

TEN STEPS PAST THE LANTERN LINE

I only went ten steps past the Lantern Line because I'm an idiot with a flashlight and a caffeine addiction. Everyone knows the corridor past that point is off-limits. Even the walls whisper, "Turn back," which is frankly rude because I don't like being bossed around by **walls**.

Still, there I was: bold, brave, and possibly dumber than a box of cursed **teeth**.

It wasn't my fault. Someone had left a trail of **papers** scattered across the floor — not subtle, "Oops I dropped a page," papers, but dramatic, "Someone flung an entire **file** cabinet into oblivion" papers.

Naturally, I followed them.

After ten steps, the temperature dropped like the corridor suddenly remembered it was dead. The lanterns flickered. My flashlight flickered. My patience flickered.

Behind me I heard a soft **breathing** sound that didn't match any employee I like... or any employee left alive.

The papers led to a trunk wedged in a shadowed nook — not one of our sanctioned trunks. This one had **scratches**, like someone with too many **fingers** tried to claw their way out. Or in. Hard to tell.

A sticky note was slapped on the lid.

Written in frantic, looping handwriting:

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"Do not remove. Do not read. Do not ignore."

I ignored it immediately.

Inside the trunk was... nothing. No, worse than nothing. It was **dark**, but a **hungry** kind of dark that felt like it wanted to chew my kneecaps.



The air pressed in heavy, thick with **static** and regret. Mostly regret.

Something moved inside.

Something **wet**.

I slammed the trunk shut, nearly trapping my coat in the process. I'm brave-ish, but I'm not "let the abyss nibble me" brave.

When I turned around, all the papers were gone.

Every single one.

But twelve words kept ringing in my head afterward — the ones that felt like they'd been watching me.

I'm sure it's fine.

I'm ignoring the nosebleeds.

