . .”

“And what is a watch?” Augusta interrupted.

“Mistress doesn’t know?”

Augusta slapped him again. “Insolence.”

Her nails bit into his jaw. Thistle’s eyes watered. His eyes met Dora’s. Dora stood up. Thistle shook his head faintly, and Dora sat down again.

“You will tell me what a watch is,” Augusta repeated.

Thistle sniffled. “It measures time.”

“Show me,” Augusta said.

She pulled Thistle down on the bed next to her, and put her arm around him as if she were his protector, not someone who

might stick her thumbs into his eyes because he looked at her in the wrong way.

Thistle pointed at the clockface. "This hand moves forward, and then the shorter one, and then the shortest. That knob winds it up to make it run."

As he spoke, Augusta shuddered and made a noise at the back of her throat.

"I know it. Somehow, I know what this is," Augusta said. "Does it measure time?" Augusta said. "Or does it just move forward and call that time?"

Thistle blinked. "Time is time," he said. "If it goes, it goes forward, from moment to moment."

Dora remembered time. She recalled crawling out of the earth into a rosy dawn. The sun, traveling across the sky to set. Shifting light and darkness. Heat and cold. But here it was always an azure summer night, an eternal sunset tinting the western sky green and gold.

Augusta twisted the little knob on the side of the locket. A ticking sound filled the air, faint and deafening all at once. The air trembled.

"Very well," Augusta said. "That is all." Her voice echoed.

Augusta let go of Thistle's shoulders. Thistle stood up. When he was almost at the door, Augusta spoke.

"This will be our little secret. Kneel."

Thistle did as he was told. Augusta picked up a long knife that lay on her vanity. She grabbed Thistle's jaw and, with her other hand, held the knife against his throat. Dora stood up, prepared to leap through the curtains.

Thistle spoke between Augusta's fingers: "Wait!"

Augusta blinked and released Thistle's jaw. "You dare?"

“My pattern isn’t done,” Thistle said. “You’re not allowed to kill me until it is.”

“I can finish it now, if you like,” Augusta replied in a sweet voice. “Undress.”

“You have to call a hunt, too,” Thistle said. “It’s the way of the lords and ladies.”

“Then I shall do so, dear,” Augusta said.

“But you just had one.” Thistle’s voice broke. “You’re not finished dining on Hyssop. The lady Mnemosyne will be angry.”

“Mouthy little shit. I regret taking you at all.”

“You could give me my name back,” Thistle said quickly, “and I would go away and be gone from here. I would never trouble you again.”

“Give it back? Go away?” Augusta smiled. “There’s no leaving this place, boy.”

Thistle looked at the ground.

“Take that jacket off now,” Augusta said. “And your shirt.”

Thistle did as he was told, folding his clothing beside him. The flower stems Augusta had carved up his arms and over his chest were raised welts against his skin. Augusta bent down and trailed the sharp nails of her right hand across his chest. Thistle froze as she pressed her index finger against his left clavicle. He gasped as her nail bit into his skin.

“Almost done,” Augusta whispered. “Nearly there.”

She dropped her hand and straightened. “Leave me.”

Thistle stood up, blood running down his chest. He rushed to gather his things and stepped outside. Dora watched as he left, then backed away before she could be noticed. If anyone caught her, Thistle’s pattern would be finished for sure.

Dora began to head to the conservatory. She passed the dining tables, where some of the servants were busy cleaning up.

The food heaped on the tables was returning to its original state: moss, bark, toads. It happened at the end of a party, when the lords and ladies had left to sink back into their stupor. All but the bones sitting in the middle of the center table. They would be buried.

Walpurgis sat in a corner of the dance floor, overseeing the cleaning procedure, wine bottle in hand. He looked up at Dora as she went past. Her heart beat stronger for a second. Perhaps this would be the day the story came true and he took her back.

“Hey!” he shouted. “Your face, cretin.”

Dora quickly pulled the veil over her face. She had forgotten.

Something hit her leg: the wine bottle. It didn’t break but spilled its contents over Dora’s feet.

“Your fault,” Walpurgis mumbled. “It’s all your fault.”

Every time he happened to see Dora, he said the same thing, over and over again. *Your fault.*

“Father,” Dora whispered.

“Not your father!” Walpurgis shouted. “No. Not your father. I don’t care what Mnemosyne says. You’re not mine.”

He said that each time as if it were the first. Dora raised her veil slightly and looked at him where he sat. He was weeping.

“Then where do I go?” she said.

“I don’t care,” Walpurgis replied. “Don’t show your face here.”

Dora found Thistle under their tree. He was curled up, seemingly asleep, a blotch of blood on his shirt. Dora wrapped herself around him. He mumbled and shifted a little against her chest.

“He still says he’s not my father,” Dora whispered to Thistle’s sleeping form. “But I will always be his daughter.”

As they lay there, the lady Augusta came walking through the

orchard, the pocket watch swinging from her hand. Dora stiffened, ready to defend Thistle if needed. But Augusta didn't seem to notice them at all. She walked up to the conservatory, rubbed a sleeve over one of the panes, and looked inside. Staring at the watch in her hand, she twisted the little knob on the side. There was that ticking noise again, and a sense of something shifting, a twitch in the air.

“Look at that,” Augusta murmured.

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A Novel

HEATHER  
WALTER

*Malice* is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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## CHAPTER ONE

Age of the Rose, 996

The golden bell above my doorframe bobs twice. I roll my shoulders against the needling ache that settles at the base of my neck whenever that damn thing sounds. After nearly a decade of hearing it, I've come to despise the bell's shrill, tinny clang almost as much as the message it carries: A patron is coming. When it was first installed, my bell gleamed like those the Graces use in their parlors. But now, seeing as the servants conveniently forget to polish it, a mottled green tarnish clings to the thing like a scaly skin. Fitting, I think, that I should have the ugliest bell in Lavender House when I am by far the ugliest creature living inside it.

*Alyce.* My own name on my patron schedule glares up at me when I glance at the next appointment. Beneath it: *The Dark Grace.*

Grace, indeed. If I were truly a Grace, I'd be receiving my patrons in a sunny parlor with silk-upholstered chairs and

trays of spongy, cream-frosted tea cakes. Instead, I'm banished to a converted storage annex attached to Lavender House's kitchen. It's yet another reason Cook hates me. The space was once a larder and now Cook complains every chance she gets that there isn't enough storage space in the cellar. I catch her grumbling curses at me when she thinks I'm out of earshot, as if this insufferable chamber is some kind of prize. There are no windows. A dank chill seeps through the rotting mortar, even in the summer heat. And the wretched hearth—hastily added once I opened my practice—clogs more often than not, filling my Lair with a perpetual smoky scent and smearing soot on every surface.

It's more a dragon's lair out of a story than a parlor in a Grace house. Rose dubbed it such soon after she arrived: the Lair, where the Dark Grace dwells. I hate the place so much that I didn't even fight her.

Callow ruffles as the bell jangles a second time, as annoyed as I am at the intrusion. I offer my kestrel a few meat trimmings snuck from beneath Cook's nose.

"What do you think this one wants?" Callow shakes out her white-speckled wings in a decidedly irritated fashion and nudges my hand with her head. And I suppose there's no point putting it off any longer. "Enter!"

The chamber door squeals and I can tell immediately from the footsteps that it isn't one of my regulars. They're anxious. Hesitant. A startle away from turning and bolting.

I wish they would turn and bolt.

Whispering apologies to Callow, I fix her hood over her head. She's easier to handle this way, especially around

strangers. I'd found the kestrel as a chick some years ago, half-dead and starving on the sea cliffs outside Briar's main gates. Though I'm no healing Grace, I was able to nurse her back to health with what tinctures I could concoct. She's never taken to anyone else. Not that I blame her. Mistress Lavender said it would have been kinder to kill the bird, and one of the servants mistook her for a rat and nearly bludgeoned her to death. The maid was lucky I didn't return the favor.

The nervous patron hovers in my doorway, hood close around her face despite the oppressive, salt-soaked heat of late summer. The firelight flits over her features, sharpening her cheekbones. Hollowing her eye sockets. Definitely not a regular. She looks like she thinks I'm going to roast her over a spit. As if my pathetic hearth is large enough to manage that. Would that it could.

"Your Grace." The edges of her brocade cloak tremble as she scrapes a curtsy.

"What brings you here?" I stroke Callow's snowy breast with one finger, affecting the cool, detached manner people expect from the Dark Grace. I don't ask her name. Within these walls, she doesn't have one. Patrons do not come to my Lair seeking beauty or charm or wit as they would in a Grace's parlor. They come for revenge. For cruelty. Services provided at a steep price, and that price includes anonymity.

"I . . . I have a . . . cat." She stumbles. Flushes at her own threadbare deception.

I resist the urge to roll my eyes. My patrons always spare less than half a thought to crafting a decent backstory. Bri-

ar's Grace Laws prevent the use of their magic for ill will, which should directly prohibit my line of work. But I am the only Grace of my kind. And all I do is prepare the elixirs. Once the vials leave my hands, it's up to the patrons to dispose of them as they please. And as long as I don't *know* I'm party to an attack on another citizen, I cannot be held liable for my patrons' actions. Besides that, my elixirs cost three times the average rate of those of a Grace. And if I stopped working, the Crown wouldn't get its cut.

"A cat." I school my features into the neutral expression I've perfected over the years.

"Yes, a cat." She fiddles with the buttons at her sleeves. "A cat too pretty for its own good. She's getting too much attention from the other . . . cats."

Dragon's teeth, she's even worse than the others. And I once had a man tell me his own rose garden smelled too nice and was attracting bees.

"And you wish to . . ."

"I don't want to harm the cat," the woman says automatically. "I just want . . ."

"To give her a few warts?" A standard ugliness elixir.

Her gaze brightens in the gloom. How predictable. New patrons are always so grateful when I offer suggestions. I think it makes them feel less the villain. Like they didn't come here specifically to do harm to someone they've convinced themselves deserves it.

The patron nods and I motion for her to sit at a worn wooden table near the hearth as I start assembling ingredients for the elixir. Swamp water. A dash of powdered night-

shade. And, for the warts, I cart over the short, boxy cage which houses my toad, Prince Markham.

The woman stammers, flinching as I plop His Highness on the table in front of her. He lets out a belchy croak.

Only the crackle of the flames and the grind of the pestle break the silence as I work. I'm grateful. Sometimes my patrons try to plump up their lies, offering needless explanations and sugarcoated stories. Hoping I'll nod along. Make it easier on their consciences. I never do. They deserve whatever guilt festers in their guts.

But this woman only chews the inside of her cheek, glancing at the door every few moments as if she's worried she'll be discovered. She needn't be. Every aspect of my craft is steeped in secrecy. Patrons book their appointments with me using a shrouded alcove around the side of the house, built specifically for the purpose. There's a little screen secured into the wall, where patrons or their servants can murmur their needs to our house manager, Delphine. She even takes the payments through a slot and allows aliases on the bookings, a practice forbidden to the other Graces. If Delphine guesses who the patrons are, she's paid well enough to keep her mouth shut.

My current patron, who calls herself Mistress Briar—how original—seems to have forgotten about the great care Lavender House has taken to protect her identity. Despite the Lair's cold, sweat beads on her upper lip and she dabs it away with a lace handkerchief. She jumps every time Callow moves on her perch. Ignoring her restlessness, I hold a long needle over a candle flame, and then with a quiet apology, I

pierce one of Prince Markham's warts. He gurgles in protest as a few drops of his blood, so dark they're almost black, fall into the waiting vial. I add it to the rest of the mixture.

Now for the most important piece. With a small scalpel, I press down on my finger. A line of green blood—the source of my power—wells. I count to three, inhaling the faint scent of woodsmoke and loam that is my magic, as it dribbles onto the other enhancements. Immediately, the mixture hisses. I stir it with a long spoon until a cloud of black smoke erupts from the mortar. My patron covers her slender, high-born nose and coughs.

“For your cat.” I raise an eyebrow, pouring the elixir into a vial and sliding it across the table. “The more you use, the more warts she'll get.”

She nods and pockets it, not daring to say another word, not even deigning to thank me.

As the door snicks closed behind her, I curse the familiar sickening feeling that settles like hot coals inside me. I should be used to these requests by now. I can't even count the number of ugliness elixirs I've produced over the years. And I'm bound by the Grace Laws to satisfy my patrons' needs.

But the woman's abrupt dismissal still stings, as does every other slight I've endured since I began working in Lavender House. My patrons pay good coin for my services, but not one of them would willingly meet my eye if they passed me on the street. I am reviled and despised for the very reasons I'm sought out. A figure of dark, evil magic. A member of a race all but stamped out. A Vila.

A monster.

## CHAPTER TWO

“**H**onestly, if I have to shade Lady Dulcet’s eyes lavender *one* more time.” Rose selects an apricot tart from a tiered stand at tea that afternoon. Her fluffy rat of a dog, Calliope, whines at her side. “Today was the third appointment this month.”

“It’s in honor of the princess, surely,” Marigold chimes in, slathering a healthy layer of jam onto a scone. “It is her birthday.”

“I don’t care what it is.” Rose sucks sticky orange filling from her fingers and slips a scrap of ham to Calliope, who slurps it up and begs for another. “Lady Dulcet should understand that it will take more than one of my elixirs to maintain the beauty of someone of her . . . circumstances.”

“You mean age.” Laurel doesn’t even glance up from the book that’s balanced on her knees. “And be careful. You’ve had to make Lady Dulcet three elixirs in a month. People will think your gift is Fading.”

Like me, the Graces draw power from their blood. But while my blood is the green of the Vila, the Graces share the golden-colored blood of the light Fae of Etheria, the Fae courts beyond Briar's northern mountain border. Centuries ago, the High King of the Fae, Oryn, and the Briarian ruler entered into an alliance agreement. In exchange for the humans' aid during the War of the Fae, the Etherians granted Briar the Graces. Born of human women, the Graces possess only a fraction of the power a full-blooded Fae can wield. The Etherians have mighty staffs said to be able to command the sea currents or turn straw into gold. Their long lives skirt the boundaries of immortality. But the Graces' gilded blood can only produce charms and blessings when added to an elixir. And eventually, that golden blood Fades to a dull silver color. The Fade is slow at first, usually starting at around age thirty. A Grace will begin to need more drops of her blood in each elixir. Strands of her vibrant hair will turn silver. And then, the most feared sign of all, flecks of silver will appear in her blood. After that, it's only a matter of time before the Grace's gift is spent and she endures the rest of her life as powerless as any other mortal woman.

I imagine my own green blood will Fade one day, as I'm not full-blooded Vila. But I don't care half as much about losing my power as the Graces do. I've seen Rose picking through her hair when she thinks she's alone, looking for the dreaded, telltale silver in her roots. And if she's overzealous—crafting too many elixirs or increasing the dosage of her blood to heighten their potency—her gift could Fade well before her time.

“Don’t even dare.” Rose’s golden eyes narrow to slits. She’s been marked as one of the most skilled beauty Graces since she Bloomed five years ago, consistently ranked in the top quarter of the house standings each year. “Mistress Lavender will dock your coin for spreading such lies.”

“And what will she do to you?” Laurel lazily flips a page. “For speaking ill of a patron?”

Rose’s pink curls begin to vibrate. I smile into my tea.

“And what are you so pleased about, *Malyce*?”

After so many years, I would have thought myself immune to the ugly nickname. But humiliation flames in my cheeks anyway. Rose watches me with her perpetual haughty smirk as she drops another sugar cube into her teacup.

“Well. Are you going to sit there and gawp at me?” She drums her nails against the linen tablecloth. “Pass the cream.”

Scowling, I reach for the pitcher. But not before I use the tines of my fork to open the small wound on my fingertip, earned from crafting elixirs that morning. I let a pearl of green blood fall into the cream before Rose can see. She accepts the pitcher carefully, making sure not to accidentally brush hands with me, and chatters to Marigold about inane court gossip.

One heartbeat. Two. I suck the tip of my finger, tasting the leather and damp earth of my magic. The next time Rose sips her tea, her lips come away black. She chokes, spewing a stream of filth across the table.

“You stupid Vila!” Rose slams her fists on the table. The dishes rattle. Her pearly teeth are now coated in pitch. Lau-

rel covers her shocked laughter with her book.

“I’m not a Vila.” Not entirely, anyway. Though my exact heritage is unclear, it’s obvious from my outward appearance that I am at least half human. The other half, though . . .

“You’re right.” Calliope yaps and growls, her wispy-haired ears lying flat. “You’re worse. You’re a *mongrel*.”

The room goes silent. Even the buttery afternoon sunlight dulls as a cloud passes by the arched windows. Laurel and Marigold dart nervous glances between us. They’re wondering what I’ll do next. Make boils erupt on Rose’s skin? Tie her tongue into a knot? Anger surges inside me. I want nothing more than to do exactly what they expect of me. To live up to my reputation. The Dark Grace. Dealer of black wishes and evil deeds. But I don’t get the chance.

“Graces!” Mistress Lavender sails into the room, clapping twice. “That’s quite enough.”

“It’s her fault. Look at what she did to me!” Rose bares her inky teeth. Her tongue looks like a garden slug.

Mistress Lavender sighs, beleaguered. “Alyce, really.”

“This is intolerable,” Rose continues. “I cannot be expected to work in a house that—”

“Rose, go and clean up.”

“But—”

“I trust you have your schedule from Delphine. You don’t want your patrons to see you looking like that.” Mistress Lavender straightens her bodice. “I’ll deal with your sister.”

“She’s *not* our sister.” Rose flings her napkin onto the crumbly pastry remains on her plate, pinches Marigold’s elbow, and stalks away, her dog trotting at her heels. Laurel

follows mutely behind them, shooting me a sympathetic look.

“I don’t understand you, Alyce.” Mistress Lavender perches in the always-empty seat beside me. Her gaze—silver now that she’s Faded—is tempered with accusation. “Why do you insist on making a target of yourself?”

“Me?” My blood begins to heat. “Rose hates me. All of them do. I’m too . . . different.”

The word presses against my eardrums and my temples begin to throb. My “sisters” are Graces, able to grant hundreds of prized attributes with mere drops of their blood. I study the reptilian green veins marring the backs of my hands. Next to the Graces, I’m like the sludge staining Rose’s teacup. A nuisance someone else has to clean up.

“That may be.” Mistress Lavender risks a tentative touch on my arm. The amethyst ring on her first finger, denoting her status as housemistress of Lavender House, glints. “But you earn your keep in this house. You have value, Alyce.”

I snort. “Curses?”

“All magic has a purpose.” A refrain I’ve heard a hundred thousand times. As if it’s possible to somehow gloss over the fact that the purpose of my magic seems to be to do harm. “And it isn’t as if you lack for patrons. Lavender House rose three rankings once you Bloomed. Surely that’s worth something. Even to you.”

I clench my fingernails into my palms. It isn’t.

There are about twenty Grace houses in Briar, each with anywhere from three to thirty Graces. Every year, the Grace Council—a handful of noblemen selected by the king and

tasked with regulating the Grace system—determines the rank of those houses based on a number of factors: the tabulation of each house’s yearly earnings, accuracy and precision of its Graces’ elixirs, growth from the previous year, patron loyalty, and a hundred other things, it seems. Official rankings are announced at the Grace Celebration thrown at the palace each spring. High-ranking houses accrue royal favor and increased patronage. Exceptional Graces and housemistresses are recognized with gifts and more desirable house placements. Mistress Lavender, obsessed with earning a position at a more prestigious house, drills our weaknesses into us at every opportunity.

“I don’t give a dragon’s ass—”

“Mind your attitude, my dear.” Mistress Lavender squeezes a warning into my shoulder. “That’s no way to speak of your house. You earn triple the coin of your sisters. Why don’t you spend some of your wages on . . . well . . .” She looks around the room, like the answer might be written on the floral-papered walls. “Perhaps you’d like to wear something a trifle more . . . becoming?”

Yes, because a change of dress would instantaneously reverse the ostracism I’ve endured for twenty years. But at least Mistress Lavender didn’t suggest letting Rose try to alter my appearance or Marigold school my manners with one of their elixirs. My childhood was riddled with excruciating failed attempts to conceal my macabre blood, re-sculpt my bones, and cool my temper. They all slid off me like oil from water, leaving me exactly as I am now: stringy, jet-black hair that refuses to stay in any sort of passable ar-

rangement; dry, tissue-thin skin; a figure as flat and bland as dry toast; and a temperament that's only festered over the years.

"I don't need new clothes." I've no patience for such fripperies. And, in truth, I think my patrons enjoy seeing me this way. A hideous half-Vila in stained, musty clothes.

"Well." Mistress Lavender pats a stray silver ringlet back into place. Before she Faded, our housemistress was gifted in wit. And I know she's trying her best to access the dregs of that power and sway me to her side. But the attempt is useless. I'll never be like the others.

"I just wish you wouldn't be so contrary. I'm sure there's some sweetness in your core. We just have to tempt it out." She examines the ratty tips of my hair, lines bracketing the corners of her mouth. I angle away from her. "In the meantime, will you please stop baiting the others? You only draw more attention to yourself."

I start to argue that I don't bait everyone. Just Rose. Sometimes Marigold. And only when they deserve it. But at that moment, the glass-paned double doors of the dining room burst open. Rose barrels through, waving a gilt-edged parchment. Marigold tumbles in behind her.

"It's from the palace!" Calliope nearly trips over Rose's feet as her mistress twirls with delight. The dog's tiny nails skitter over the parquet floor. "They've added a ball to the Princess Aurora's birthday celebrations!"

Mistress Lavender snatches the invitation out of Rose's hand.

"Oh, it will be wonderful!" Marigold begins dancing

with an imaginary partner. “It’s been ages since we’ve had a grand party. Her other birthdays have been positively grim.”

She isn’t wrong. Parties and balls are commonplace at the palace, especially for the Graces, who seem to be invited to such gatherings every week. But since the deaths of the crown princess’s two elder sisters, the birthday celebrations the royal family has held in honor of their remaining daughter have been lacking. Last year, there was only a dinner to which a select few were invited. Rose wasn’t one of them, and we heard about it for weeks.

“Dragon’s teeth, why did they wait so long to announce? We’ve no time to prepare.”

As if Rose doesn’t have a wardrobe full of ridiculous outfits she buys with all the coin she makes. Just the other day, she came downstairs wearing a hat with an actual bird’s nest secured into the netting, with three jewel-speckled eggs glistening inside it. Eggs that, thanks to some innovation Grace magic, hatched a trio of twittering canary diamond chicks every so often. I was half-tempted to untether Callow and let her use the thing as a roost.

Rose begins ticking things off on her fingers. “I’ll need a new gown, of course. And slippers. Do you think Madame LaRoche could have them ready in time?”

Mistress Lavender peers at her over her half-moon spectacles. “This says the ball is in a week. A new gown so quickly would be quite the request, Rose, dear.”

“But I’m a favorite of madame’s. And I give her enough coin to deserve the effort.” She frowns. “Perhaps an elixir will encourage her to get me what I need.”

“That isn’t allowed and you know it,” Laurel chides from across the room. Tall and willowy, Laurel’s beauty isn’t gaudy and overdone like the other Graces’. Though always well-dressed, the wisdom Grace makes no effort to procure expensive clothing or jewelry. Her emerald-green hair is tied in a neat, uncomplicated braid, complexion free of the golden powder the other Graces apply liberally to their faces and necks. Sometimes I even catch her with ink or enhancements smudged across her forehead. “Graces aren’t permitted to bestow personal favors.”

“Don’t quote the Grace Laws at me.” Rose glowers. “You’d grant a favor to Madame LaRoche in a trice if she could give you something you craved badly enough. You just don’t care about fashion.”

“Laurel is right,” Mistress Lavender intercedes. “Payment is always required for our services and not”—she holds up one finger as Rose begins to argue—“in the form of gifts or favors. The Grace Laws are very clear, Rose. You can’t go about flouting them. It’s for your protection, as well as for fairness’s sake.”

Just after the War of the Fae, when the Graces were new to Briar, wealthy nobles would buy Grace children, lock them away, and force them to work only for their own families. Some even tried to extract the Etherian magic from the captive Graces’ blood and replicate its power. These horrible practices led to the establishment of the Grace Council and the passing of the Grace Laws, which are still in effect today. Last I checked, there are over four hundred Grace Laws, and the council adds new ones whenever it sees fit.

Some of the laws are fair enough: Graces are required to be paid for their services, which is where Rose gets her coin to buy slippers made of sea glass and rare cloudlike ostrich plumes imported from other realms. Briar is also obligated to care for its Graces once they Fade—like providing a housemistress placement, a good marriage, or a stipend. But some laws are unpopular even among the Graces, when they dare to complain about them. Rose hates the law forbidding her from showing bias toward any one patron or family, thus thwarting her scheme to bribe Madame LaRoche into completing her gown in time for the ball.

It's an extraordinary occurrence when Rose doesn't get her way, and I have to cover my mouth to hide my grin.

"What are you smirking at, Malyce?" Rose sneers in my direction. "You don't even get to go to the ball. They'd never let something like you ruin a royal celebration."

*Something.* Rage claws up my chest. I shouldn't let Rose provoke me like this, but I can't help it. She knows every weakness. My fingers twitch. I want to wipe that look off her face and use it to scrub the floors.

"I don't see why she can't go to the ball." Laurel reads over Mistress Lavender's shoulder. "The invitation is addressed to the Graces."

"She's not a Grace." This time it's Marigold.

"I'm known as the Dark Grace. Even at the palace." I don't give a dragon's tooth about the ball. But I don't want them to be right.

The honeyed tint of Rose's skin flames bright copper. Marigold splutters something unintelligible. And Laurel

curves a slow smile. We're not exactly allies, Laurel and I, but she's never hated me the way the other two do. I nod my thanks.

Mistress Lavender clears her throat and removes her spectacles, silver gaze studying me carefully. "I'm delighted to see you taking such an unprecedented interest in Grace activities, Alyce. Though I'm not entirely sure the invitation *is* meant for you."

"It isn't." Rose grips the back of a chair so hard it looks like it might buckle. I wonder if I could come up with an elixir to make her glossy pink curls fall out, one by one. "She's never even gone to a Grace Celebration. Why should she be invited to the princess's birthday?"

"That may be true. But simply because she's never accompanied us to a Grace Celebration doesn't mean she would not have been permitted to attend one. I have always excused her on account of, well . . ." Mistress Lavender clears her throat. "Now, however . . ." She taps the edge of the parchment against the tabletop. "I suppose, as long as you're caught up on your appointments and other duties, I see no reason why you should not go with us."

I think I see steam billow from Rose's nostrils. Marigold lets out a cry. They both try to speak at once, but Mistress Lavender raises a hand to stay them. "We must be inclusive, Graces. Alyce is under my protection, and it's my decision if she goes."

"Some party this will be," Rose grumbles. "No one will be able to enjoy themselves. Everyone will be too afraid she'll curse them. A Vila skulking in the palace, indeed."

“That’s quite enough. I’m sure you all have patrons coming. Or has Delphine been slacking in her duties?” Mistress Lavender pockets the invitation and begins steering the others out of the room, but not before Rose’s words twist into me with painful precision.

Even in an evening gown, the guests will know who I am. What I do. Already, when I move through the Grace District, the crowds part around me like I have some kind of plague. What will it be like for me in a ballroom?

A nudge on my elbow brings me out of my thoughts.

“It’s a masque.” Laurel speaks close to my ear. “If you don’t wish it, no one need know you were ever there.”

A masque. A night where I can shed the identity of Dark Grace and become anyone I wish. The idea creeps over me like the sun rising over the sea. And I decide that the Dark Grace—no, Alyce—is going to make her first appearance at a royal ball.

JASON LOO  
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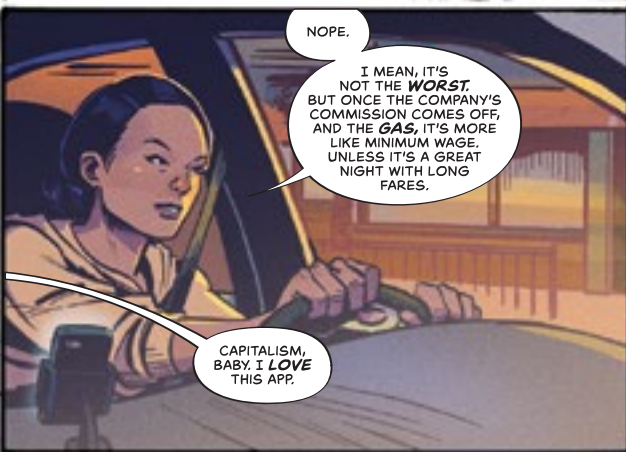
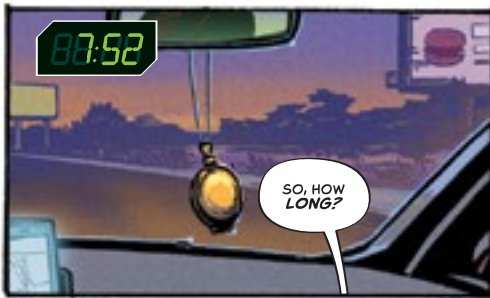
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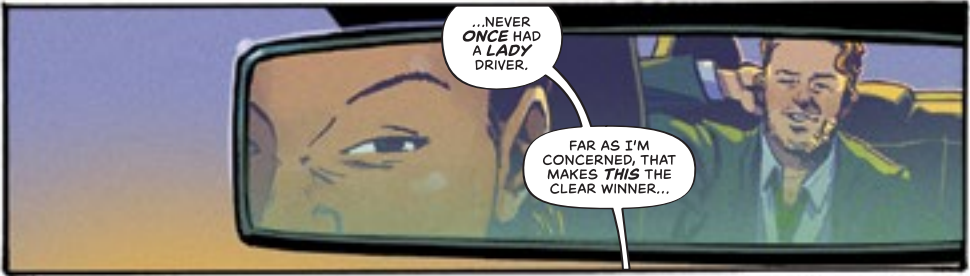
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WAS GOING TO JUST GET TACOS FROM THE PIER AND--

I DON'T NEED YOU TO FEED ME, I--

OKAY! FINE! I'LL SWING BY, I--



"BYE TO YOU TOO, MOM..



SMOKING IS DANGEROUS.



SORRY, BUDDY. CIGARETTE PACKAGE ALREADY BEAT YOU TO THE PUNCH WITH THE DIRE WARNINGS.

OH, NO. I MEANT IT'S DANGEROUS AS IT JUST INVITES PEOPLE...



...TO STRIKE UP A CONVERSATION IN SEARCH OF A LIGHT.

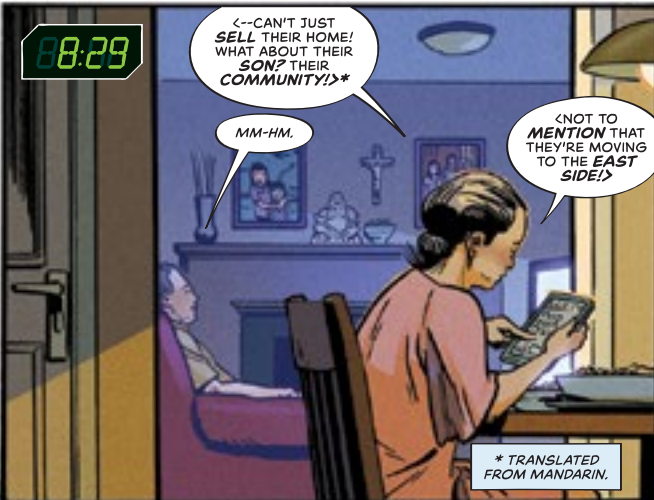
GOT ONE?



THANKS.



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8:29

<--CAN'T JUST SELL THEIR HOME! WHAT ABOUT THEIR SON? THEIR COMMUNITY!>\*

MM-HM.

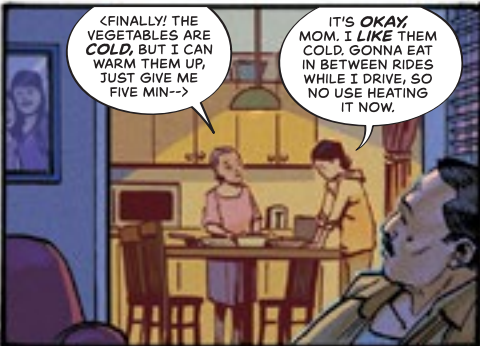
<NOT TO MENTION THAT THEY'RE MOVING TO THE EAST SIDE!>

\* TRANSLATED FROM MANDARIN.



<WHAT, ARE THEY GOING TO TRAVEL AN HOUR FOR PROPER GROCERIES, OR-->

HEY, GUYS.



<FINALLY! THE VEGETABLES ARE COLD, BUT I CAN WARM THEM UP, JUST GIVE ME FIVE MIN-->

IT'S OKAY, MOM. I LIKE THEM COLD. GONNA EAT IN BETWEEN RIDES WHILE I DRIVE, SO NO USE HEATING IT NOW.



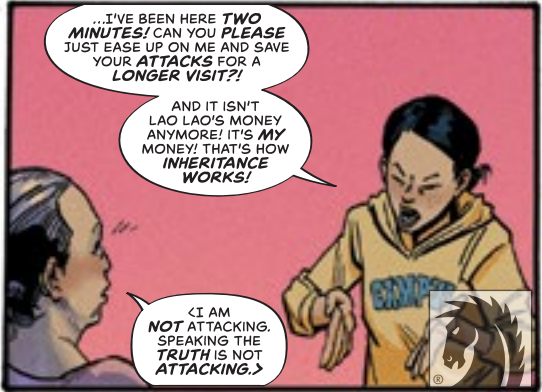
<DRIVING! YOU THROW AWAY YOUR JOB FOR DRIVING! INSTEAD OF BUSINESS SCHOOL WE SHOULD HAVE SENT YOU TO DRIVING SCHOOL!>

YOU DID SEND ME TO DRIVING SCHOOL, WHEN I WAS SIXTEEN. IT'S WHY I KNOW HOW TO DRIVE.



<YOUR NICE NEW CAR! YOUR GRANDMOTHER WOULD DIE AGAIN IF SHE KNEW HOW YOU SPENT HER MONEY!>

OH MY GOD...



...I'VE BEEN HERE TWO MINUTES! CAN YOU PLEASE JUST EASE UP ON ME AND SAVE YOUR ATTACKS FOR A LONGER VISIT?!

AND IT ISN'T LAO LAO'S MONEY ANYMORE! IT'S MY MONEY! THAT'S HOW INHERITANCE WORKS!

<I AM NOT ATTACKING. SPEAKING THE TRUTH IS NOT ATTACKING.>



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FUCK OFF WITH THAT SHIT! I AIN'T BEEN INTO HOUSTON IN YEARS! YOU'RE TRIPPIN' IF YOU THINK--

PLEASE DON'T LET THEM BE MY FARE PLEASE DON'T--



OH THANK GOD...

DUMU?



YES.

I AM VERY HAPPY TO HEAR THAT.



FOR A SECOND I WAS WORRIED YOU WERE ONE OF THE GUYS OUT THERE.

THE LAST THING I NEED IS TO CLEAN VOMIT OUT OF THE BACK OF MY CAR. AT LEAST NOT THIS EARLY INTO MY SHIFT.

OH, DON'T WORRY...



...I HAVEN'T HAD A DRINK IN YEARS, JANICE.

I...HOW DID YOU KNOW MY NAME...?



JANEL GUN  
4.7★

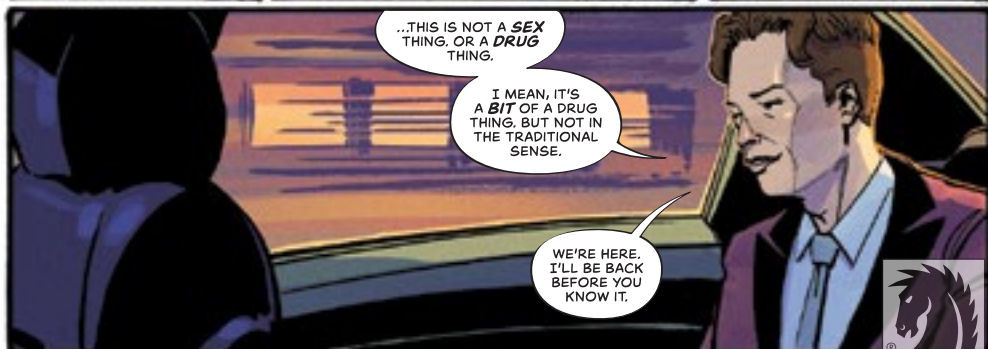


HEH. I SHOULD'VE PUT A FAKE NAME IN THERE. LIKE AN EROTIC DANCER.

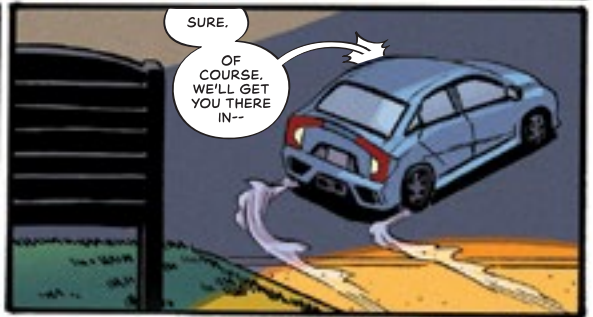
"SLEEPY DRIVESALOT."



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WHAT THE FUCK...?

EVERYTHING WILL BE FINE...



...TRUST ME.

YOU JUST HAVE TO FOLLOW THE APP. THINGS WILL GET STRANGE, BUT IF YOU JUST FOLLOW THAT APP YOU'LL BE OKAY. IT'S BEST IF YOU DON'T--



WHAT THE FUCK IS GOING ON?

--ASK QUESTIONS.

THEY ALWAYS ASK QUESTIONS...



HOW'D YOU HACK MY PHONE?! WHO IS THIS WOMAN AND WHY DOES SHE LOOK LIKE SHE'S BEING CARTED OFF TO HER EXECUTION?!

WHO THE FUCK ARE YOU EVEN?! I CAN'T--

I'M...I'M...



...I'M ALREADY DEAD...



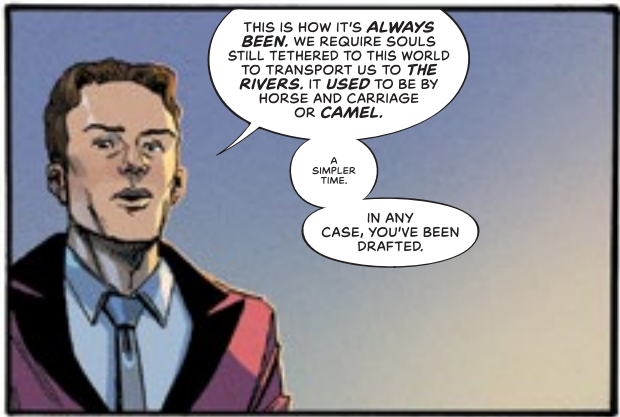




WE, YOU AND I, ARE TRANSPORTING A *SOUL* TO THE *AFTER-LIFE*.

ARE YOU LISTENING?

WHAT...



THIS IS HOW IT'S *ALWAYS BEEN*. WE REQUIRE SOULS STILL TETHERED TO THIS WORLD TO TRANSPORT US TO *THE RIVERS*. IT *USED* TO BE BY HORSE AND CARRIAGE OR *CAMEL*.

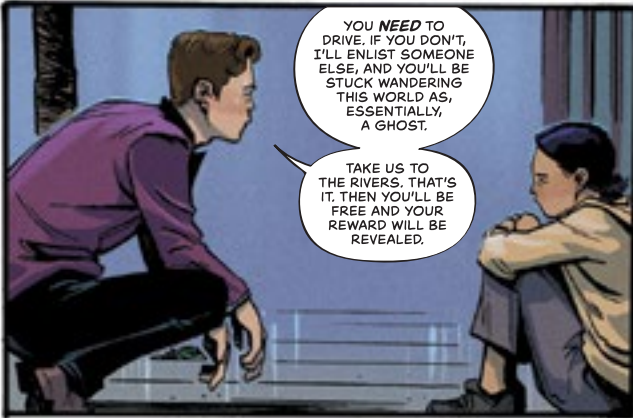
A SIMPLER TIME.

IN ANY CASE, YOU'VE BEEN DRAFTED.



ARE YOU OKAY?

NO.



YOU *NEED* TO DRIVE. IF YOU DON'T, I'LL ENLIST SOMEONE ELSE, AND YOU'LL BE STUCK WANDERING THIS WORLD AS, ESSENTIALLY, A GHOST.

TAKE US TO THE RIVERS. THAT'S IT. THEN YOU'LL BE FREE AND YOUR REWARD WILL BE REVEALED.

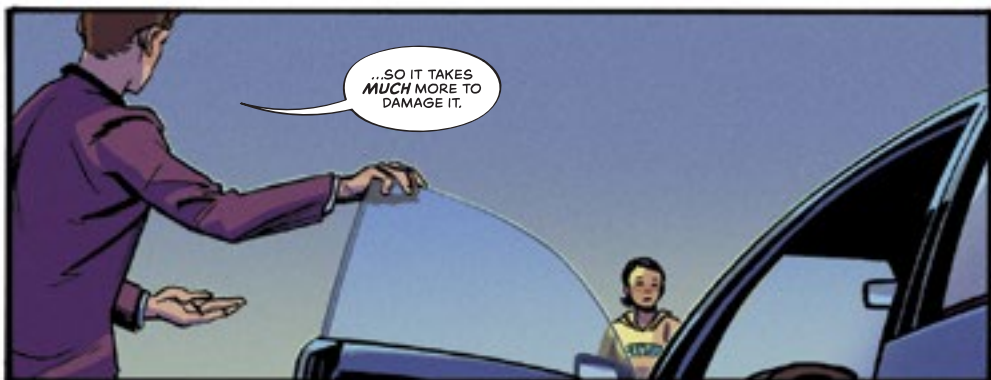


YOU'LL WANT TO HURRY SOMEWHAT...



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...SO IT TAKES  
**MUCH** MORE TO  
DAMAGE IT.



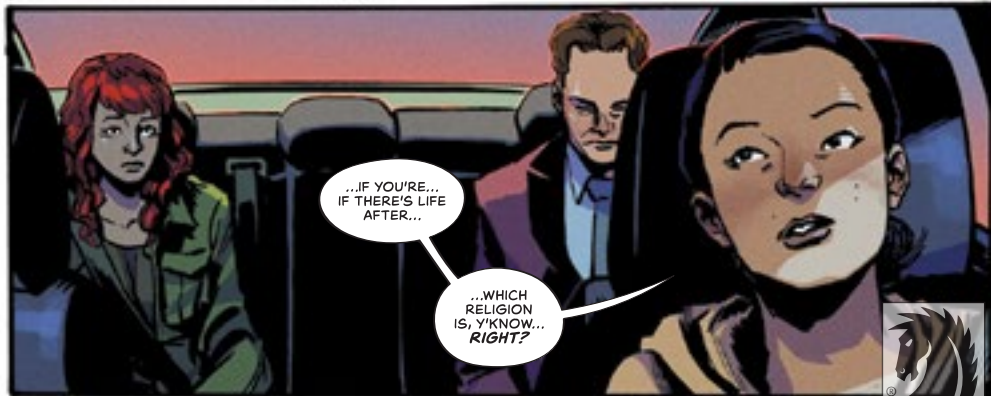
VERY WELL  
THEN...



...DRIVE.



I...SO,  
WHICH...

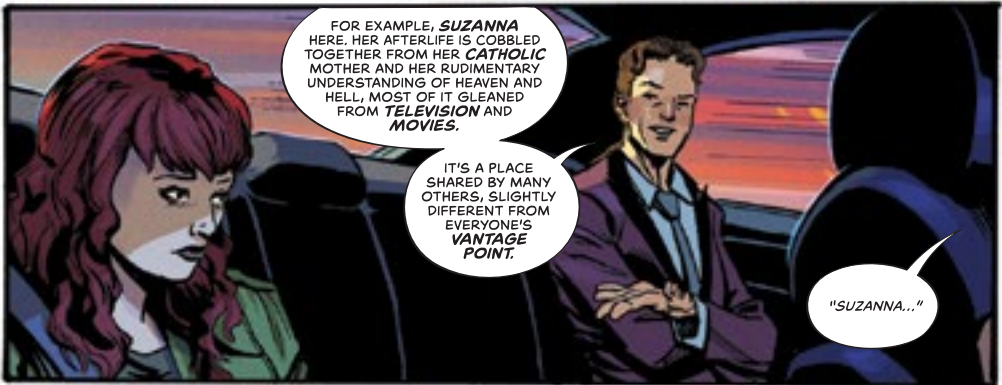


...IF YOU'RE...  
IF THERE'S LIFE  
AFTER...

...WHICH  
RELIGION  
IS, Y'KNOW...  
**RIGHT?**



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...YOU DIDN'T KNOW, I MEAN...I DIDN'T EVEN KNOW, REALLY...

SORRY, BUT...

...WE NEED TO SPEED THIS WAY UP, LADIES...

KRAKOOM

"...OTHER MEMBERS OF THE HORDE ARE HERE."







DEMONS.

EVERY SOUL IS A BOUNTY SOME WORTH MORE THAN OTHERS.

MS. SUZANNA'S SOUL IS APPARENTLY WORTH ENOUGH FOR THIS TO BE A BIT OF A FIGHT...

WAIT, WAIT...



"WORTH ENOUGH?"

HOW?!



HELL IS FILLED WITH HORRIBLE PEOPLE. DIME A DOZEN.

BUT SUZANNA HERE... SHE'S ONLY HORRIBLE TO HERSELF...

...AND THAT'S PRICELESS IN THE UNDERWORLD...

BUT I...I DON'T WANT TO...



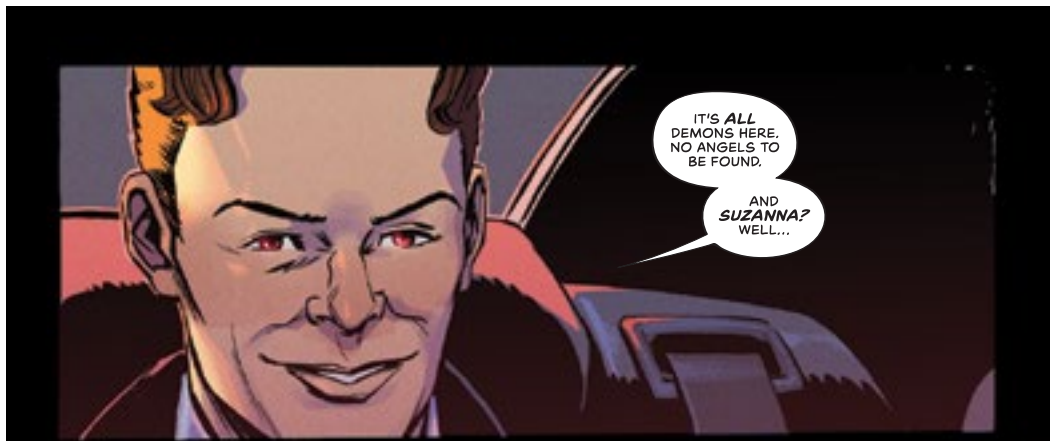
--WAIT, WAIT.

YOU SAID "OTHER MEMBERS OF THE HORDE," WHICH--WHICH WOULD FUCKING INDICATE--

OH, JANICE, DID I NOT MENTION THAT PART?



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IT'S *ALL* DEMONS HERE. NO ANGELS TO BE FOUND.

AND *SUZANNA*? WELL...



"...SHE'S COMING TO HELL."



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