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Charlotte Gospel



DEMONS AND GHOSTS

**CHARLOTTE
GASPEL:
DEMONS AND
GHOSTS**

CRAMIRO STARENN

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Original Title:

Charlotte Gaspel: Fantasma y Demonios

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Inside Illustrations:

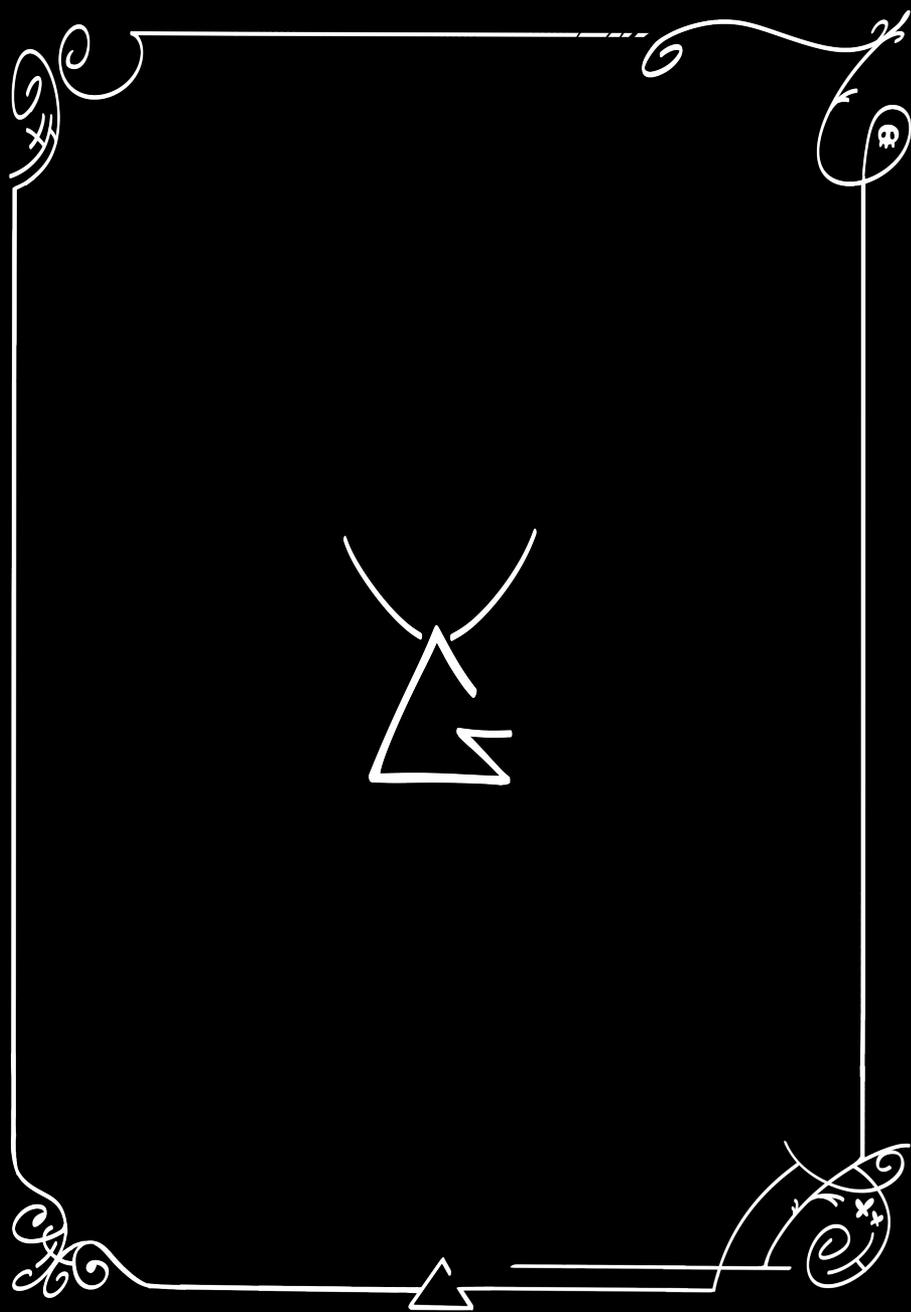
SarahpDraws - Cramiro Starenn

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*“Knowledge is power and ignorance is bliss.
The ignorant will be weak, but the powerful are doomed.”*

Introduction

Being the author of this book, I want to make it clear to you, person reading this, that all my life I have disowned reading books; so many long words and unnecessary turns only made me think that the authors of the “Classics of Literature” were just filling space on the pages to make their book look fatter. I'm a strong believer that if you want to say something in a novel, do it in the most efficient way possible, mainly because ordinary people don't have all the time in the world to feel like they're not getting anywhere. Therefore, this book doesn't seek to make you feel good about the number of words you read, but to tell a story without making you feel like you're struggling to understand it.

If you bought the book, thank you very much. If you downloaded it pirated, now you know that I know you did, and the guilt will haunt you for decades until you let out your last breath, completely regretful and broken for not paying for a digital file taken from the internet. If it was given to you, enjoy it.

If you are mature enough you will be able to tolerate the sensitive topics in this book, such as cancer, homicide, philosophical dilemmas, drugs, religious conflicts and such things. After all, I made this book to be easy to read. Also, this is my first one and English is not my native language, so it is not wise to expect a perfectly correct composition.

All characters, situations, and places related are fictional and whether they relate directly or indirectly to real or fictional people, places, or situations is completely accidental. Fictitious places will be indicated in *italics* to avoid confusion. If you maintain a contrary stance towards any of the topics reported (including religion), I apologize in advance and I guarantee that all the content written in the following pages is pure entertainment.

In short, thank you for reading.



ACT I: GENESIS



I

FIAT LUX

Setting us in some obscure place in France in 1957, two lovers granted the gift of life to a new creature they had forged; a curious spawn; a beautiful child they decided to call *Charlie*.

And so they began to call him: Charles Gaspel, descendant of Jeff Gaspel and Clara Moreau; possessor of all the love that his precious parents could give him; destined for happiness and prosperity. Make no mistake, no matter how you present him, in reality his family lacked wealth.

Mister Gaspel possessed great gifts for entertainment, and I write *Mister* only out of courtesy, as he possessed no trace of nobility. He and his beloved felt a great need to raise a child. People of his economic class could not afford such luxuries, but under the circumstances, what is there to lose? Youth? Time? Vital energy to preserve mental stability? Bullshit. All that is secondary when you have no money. Not to starve to death is the highest priority, and although they

had no expensive possessions, they had plenty of love to give, so the decision was made. *Let's have a child!* What a madness! What a recklessness! What an absence of common sense! But more than anything else... What a blessing!, because when Charlie was born, their lives began to take on color.

The mother, Miss Moreau, knew the limits of the world. She knew when to stop the show, when to get the best deal, and how to use your weapons well. Obviously, she and her beloved were a perfect match, as Jeff was, by definition, reckless. He was passionate; someone with vision, heart and courage, but such an attitude also brings problems.

Charlie had the bad luck to be born in a town where the law was just an urban legend. *Soufreville*; that's how they identified the location, so that when someone sees crows eating the remains of a corpse in the street they can say: *I found it here, in Soufreville. Yes, where I was mugged last week.*

The authority figures who reside there are usually members of the most important mafia in the region. Everyone calls it: *The Coffin*. It looks cute when they say: *If you don't pay what you owe The Coffin, they will cut your guts out.*

In theory, they are also the bank there. People often turn to *The Coffin* for loans, as long as they pay back the money in 2 months and 16 days maximum. Paying interest, of course.



Luckily, every time Jeff and Clara borrowed money from *The Coffin*, Clara made sure they didn't miss a single crumb.

The Gaspels were doing very well for themselves. Mostly they didn't lack food, health, or happiness, so their life was technically good. Unfortunately, as you can imagine, good stories don't come from good times; bad times make good stories, but good stories don't make good times.

II

GOOD TIMES

Jeff Gaspel was retiring to go to work. Clara could no longer provide for the family because Charlie had just been born, so she had to stay home and he had to work twice as hard. He grabbed his leaky hat, put on his brown coat, kissed his wife, kissed his son and walked away. She closed the door, put the newborn on the table, grabbed a broom and set about cleaning the shack.

Charlie was wrapped in yellow sheets. By then he could only recognize blurry gray dots on the ceiling, black patches and a shadowy confusion. Clara couldn't see how to spend the *free* time she had. At that time of the day she used to work in a cafeteria doing the cleaning. She used to wash all the dishes, dozens of glasses, dozens of cutlery and two coffee pots. Everything a cafeteria could lend to strangers eating their food she would leave sparkling clean, but this

time, she only had to wash two plates, two glasses, six pieces of cutlery and no coffee pots.

She thinks a lot about organizing her time, but barely remembers the child she left on the table, who rolled slowly and silently to the corner. She whistles as she cleans out the grimy blue refrigerator. She stuck his head all the way into the bottom of it to wipe the walls; meanwhile, Charlie managed to visualize brown and yellow stains vaguely organized in a pattern as his small arms supported the weight of his torso. If you are attentive, you may have already noticed that the infant is with half of his body off the table, looking at the floor like a child looks at the surface of the pool from the bottom. Charlie feels the need to stabilize his position; you know, to stop feeling so dizzy, so he tries to move his feet, which are enclosed in a sheet that surrounds his body, which is very peculiar, since newborns can't move that way.

What are you doing, Clara? Cleaning the refrigerator? Attend the child already, so this anxiety will finally dissipate! Charlie begins to lean up and down.

Clara pulls her body out of the blue refrigerator, straightens her back and turns her head to spot the boy on the table. Surprise! He's 1.4 seconds away from landing.

I'm sure you'll be pleased to know that yes, Clara managed to save the baby in time. It would be a bit disappointing to end the story here.

Illusive anyone who thinks Clara was going to let go of the baby after that. After dusting and dusting everything possible in the house, Clara started cooking lunch. She couldn't do that with the baby in her arms, so she made sure to put him on her bed surrounded by pillows. While Charlie was still quietly visualizing nothingness, Clara pondered the

future as she sliced the bread. She thought: “How can I ensure my son's education and health?” And, “How are we going to support ourselves with so little income and so much demand for the baby?”

Charlie is two days old, and it is curious that, since his initial cry, he has not cried again. Charlie has received his feeding and comfort needs by communicating with only slight newborn whimpers. Anyone would say that he had developmental problems, but that was not the case, Charlie was born healthy, although with a curious meteorological coincidence: The day Charlie was born, the weather was sunny; not perfect, but there were no imposing clouds, at least not until Clara went into labor. Gray clouds blanketed the sky and sounds of thunder peeked timidly across the landscape. It began to rain just as Charlie directly exposed his skin to the outside world. From the time Charlie left his mother's placenta until he stopped crying, the rain was incessant, the wind blew hard and the birds began to leave their nest.

At the end of the storm, Charlie could be seen covered with lots of fluids, breathing for the first time. His little heart was beginning to beat on its own. Too bad that lack of awareness will be by far the greatest blessing Charlie will ever have had.

Back to the matter at hand, two days after his birth, Clara was cooking meat in the pan when there was a knock at the door. It was *The Coffin*. Two men in purple suits introduced themselves. Clara's heart began to beat frantically as soon as she opened the door to them, for she felt confused. What could be the reason for the Mafia to visit her and her newborn at such an hour of the morning?

She looked sideways at the two of them and one of the men began to speak:

“Good mornig, Mrs. Gaspel.”

“Good... morning,” Clara answered. “What can I do for you?”

“May we come in?”

Clara turns nervously, worried about Charlie, then sees the two men and nods shyly with her eyes lowered.

The two men enter. One sits at the table and the other stands while the pan is still heating the meat.

Clara sits down anyway, praying for the boy not to make a sound. The last thing her family needs is for the Mafia to know they have a newborn son.

“How are you this morning, Mrs. Gaspel?” asks the man sitting at the table, taking off his sunglasses and speaking warmly.

“That's none of your business,” Clara replied kindly as she sees the other man prowling around the kitchen.

“Let's not drag this out any longer than necessary,” he says as he pulls out a sheet of paper with lots of data on it. “Your husband is being imprudent with his payments. Yesterday he took out a sizable loan a week after paying off the previous debt.”

Clara was holding back her urge to smash her head on the table. Fortunately, she and Jeff introduced themselves to *The Coffin* as married, as they could be notified of their transactions in parallel, but in reality, they have never been married. They consider it an unnecessary action, but it is useful for some things; so, for some people, they are theoretically married.

The other man was looking at the cracks in the walls and touching decorative objects. That made Clara nervous,

since, apart from the fact that she felt someone was prowling around her house, she was worried that he would suddenly feel like going into the room where she has the baby.

“Mrs. Gaspel,” insists the man sitting in the chair.

His words echo thunderously in Clara's head.

“Excuse me. We'll catch up in less than two months,” she replies.

“Unfortunately, it hasn't been a week since the previous loan, so you'll have to pay your debt next month.”

The stress is mounting as the meat is burning in the pan. So far, Clara has tried to avoid eye contact with the man sitting in the chair, but with the nerves of that situation rising so high, she decided to rush the matter. She looked him in the eye. His appearance was intimidating, but not far from ordinary. He was dark-skinned, had a trained body, a gentle look and an earring in his right ear. The other man was almost the opposite: he was skinny, blond, with a menacing face and a furrowed brow.

Very agitated, she said to the man sitting in the chair:

“Thanks for letting us know. We'll be sure to catch up in as short a time as possible.”

The standing man was making his way to the rooms. The door to the room where Charlie was staying was open, so the danger seemed to be increasing.

Clara had to take action, so she stood up and said very upset:

“Hey!”

The two men looked at her seriously.

“... Don't you want a cup of tea?”

The standing man walks to the table and sits down, then nods his head, without taking his eyes off Clara.

She flips the meat in the pan being very close to burning. She opens a door under the dishwasher and takes out some medicinal leaves. She puts the kettle on the two-place electric stove and starts boiling the water with the tea leaves.

Clara lets out a sigh. By now she had everything under control.

Since the two men were seated, the most efficient way to identify them would be: The chunky man and the skinny man. The chunky man started to make small talk with Clara. He is not the type of person that loves silence, unlike Clara, who was begging for just a few minutes, so he began to speak:

“So, have you had any experiences you'd like to share?”

“Excuse me?” Clara asked.

“I mean, do you have any information that concerns us?”

At this point she saw no choice but to answer.

“Yes. Now that you mention it, I remember a recent anecdote.” She begins to tell it while cooking the meat. “A few months ago, my husband had a bit of an addiction to carnival rides, those activities where money was exchanged for a chance to win a prize. He would always say, ‘One more time; I'm having so much fun!’ We don't usually go to carnivals, it's a luxury we can't afford, but it was our anniversary and we wanted to have a good time for a while. Anyway, he saw one of those machines that measured your

strength and wanted to try it more than any other machine in the place. I told him: 'Don't bother, it's very expensive and it's probably tricked'. He answered me like a little kid: 'I don't want to be left in doubt!' and..."

The tea was ready. She stopped what she was doing to start serving it. As good Europeans, they could not refuse tea. It is a symbol of elegance and nobility; it is somewhat insulting that such qualities are associated with such people, but their boss is a fan of this concept and always makes sure to have tea in his office, head table or living room. It is essential for meetings, for small talk and for intimidation. You can't be a powerful leader if you don't have tea served for your subordinates. You can't be a polite person if you don't serve tea to your visitors.

In short, they drink their tea in peace and quiet. Clara drinks it with all the nerves in the world. She just wants them to leave. She just wants to be able to check on her son to make sure he's not eating a cockroach off the floor. Let this encounter end. Please let it end.

Seven o'clock chimed on the clock, a reminder of the time they had to take advantage of. The chunky man stood up and politely said goodbye to Clara on behalf of the two of them. They left, but not before reminding her that the debts must be paid before the next month.

The door closed slowly, and she only wanted to hear the sweet sound of the handle returning to its original position.

Three... Two... One ... Closed.



Clara ran into Charlie's room and hugged him tightly. You could feel that she was going to burst into tears at any moment. Her watery eyes stared at the ceiling, looking for some kind of divine comfort, because she knew how much she had to suffer to get out of that damned place.

III

GOOD STORIES

It was October, a splendid time of year. The temperature is warm, the colour palettes change, the sun is covered by grey clouds and the Halloween festivities begin.

A fair is being staged in the centre of town, and as usual, there are balloons, street tents and deadly long-term food, but the most remarkable thing is the large stage with no roof or walls in the centre of the park. It is an ordinary stage: It has wooden supports, a *wide* performance area, a curtain with limited space behind it for the performers, and those concrete seats that act as stairs, the kind you see on public football fields. It was a very special place, because it was never wasted. There was always a show every now and then.

Theatre is a magnificent and exciting art, but nobody was more excited about it than Jeff Gaspel. He worked as an

actor and director. That was his passion. It's nice to have a job that you're passionate about, but naturally you don't support your family with a job that makes you happy. You don't feed your children with happiness; your children acquire happiness with food from a respectable salary, so Jeff had two jobs: Apart from acting in the theatre, he worked in a laundry.

Jeff washed, folded and organised around *a lot* of white sheets a day. Every morning he breathes in all kinds of cleaning chemicals; every day he put miles of thread into washing machines; every afternoon he is a slave of his situation. He should be grateful that he at least has a salary, even if it is a rather low one. At five o'clock in the morning he would get out of bed, at six o'clock he would head for the laundry, at three o'clock in the afternoon he would meet his team in the park and at six o'clock in the evening he would be back home so he could sleep seven hours at least. It was a tight routine, but it worked.

A week before Charlie was born, Jeff was working on the Hamlet performance. The group had half the script ready when the baby was born, so they needed Jeff to complete the piece they were going to perform, which clearly couldn't be, since he had to pull out of the show to do the parenting. Under the circumstances, Jeff had to meet with the group to inform them of his absence.

Back to the current events of the story. The mobsters leave Clara's house and close the door. Jeff was already on his way to the central park to give the good-bad news to his theatre group.

He said, "I'm afraid I will not be able to direct the show. I'm a father now and have to manage my time better."

Jeff hoped that someone would congratulate him on his new occupation, or at least show understanding. There was

an odd four seconds or so of silence until one of the members asked, “So we're cancelling the show?”

Jeff replied a little quizzically: “No, you can do it without me.”

There were six members not counting Jeff: a tall dork, a grumpy old man, a stuck-up fat woman, a friendly dwarf, a shy skinny woman and a blond psychopath. The one who asked the question was Mari, the shy skinny one.

Hearing Jeff's answer, Viktor, the grumpy old man, replied: “Are you telling me you're going to throw away all the work we've done so far?”

Jeff replies, “I haven't thrown anything away. I'm just letting you guys finish writing the show.”

Joanna, the stuck-up woman, retaliates to Viktor, “Are you saying that what we do is crap?”

Hautel, the tall fool, joins in: “The problematic here is the lack of a director.”

Emilio, the nice short one, tries to calm the situation: “We're going to be fine. Jeff was a good mentor and we can follow his example to finish the play.”

When he said this, all that remained was to listen to the silence of Clyde, the blond psychopath.

Enough was enough. The group was too inconsiderate to waste any more explanations. The message had been made clear, so he was out of there.

The theatrical group was never very friendly. They were an ensemble of fame and money lovers. Jeff had been with them for at least four years and three months and he could tell they were very good at working as a team, but nothing can be perfect. Actors in general are poor people with frustrated dreams and they didn't have a clean history to be honest. If they were not a regular source of income, the group would be considered a bad influence on Jeff.

It was almost fourteen minutes to seven, the time Jeff was supposed to be at the laundromat, but there was something else he had to do.

The sun was covered by the endless morning clouds. The atmosphere was cold and grey, and Jeff was heading down a dark alley. He had an order to pick up, so he entered the narrow place. There was trash lying around, dogs barking in the distance and a man leaning against the wall with his hands in his jacket. Jeff saw him and knew he was the man with whom he had a pending exchange. He leaned against the wall about fifty-seven inches away from him and the man asked him, "Do the crows sound very prosperous on the evening?"

Jeff replied, "Not so much as the tiles at noon."

That was the password, apparently.

The man then pulled out a strange object covered by a bag behind a dumpster. The object was about three feet and a half tall, so he rolled it out on little plastic wheels.

Don't try too hard to guess what it is, it's a baby car.

Jeff paid the man and he walked away. Not a word was said but Jeff now has a *brand new* pram.

It's no mystery that those plastic prams are quite expensive, so the only way Jeff could buy it was to pay a third party to give him a stolen or pirated one at a more affordable price. It's not that hard to find that kind of business out there.

Anyway, Jeff arrives at work on time. He puts the car in an employee locker and gets to work. There had been no inconveniences in the plan; of course, I'm not including the big hiccup of the visit from the two mobsters. That afternoon will sure be interesting for both of them.

Back at the house, Jeff opens the door and announces his arrival. Clara is in her room folding clothes.

She doesn't answer Jeff's knock and he has an idea why. He leaves the pram in the kitchen and peeks into the room where she and her son are and then strikes up a conversation:

“Hello, dear. How was your day?”

Clara shows no response; in fact, she keeps folding the laundry. Jeff insists:

“From what I see, you noticed.” Smiles nervously. “I still don't know how you always figure everything out on your own.”

Clara stops what she's doing and lets out a long sigh. Then, without turning around, she says to Jeff:

“I wish I'd figured it out myself.”

“What do you mean?” he asks hesitantly.

Clara turns and exclaims:

“I mean, I wish I hadn't been told by gangsters in our own house!”

“Clara, it wasn't...”

“And with our son present, Jeff! What were you thinking?!”

“Listen, it wasn't my...”

“You never think things through, you don't even seem to care about nothing but your career! It's not the first time you've done this to us and you know it!”

“... You're done?” he said after two seconds of silence.

She covers her forehead notably stressed, and looking at the floor, asks disappointed:

“What was the loan for?”

Jeff goes to the kitchen and returns with the car. After seeing it, Clara covers her mouth with teary eyes and says in a broken voice:

“... Honey... I can't believe it...”

Clara throws her arms around Jeff, crying with emotion. She doesn't seem angry after all.

A pram, even if it doesn't look like it, is a great gift for a couple on low incomes.

“Why didn't you tell me about this?” Clara asks, wiping away her tears.

“I wanted it to be a surprise; besides, I'm sure you wouldn't give me permission to take out another loan, even if I got a big discount.”

“It's perfect... but,” she punches him in the stomach, “it wasn't a smart move on your part.”

“I understand,” said Jeff, aching in the fetal position.

Clara wants to try it, so she holds Charlie and lays him down in the car.

Charlie is expressionless. He opens his eyes and begins to locate his two favourite blurry blobs: mom and dad. Both looking at him with joy and uncertainty.

What happens next?

Let's just say it won't be a bad story.

IV

THE NEXT ACT

The family went for a walk for a while in the park. They weren't afraid of being caught with a baby, mainly because they knew that the mafia hasn't policed the streets since 1947.

It was Saturday afternoon and the family was excited to see the weird stuff of the fairground vendors. In October there are all sorts of crazy things on the streets, like Halloween themed decorations, especially the spooky decorated pumpkins on the porches, which you don't know whose they are because they don't last more than an hour in one house, as they get stolen or eaten; there are also artificial spider webs; real spider webs; decorative papers; and something very peculiar: rubbish bags stuffed with papers so that they look like body bags. The fun part is guessing which one is fake.

Charlie was not deprived of the excitement, as his baby carriage allowed him a great view of the reddish leaves falling from the brown trees and the gray sky. It would be quite a spectacle if it weren't for the fact that the only thing his underdeveloped eyes could allow him to see were spots without depth or consistency; in fact, I don't think he could have seen anything outside the edges of his crib.

You could see confetti, toilet paper and plastic bags in the treetops, including the smell of the burnt flour from the fruit cakes. All this meant one thing: It was time to play carnival games!

Jeff was jumping with impatience, but he'd be too dumb to think Clara would let him near one of those. However, they had to walk past them to get to the other rides.

The further they walked, the more attractive the prizes looked. They went from bitten apples to expensive candy, even stuffed animals. Jeff could only watch the booth attendants as they set up the games for the night. Some vendors were asleep in their chairs, but others seemed to be begging for your attention. Clara enjoyed the ride; Jeff's addiction didn't bother her, mainly because she only brought money for just one attraction.

The Ferris wheel. You never quite knew the exact name of the ride, but you already know which one: You get on a carriage, which is wheeled up into the sky and back down again. Silly and technically dangerous, but fun. After all, it gave that feeling of power and freedom that humans yearn for so much: To be at a great height, watching others like ants while contemplating your superiority.

Anyway, they went there. They gave the driver a coin and got on. Charlie enjoyed being in a confined space with the feeling of being in slow motion towards the heights. Clara

and Jeff enjoyed the view and the lights that adorned the houses. Naturally when someone goes up on one of these devices they are usually worried that it will stop working at the worst possible moment, and considering the fact that the person at the top is the most powerful and at the same time the most vulnerable, you might be thinking that luck did not favour our dear characters, but, on the contrary, the wheel of fortune stopped working when they were about to come down. Crazy, isn't it? They managed to get off the strange attraction with some difficulty while the supervisors found a way to repair the disaster. What caused the breakdown? It's a good thing you asked, because I'm going to tell you:

It was a raccoon. A simple rodent was frolicking in the machine's wiring and circuitry. Fortunately, it didn't end up being anything serious.

Jeff and Clara breathed a sigh of relief at the situation, initially irrelevant, but demonstrating the strange decisions that fate makes.

They made their way to the stage, where a new show was about to be performed. On a wall there was a poster announcing the person who was going to amaze the audience: *Steven G. Ledger, the Wizard*. They showed some indifference at first, but it was a good way to distract Jeff from his addiction to games.

They took a seat in the bleachers to wait, Charlie resting on his mother's lap so he wouldn't miss the show. They didn't have to wait long, because the show started right away.

The curtain opens. The first thing you see is the *wizard* with his back facing the audience. Wearing a distinctive ponytail, a big crimson velvet suit and very elegant black pants. His hair was grey, not *old people gray hair*, just grey, like the moon, only sprayed all over with grey paint. He wore shiny red shoes and gloves, an amulet around his neck and

no hat. There were only three things on the stage: the *wizard*, a small bench and an old vinyl record player resting on the previously mentioned bench. Six seconds after the curtain opened, the supposed *wizard* placed a record on the player and it began to play a bouncy jazz song from 1934. Steven, *the wizard*, turned to the audience and shouted with excitement:

“Ladies and gentlemen! Girls and boys! Dogs, cats, rats and spectres, welcome to my show! Tonight I will present to you my splendid skills of ordinary magic. If I may have your attention, please, you will see an ordinary tissue.” It was a white handkerchief with the unique peculiarity of being very ordinary. “Naturally, you would usually get a dove or some other kind of flying animal out of a tissue like this, but I honestly feel that such a trick is no longer surprising, so...” he waves the tissue and places it on the palm of his hands “I am going to materialize something a little more unusual.”

The audience looks on with curiosity, expecting some kind of revelation, or at least a cheap trick.

The handkerchief begins to burst into flames without warning. The audience gasps in surprise and concern, but *the mysterious wizard* shows no sign of disturbance.

The fire turns purple, purpler and purpler. The hands of the mysterious sorcerer burn for eight seconds straight. The audience was in shock as they watched the fire abruptly cease to show that a rabbit had indeed materialized in his hands.

The rabbit looked a little strange, perhaps because of its abrupt appearance, the perfectly white fur, or the fact that it has a pair of horns as if it was a moose.

The audience began to applaud, but the show had literally just begun. Just as the rabbit appeared, it vanished when *the mysterious wizard* put it in his sack.

The next act was something a little creepier, and although opinions are divided, many would confirm that getting your elbow through your chest by cutting your back open is not a very pleasant thing to watch; however, the lack of humanity of *the mysterious wizard* made him think it would be a good spectacle for the whole family. Without going that far, he faced the audience, removed his jacket, bent his arm in such a way that he could draw his elbow to his stomach, pressed hard until his eyes turned red and he did not let out the slightest breath of air as his chest began to consume his arm. His shirt ripped at the contact of the skin pressing against his own flesh. *The mysterious wizard* slowly turned around to give the audience a better view. His shoulder began to make unsettling noises as a bulge in his back became noticeable. His spine was showing through the shirt bending to the side as his flesh shifted; his forearm was getting more and more out of sight; the bulge in his back, covered by his shirt, was getting much bigger and people were just thinking about what trick he was using. No, they were begging for what they were seeing wasn't real. His arm was no longer visible in its original position; his hand was consumed by his torso and his eyes no longer had a trace of white in them. His back looked strange, as his bulge could no longer be considered a bulge, mainly because his shirt was beginning to rip. Finally, it ended up splitting, revealing the hand of *the mysterious wizard* followed by his forearm. The most observant could notice the opening in the skin where the arm protruded. There was no blood; it was like piercing an egg with a pen, assuming the egg has a fleshy shell two inches thick.

For the final move, *the mysterious wizard* bent down in that position and made the jazz hand gesture while a

fragment of the music kept repeating due to a scratching of the vinyl record.

I could omit the audience's reaction to such a spectacle, but I know you want to know what was going through their minds. To make a long story short, during the whole act there was nothing but moans of anguish, discomfort, fear, amazement and, in some cases, pleasure. When the act was over, everyone was silent, waiting to wake up or for *the mysterious wizard* to show a fake arm; however, there was only nine seconds of awkward silence, silence from astonished faces that just wanted to get out of their skulls. *The mysterious wizard* brought his arm into the traditional position at a disturbing speed. It was at this point that the audience began to mutter aloud that the situation was too strange to be real. Some got up from their chairs trying to slowly back away in fear that the mysterious wizard would detach their eyes with his mind or something. The wizard, a little flustered by the unexpected reaction of his audience, stopped them by exclaiming, "Wait, I'm joking! Don't get alarmed, ladies and gentlemen. I'm sure you're going to love the next act." The audience, somewhat uneasy, decided to stay. Just out of curiosity about what might happen in the next act.

The next act involved a hoop; you know, those hoops that are used for dancing, playing games and other recreational activities. He took out the hoop and showed it to the audience. Again, there was nothing special about the object, but it was beginning to cause uncertainty as to what it might do. *The mysterious wizard* grasped the hoop with his two hands stretched out in front of him and recited a few words in Latin: *Egredere ex rationalitate tua, veni in mentem tuam in perditionem cadens.*

People began to stare at the object that now took full prominence in the performance. Their senses began to feel strange; the limbs of the audience seemed to deteriorate in their own perception, but that didn't matter, because the inside of the ring was much more interesting. The colours, the textures, the depth, all began to distort inside that circle. If you had imagination, you could even see the weavings of the universe.

Everyone let out a different groan of excitement, as they didn't see the same thing. Some saw a blue frog with door handles instead of eyes. Others saw a purple liquid on a grey floor. Charlie, on the other hand, saw a heart, a human heart on fire. Charlie would never forget that image, mainly because at that moment, what was inside the hoop was the first thing he had ever seen in his life that wasn't blobs of undefined colours.

The mysterious wizard quickly put the hoop away, and sure enough, the people in the stands began to scream uncontrollably. They felt pain in their eyes, in their fingers and head. What drove that scream was more fright than pain, because, if it had been more prolonged and desperate, the skies would have clouded over, the sound of thunder would have roared and rain would have fallen on the ground, because Charlie would have cried.



It was time for everyone to go home. The show wasn't over, but everyone knew they had to leave. You may wonder how the mysterious wizard reacted to such a rejection. The answer is simple: He didn't, he was gone by the time the audience regained consciousness. He disappeared, like a leaf in the wind; like a bug in the rain; like the audience's belongings when they awoke from their trance.

Clara and Jeff didn't worry too much. Charlie was fine and all they had was a button and half a pencil, but *Steven G. Ledger's* appearance will be remembered as just another event in *Soufreville's* disturbing history.

V

CAROUSEL

Summer: A beautiful time of year. Mosquitoes bite naked flesh, the heat makes you sleepy and thunderstorms roll in after three o'clock in the afternoon, but people tend to enjoy summer a lot, because they see the less terrifying side of it: the holidays, of course. Many adults didn't have a summer holiday, but they still enjoyed the idea of sweating like pigs on a surface of sand and salt water, at least some of them.

Eight years, nine months and four days had passed since the previous anecdote. Charlie had not changed much; of course, not considering that he was no longer a baby, but a human being almost nine years old.

In spite of difficult circumstances, the three of them were still in the same village. Although it was already the sixties, *Soufreville* did not seem to have evolved; likewise, no one expected it to.

These were not the best of times for Clara and Jeff, partly because they now feared for their son's safety, and mainly because they had lost their financial stability. As a result, they could not support themselves as before, which meant that from time to time they had to steal medicine and negotiate more than usual. Some days they didn't eat, some days they didn't wash themselves completely, but every day they lived every day like it was their last; I don't mean that every day was spent on a hospital gurney, I mean that they enjoyed every day with the fear that the next day they would be dead.

Charlie always had a smile on his face. He loved his parents and made sure that all their hard work was not in vain. Although *The Coffin* had them on the Frequent Latecomers list, Jeff and Clara weren't too worried, because they had a plan. To be more precise: A plan to get out of town.

Sunlight could be seen through the rectangular holes protected by old pieces of cloth that Charlie called *windows*. The welcoming reflection of that yellow light on the wooden floor always fills anyone with optimism. On such a warm morning, the spider webs on the ceiling didn't look so spooky and gave a more rustic feel to the decorations. Don't get the wrong idea, the Gaspel's house wasn't that neglected, Charlie actually slept in the *attic*, an empty space under the roof to be more precise. The reason he lived there is simple: *The Coffin* still thought Jeff and Clara didn't have a child, and that served to ensure their protection, because, if dangerous people don't know you have something you love, they can't take it away from you.

I'm sure you'd think that making the decision to hide your child for eight and a half years is stupidly risky, but it really wasn't, because when Charlie was three years and two months old, a police station was set up near the town, so *The*

Coffin couldn't afford to have tall men in suits and communicators guarding the open areas of town, it's more useful to have the cops do that function, and, honestly, they don't care who is walking with who. This was great news for many, including Jeff and Clara, mainly because they could take their son out in broad daylight without raising any suspicions. However, this didn't stop the occasional man in purple coming to visit.

Time for breakfast. It was 8:39 a.m. Charlie came down from his *room* to eat with his family and was shocked by the surprise that awaited him at the table: His parents were able to get some fairly fresh fruit: two apples, a banana and a papaya. Apples are common where they lived, but papayas or bananas were rarely available, so they let their son choose between the two exotic fruits while they ate the apples.

Charlie looked at the two options with curiosity. On the one hand, bananas are an easy fruit to become familiar with; they are tempting, a choice worthy of privileged people. It seemed like the right choice. But on the other hand, there was the papaya, something very foreign, but at the same time very relatable. A strange choice, but there was something about that fruit that called to him. It felt so real and natural that he was sure that if he went with his instinct and chose it he would not regret it.

However, he didn't choose one. He decided that it didn't matter, as long as it all ran its course, and that's what he told them. His parents looked at their beloved son with confusion and told him with a certain neutrality: "It's only a fruit. Just pick one."

Charlie was a quite reserved child. He was smart, he knew what to do in risky situations. When his parents were busy working, he would hide in the town library. It wasn't much, but Charlie considered it his second home; in fact, there was never anyone there except for the kind librarian, so

it was a perfect hiding place. Being in that big place full of information put him in a corner to spend his time reading, and it wasn't unpleasant for him at all. He enjoyed reading long books, it took days, but it was worth it. Children's books, on the other hand, were not very interesting. They were nonsense to him, ridiculous things created for inattentive minds. Sure, they had an obvious moral message, but he didn't see it as appropriate that they were infused in such small, illustrated spaces.

However, there was one short book in the children's literature section that he loved: *The Little Prince*. He felt it would be more appropriate for that book to be in the adult world literature section. Perhaps they put it on the little shelf for *Little Readers* because they thought that since it is less than 100 pages long it wouldn't be an immersive or interesting read, but boy were they wrong. There was no book as wise or as thoughtful and deep as *The Little Prince*.

Charlie's high IQ allowed him to understand books of more than 236 pages. It may not sound like much, but if you were eight years and nine months old and read something of that magnitude, you'd be the loneliest kid in school. Fortunately, Charlie didn't go to school. His parents taught him to read and he learned the rest on his own, so he doesn't need social pressure to memorise dates and names on the calendar.

It was four twenty-four in the afternoon, his mother would not be long in coming for him. Charlie was already getting bored, so he decided to find a different book to read while he waited, and maybe take it home. He looked for a ladder and climbed it to reach for a book that might interest him in the *Classics of Fiction* section. He began to name the titles aloud and all he could see were: *Frederick and the Pink Knight*; *The Lagoon of Skulls*; *Furry Skins* and little else. He searched for the longest book possible until he found possibly the most mysterious of them all. That book seemed

to be the one for him; it was as big as his head and as heavy as you could imagine. He put it in his hands and carefully put it down. That book was a strange case, it was an important book for many, several copies of it were preserved over the years and almost everyone had a copy of a smaller or larger size. But what was it that made it so special? Well, it is the main basis of several religions, as well as having two different adaptations before and after the death of the *messiah*.

You probably already know the story. It's a classic tale. The *messiah* was a great lover of wine and was said to be the son of *The One who reigns in the Sky*. So important was this character that they began to count the years after his birth.

Anyway, Charlie began to read that book. Perhaps his weight affected him a little, as he felt some pain in his stomach, *but it didn't matter*. His mother had arrived and it was time to go home. Charlie said goodbye to the librarian and took the book with him.

Since Clara didn't have much to do at home, she decided to take Charlie for a walk in the park. Maybe they could go on a ride.

It was quite a beautiful afternoon: the sky had that characteristic red colour and the wind was blowing pleasantly. Clara and Charlie walked through the park, stepping on the leaves and contemplating the *beauty* of human nature, watching how adults create metal traps to get money from minors who want to entertain themselves for a few minutes. Between tree and tree they found the perfect attraction to have fun that afternoon: an old carousel. It's not often activated, but it's one of the most fun rides in the park, so they decided to line up to ride it. A lot of kids were in the park that day, and they all knew it was a limited ride, so almost everyone was lining up to go on it.

Clara had the money and Charlie had the patience, so it wasn't hard to wait. When the time finally came, a group of girls got ahead of the line and got in first. That wouldn't have been a problem if the carousel was an unlimited service, but it turns out that after those girls no one else could get in, because all the seats were already taken; but to add salt to the wound, the carousel manager said that this was going to be the last round. So yes, it was a problem.

Charlie was quite frustrated. It wasn't fair. It wasn't fair at all, but crying wouldn't make any difference, so all he could do was watch the people who had taken his happiness away from him amuse themselves by spinning in circles on unstable wooden horses. The girls went round and round, taunting those who couldn't get in, laughing their heads off as the wooden horse went up and down, slower and slower, faster and faster... But this was not normal. The carousel stopped for a moment, and the mocking girls stopped laughing. Strange sounds were coming out of that device. "Maybe it's a small fault, a circuit breaker," the observers thought, but that wasn't exactly what stopped it.

Charlie watched the dysfunctional machine with discomfort, but he didn't have time to react.

The wooden bars supporting the roof came loose from their base, causing the whole delicate, old, rusty system to shatter, dropping the roof and killing all the children on those horses. The heavy steel of the roof fell on the weak bodies of those sensitive creatures, crushing their skulls, shedding blood and fracturing some limbs.

The sound...

The sound that Charlie and the others heard for about two and a half seconds that afternoon was impossible to forget. Clear crackles and rumbles, easy to resonate in

echoing spaces, especially in those observant heads in that park.

It was no coincidence, the screams were heard again, those screams of disbelief and terror were heard once more after so many years, so many years since *The Mysterious Wizard* made that appearance in that very park.

It happened again, an accident in a mechanical trap that narrowly missed Charlie. Some would call it coincidence, maybe a message, maybe a lot of luck. Others would say it was karma based on the context, but all would say that the park was cursed by evil forces or the absence of safety inspectors.

Charlie watched in shock as blood ran across the ground, just as he watched the machine attendant run in fear and a raccoon run from the scene of the crime, emerging from the rubble and looking Charlie in the eye as an infant would after breaking a glass in front of his father for the second time.

Clara reacted immediately, carried Charlie in her arms and ran, telling her son and herself: “Nothing happened here, it's time to go home. Nothing happened here, let's go home. Everything is fine, don't worry about it.”



Hours passed, voices ran. Charlie stared dizzily at the letters in his book in the kitchen while his mother cried at the table, telling Jeff all about it. Adults have their ways of dealing with their problems, whether it's drinking or smoking whatever's behind the fridge. Charlie read. The small paragraphs of his new book were very engaging. It distracted him from the possible trauma and that nagging pain in his abdomen; although, deep down, Charlie didn't

feel so bad. It was, after all, just a convenient accident. It was funny, even if his morality prevented him from cracking a smile. And so the afternoon continued until the sky began to darken and the air began to dissipate.

Nothing had happened, everything was fine..

VI

INTERMISSION

The night was very young, the sky was a greyish blue, the rain was in the air like salad at a family dinner, not this particular family, but a family with the possibility of nourishment every night. Through the window you could see the drops crashing furiously to the ground. There wasn't much thunder and it looked like it was going to be a quiet night.

It would have been nice if the whole family started playing a board game. Dreaming is free. What the family was really doing was getting busy. Jeff was looking for possible places to run away and start a new life and Clara was cooking and organizing the family's bills at the same time. All those months of saving were not going to be in vain. Charlie, on the other hand, was in bed, documenting all the sacred fables in the book he had acquired. He had planned to do it in the kitchen, sitting at the table, but the dark circles under his father's eyes indicated that staying there was inappropriate.

I guess you'd rather know what Charlie's doing in his room than watch his parents struggle with stress. I don't blame you.

Charlie was lying belly down on his bed with the book in front of him. He wasn't very comfortable; lying in that position wasn't helping his tummy ache. Maybe it was a bad meal, maybe it was from forced exercise, but it wasn't very urgent so he didn't think much of it.

Eventually, so many repeated words became boring. She decided to put the book aside and start distracting himself in the other known way: he stood up and gently closed her eyes, raised his arms and gracefully began to dance ballet. Her feet moved with extreme care around his central axis; his arms made smooth movements in the air and, as a whole, he seemed to be in a trance-like state where he could control what he felt, using the outside world as a stage.

Dancing was his greatest hobby. Whenever he could, he would play with his legs as he walked, doing little jumps or simply shuffling his feet on the floor.

During that little performance in his room, he remembered the time when he played with the library ladders. He used those ladders designed to reach the high shelves to see through one of the windows that almost touch the ceiling. That's the only safe way for him to see the mafia building.

It was not a singular building. It used to be a luxurious three-story restaurant; I'm talking about long before *Soufreville* suffered an economic crisis, before the birth of *The Coffin* boss. On the outside it had no eye-catching paintings, it was more of a concrete exhibition. Inside, the large rooms where the tables used to be now contained offices, bars and recreational areas. But all Charlie could see was the grey concrete part and transgressive graffiti.

In and out of the building came and went gentlemen in purple suits, gang members and ordinary people going about their business. Charlie might suspect something about it, but for the most part, he did nothing more than observe. He never talked back about the injustice around him. Fear was a good repellent against those with the ability to change the world, and no doubt Charlie was one of them, but he feared. He feared losing everything by opening his mouth.

The thought of all that wouldn't let him dance. He went back to bed and closed his eyes. He thought of a world where everything is perfect. Like I said, dreaming is free.

VII

VISITS

A new dawn broke in. Charlie woke up excited to go for a walk, and he was lucky, because that day was Sunday, and on Sundays the family goes for a walk. But this time they were going to a different place than usual.

A hospital doesn't sound like a very nice place to spend the morning, but it can be a great place to organise an escape to break free from the mob. Jeff and Clara had a great friendship with the receptionist; she would help them escape, so they took advantage of the fact that it wasn't a busy day and started talking. Charlie stayed away from the adults and their boring conversations as any child would. He seemed much more attracted to the waiting room. There were interesting toys for any underage child to play with.

Charlie sat down on the greyish carpet and began to play with a plush monkey. He chose that one in particular

because it was one of the few that could come off the floor; besides, the other option was a plastic truck with no wheels and no compartment. The other toys were limited to incomplete puzzles and small mechanisms to develop the minds of younger children.

The plush monkey Charlie was playing with had special features: It was a yellow monkey with brown and white spots from the moisture and dirt that was lodged in the hospital. It also had a pink nose, a somewhat unusual colour for a yellow monkey's nose, but it was charming. Its limbs seemed to be in place, which is a strange thing for such toys; its arms were long enough to use it as a backpack, and it had its two ears, which sounds very pious, but at that point that was an achievement.

Charlie could play with the monkey for half an hour, but something caught his eye. In a chair sat a medicine student with a big book.

Charlie walked over. He looked friendly. He was very thin, wore glasses and a jumper. He looked focused, although a bit stressed; he was making that expression that some people make when they're anxious; you know, repeatedly lifting his heel. Charlie didn't quite understand the young college student's concern because he didn't yet understand the complexity of the education system and how exhaustive it is to study for six years the sacred art of understanding and healing the human body using only the mind and government-supplied chemicals.

Charlie was no fool, he knew he shouldn't talk to strangers, but there was something about him that made him curious; besides, his parents were twenty-two feet away, so it didn't seem like a dangerous situation.

The college boy looked up and saw Charlie. Their eyes met, and it seemed like a good opportunity to start a dialogue.

“Good morning,” said Charlie with forced eloquence.

“What's up?” replied the university student, coughing a little.

“What are you reading?”

“Not much, it's a notebook where I write down what I need for my exams. I don't know if you know what I mean.”

“I know what the word ‘exam’ means, and I also know what the word ‘notebook’ means, and that book is too long to be considered one.”

Fortunately, one of Charlie's favorite books was the dictionary.

“You're smart,” the college student reacted in surprise. “Where do you study?”

“I'm not supposed to answer that.”

The young man laughed a little laugh and then asked,

“What's your name?”

“Charlie,” he answered, looking at the monkey in his arms.

“My name is Arthur, and I made this notebook myself to write down everything I need to know to be a future surgeon.”

“What do surgeons do?”

“Well...”

Arthur was trying to find a way to explain Charlie that being a surgeon meant penetrating the skin to modify or remove guts of a human being.

“A surgeon,” Arthur said between coughing fits, “is someone who fixes people's organs.”

“That sounds impressive.”

“Do you want to be a surgeon when you grow up?”

Charlie didn't answer that question, instead he looked at the plush monkey shyly. It didn't take long for his parents to call him. It was time for the next visit.

Charlie, before saying goodbye, asked Arthur why he was in a hospital waiting room.

He replied, “It's nothing, just something wrong with my lungs.”

Charlie then said goodbye, and returned to his parents with the plush monkey in his arms. The receptionist saw Charlie with the doll and seeing such a touching situation of a child sweetly attached to his toy, she could not resist saying: “You must return that, it is hospital property”.

Charlie returned to the waiting room and put the toy back where he found it. He took one last look at Arthur, and left as he let out a small laugh with a little cough.

Remember the *Mysterious Wizard*? You'll be happy to know that he's been in touch with Jeff since his last appearance. They've become friends over time due to work issues, and I say that because Jeff was fired from the laundry when Charlie was four years and seven months old. Since then, Jeff has found steady work as an assistant to Steven G. Ledger, aka: *The Mysterious Wizard*, because it turns out that street performers pay well.

Where Steven was staying was a mystery, so Jeff had arranged to meet him in an undeveloped area to talk.

The family arrived at the meeting point. There was no one there, just two crows resting on a pole. They waited about 17 seconds until red smoke began to rise, and out of the thick artificial fog, Steven G. Ledger emerged. Jeff and Clara greeted him.

Steven was an eloquent individual, but he showed no signs of any evil, at least that's what Charlie thought when he saw him.

Steven, seeing Charlie for the first time, greeted him cheerfully. Neither of them knew each other, but there was a special connection between them. Steven extended his hand to properly introduce himself to Charlie. Charlie looked at him innocently and the two shook hands. Suddenly, Steven grabbed his wrist like a snake hunting a small hamster; it was no big deal, he just wanted to see his palm. Charlie was startled for a moment, but calmed down as Steven told him his future by palm reading. He said, "As far as I can see, your hand projects a pretty clear path. You will have a hard road ahead of you, but you will enjoy a fortune in the future." Charlie smiled; hearing good news in a generic format always lifts the spirits, although no one could prove that what he said was true or not.

You would expect a meeting to take place in a comfortable place, but in this case, they stayed in the same cold alley to talk.

Jeff and Clara wanted to escape the town, that was obvious, but they couldn't because of the extensive mob security; however, Steven was their ace up their sleeve. He possessed true Black Magic gifts, not the one they would prefer, but magic was still an advantage. A force outside of logical and scientific reasoning, a power born not from the earth, but from the sacred and the darkness.

Steven was not the type of guy that grant favours, so he offered to help them in exchange for something of value to them. Anything, as long as it was of great emotional value. They were already prepared. Clara gave him an earring, an earring that was placed in Clara's hands on her first date with Jeff, an earring that she kept with her for years, an earring that reminded her of everything Jeff sacrificed for

her. That earring represented 19 years of union, support and love, so it was enough to consider it a precious object.

The item was delivered and the deal was sealed. The plan will be executed in 18 hours and there is no turning back. There is only one visit left:

The Coffin.

Jeff and Clara had friends, few, but they were allies. A week before, they made sure to say goodbye to everyone in private: reading partners, work colleagues, neighbours and close associates. However, they missed to say goodbye to someone important. That's right, they had to make one last move on the mafia.

Before I tell you about *the last loan*, I should update you on one particular visit I forgot to mention. In this case, Jeff had to go alone. The theatre group that vaguely occupies this story has not been always so close during the seven years I have omitted; nevertheless, they are still the only friendship group they lack. Jeff, against all odds, has not lost touch with them. At least he remembers their names, so, in order not to leave any loose ends, he decided to say goodbye to them properly.

He went to where they commonly met and, fortunately, found them practicing random scenes from different plays. It was a rather cloudy afternoon, so he hurried a little.

“Hello, it's been a long time,” Jeff greeted with a certain insecurity and neutrality.

“What's up, partner?” replied Emilio (the short, friendly one).

“How dare you show your face here!” exclaimed Joanna (The fat, smug one).

“After leaving us stranded to our fate!” added Viktor (The grumpy old man).

“I'm in top condition, actually.” admitted Hautel (The tall fool).

“You ruined it, you ruined everything...” murmured Mari (The shy thin one) wistfully.

And you could feel Clyde's (The blond psychopath) indifference.

Jeff didn't bother to explain himself to the wrong people, so he just said with tears in his eyes: “I know I don't deserve your forgiveness, so I'll just say goodbye to you for the last time. It's been a wonderful few years.”

Did I not mention that Jeff is an excellent actor?

The group thought Jeff was suffering from a medical problem and that's why he was saying goodbye, so they didn't ask any more questions and let him go.

Anyway, the air became thick between them, and not without justification; seeing your leader walk out on you twice is not very nice.

It may have been a short visit, but seeing them for a few seconds was enough to make Jeff nervous. The gloomy clouds slowly dissipated as Jeff left that dark park. It was for the best.



The family will no longer have to worry about all those pesky pebbles in their shoe... At least they thought they didn't.

VIII

THE LAST LOAN

Charlie's abdomen was aching, and it wasn't from hunger.

Everything looked clear, and *The Coffin* had no suspicions about the family's escape plan. Sunlight was vaguely visible on that cloudy morning. Jeff, Clara and Charlie could smell the winds of change; they could hear hope in the birdsong; they could even hope for the best in the future.

The day had come. Everything was packed. Everything was ready. All that remained was to act.

The clock was ticking. It was sixteen minutes past six and Jeff and Clara were walking straight towards *The Coffin*. They walked with hurry; they walked with care; they walked with a lot of fear until they reached the building. The guards let them in, they passed all the security filters and finally

they were behind the red door of the boss: Mr. Clement, the Great Lord Hector Clement.

They stood static for twelve seconds staring at the door until they decided to open it so they could talk to him and make the proposal.

The office of a mob boss is always something to admire. All the fancy things a deity can have in his work area dazzle the eye, partly because of the elegant and superb aesthetics they create, but mainly because you know you can never come close to paying for anything that is in that red-walled room.

And there he is, with his purple suit and his blond hair, his slim body and his cup of tea. Mr Clement was sitting at his table, a table that was 13 feet in front of the door. He was facing away from them, preparing tea, as usual. Jeff and Clara entered with some discomfort. Then Mr. Clement turned his head, smiled and welcomed them.

“The Gaspels!” he exclaimed warmly, “What a pleasant surprise. You have been very responsible with our services and that makes me very happy. At this stage it would be very rude not to share a cup of tea with you.”

Actually, he shares a cup of tea with everyone who comes into his office.

“Thank you very much,” Clara replied as she received the tea. We would like to apply for a special loan.

“What kind of loan?” asked Mr Clement as he sat down with his cup.

“Just a bigger one than usual,” said Jeff.

After Jeff told him the amount, Mr. Clement took a long sip from his cup as he watched the two of them in a shadowy

silence. It was seven seconds before he gave his answer. “Sure, no problem!”

The door closed. Jeff and Clara left the building with the money. The hard part was done, now they just needed to act fast.

The mafia wasn't stupid, they knew that Jeff and Clara wanted to steal that money, so they took action and as soon as the two left the office, Mr. Clement sent a few men to Jeff and Clara's residence to steal Charlie.

Wait... What?!

The rain suddenly poured down. The drops resounded loudly against the ground. *The Coffin* was quick, but they broke down the door and entered the house to find the total absence of any trace of life.

Ingeniously, Charlie and all the family's belongings were sheltered in the hospital. They knew very well that the suspicions about them would not remain silent forever, so they used the hospital as a sanctuary to protect their son if anything went wrong that day. The mob's plan was to kidnap Charlie to blackmail them for much more profit forever, but apparently they had to think more about strategy. They had only recently known that Jeff and Clara had a son, so they thought that acting like they didn't know was a foolproof move when it came to kidnapping him by surprise, but Jeff and especially Clara were smarter. They were dominating the game on enemy turf and nothing could stop them. The mob didn't know Charlie's location, there were no loose ends and the only enemy was time.

They both arrived at the hospital. Their hearts were pounding. They were not followed there, but they knew that sooner or later *The Coffin* would find their location, so they

ran through the corridors looking for Charlie as the water trickled down the ceiling, and luckily, there he was, in a chemotherapy room with his beloved yellow monkey.

The family was reunited. They hugged and prepared to meet Steven as soon as it was clear outside. The meeting point was not far away, and since they agreed to meet at seven o'clock in the morning, they made themselves comfortable; that is, at least until Emilio, the kindly short guy, entered the hospital. He had a suspicion that Jeff was there, so he went there to warn him that he was not alone in his suspicions.

The Coffin, having no clue where they were going or where Charlie was, decided to fiercely interrogate Jeff's theatre group. They said he was probably in hospital, as the last time they saw him they thought he was terminally ill. It was not a good move on Jeff's part to say "it was a wonderful few years" so lightly.

The Coffin was not long in coming, as total catastrophe approached with each passing minute. Emilio was the hero of the situation, and, after giving the warning, decided to stay behind to help the family and give them moral support, but what would you say to someone who is about to be brutally murdered along with his entire family? It was not enough. They had to flee. They had to hide or advance the plan, but at least two of those options were impossible, so all that was left was to hide.

The hour of reckoning had come. *The Coffin* had arrived. Thunder and lightning flashed from the inside as two silhouettes emerged from a black car. Two familiar figures made their presence known as they opened the glass door and put away their red umbrella. It was the stocky man and the thin man - what a surprise to see them again!

Perhaps they had been sent to investigate because of their ability to snoop into things that were none of their business.

Clara didn't know whether to be relieved or worried that they were the ones to look for them, but she knew it didn't mean any good. Jeff and Clara's plan was to hide Charlie in a safe place while they took care of losing the mob. They set to work, and there was no time to waste, not even a few seconds. They put Charlie and their bags in a shared room, locked the door and went to the kitchen, the most obvious hiding place.

Charlie had no problem with being in a room hiding next to what looked like a corpse, he just needed to cuddle his plush monkey until the moment passed, and he did for a while. He counted to 24, closed his eyes tightly and prayed he wouldn't be found. It was a very tense situation, too tense, in fact. Because of all the stress, his abdomen began to ache again, this time more than ever, so he tried to distract himself with something, anything, but he couldn't afford to do much exploring under a hospital gurney. However, something caught his eye. A familiar-looking object was lying on the floor next to the patient. He reached over the edge of the gurney to reach for it, picking it up quickly and cautiously. It was very heavy, mainly because it was a long medical student's notebook. It didn't take Charlie long to assimilate who was lying moribund on the gurney. He stood up and looked at him with some concern. It was Arthur. He didn't look very much alive. His heartbeat on the screen was almost non-existent, his breathing sounded like a hedgehog walking through a thorn bush and his body looked thinner than he remembered. It's not very nice to see someone you know on the verge of death on a hospital bed. It's not at all comforting for that situation.

Arthur was in those moments where last words are said, and they were not long in coming. He opened his eyes slightly and said in a sore voice: "It's good to see you again".

Charlie looked at him gloomily without saying a word. Arthur continued, "I don't think my notes will be of any use to me now..."

Those, unfortunately, were his last words. It turns out that you never know if you'll manage to finish a sentence before you die of tuberculosis.

Charlie was petrified as he looked at the corpse of what was once a possible lasting friendship. He hugged his stuffed animal as the monitor made that depressing sound, that disturbing note entered Charlie's subconscious to stay.

He looked at his yellow plush monkey for comfort, but the toy said nothing. That extensive notebook was the only thing Arthur left behind. Charlie didn't even know if he had any family or descendants, so as a sign of respect, he decided to take care of his precious notes. It was not an easy thing to read, but it was his only distraction at the moment.

He hadn't finished reading the first page and was already beginning to hear the door trying to be opened. It was a fleeting and confusing moment, because, on the one hand, it might be his parents and he just had to let them in so they could escape this nightmare together, but on the other hand, it could be danger literally knocking on the door. He just needed a sign, a combination of words to let him know that what was on the other side was not his doom. He just needed a calming sound to get out from under the bed.

Six and a half seconds passed, the longest of his life, and nothing could be heard besides a few gentle knocks on the door.

Suddenly the sound stopped. If it had been his parents, they would surely be dead by now, or so Charlie thought. That little thought lasted for a few more seconds until, all of a sudden, the gentle knocking on the door turned into forced attempts to break it down. It was heartbreaking for Charlie to hear his time running out faster and faster as his abdomen ached more and more.

On the other side was the skinny man trying to break down the door. Next to him was the chunky man, both of them trying to get into what might be the only place where the family could hide.

Jeff and Clara could do nothing from where they were, as they had so far managed to escape them by moving individually throughout the hospital, but Charlie could not do the same. The only thing they could think of was to make a noise so they would redirect their attention and look elsewhere, but that would only confirm their location so they could order more men to do a thorough search. If they were distracted they would be signing their death sentence, but there are priorities. They dropped a glass tumbler on the floor, making an incredible clatter in the lobby that echoed through the corridors. Fortunately, it worked. The chunky man went to check the perimeter while the skinny one kept trying to break down the door. There they realized it was a better idea to make two distractions in separate places so that the two could leave their position, but it was too late to look for another glass. The only thing left to do was to knock him out quietly.

Jeff stepped to one side of the aisle in full view of the skinny man and exclaimed, "Oh, damn it!" to get his attention. He turned and didn't think twice about drawing his gun. Fortunately, he didn't get to fire, because Clara put him to sleep from behind with a hit to the head with a fire extinguisher.

There was no time to celebrate. They had to give Charlie a signal to come out, so they knocked on the door and said frantically, "It's us, Charlie, come out quick! It's time to run!". With his eyes watering with nerves, Charlie scrambled as fast as he could out from under the bed with the book and his stuffed animal to open the door and get out. He was never so relieved to hear his mother's voice.

The burly man made it back to watch the three of them escape leaving his companion lying on the floor with a severe concussion.



You may never be able to imagine the speed with which two people could run carrying briefcases and a child, but I'll give you an idea: they left the hospital through the back door before a burly man could even draw his gun.

They locked the back door and headed towards the meeting point where Steven would be waiting for them.

If time was ticking before, now it was flying.

IX

EXIT

The rain was falling in decreasing amounts. The family was waiting behind a door in a damp alley. It was not a very comfortable situation, partially because of their wet hair, but mainly because it was only a matter of time before the place where they were standing would be considered a crime scene.

Luckily, Steven opened the door and let them enter his apartment before they died of pneumonia.

They didn't beat around the bush. The situation didn't call for a cup of coffee, so Steven prepared to cast the most dangerous spell he'd ever attempted in his life: *Geographical relocation*, a somewhat advanced technique for amateur wizards like Steven, but not impossible. All they had to do was stand still inside a circle drawn on the floor. At advanced levels the circle is unnecessary, but if it's your first time casting the spell, a space reference is always useful. Of

course, the family will have to pay a price for such an advantage, as black magic is not used for good, but rather the opposite; however, a few tricks can be done to use it for good, as in this specific situation. The idea is to make the family appear in a safer place, a nice place not too far from there called *Spoirtown*, but with the condition that they will have to feel every atom of their body burning because of the change of location.

Charlie didn't know much about what was about to happen, but he didn't say a word, he just knew that his parents were excited and sure of what they were doing, so he just stared around the place.

Steven took out a particularly interesting book from his suitcase, mainly because it had written on its cover: "*Black Magic for Beginners*". He opened the book and went to an advanced page, looked at it for a relatively long moment and decided to rip it out; he put the book back in his suitcase and put the page on a table.

"Place your bodies inside the circle," Steven said. "This is the moment of truth. It was nice to meet you."

The process had begun. Steven began to recite verses from his sheet that read: *Egredere de vita mea, exi de conspectu meo.*

He raised his left arm while holding the leaf in his right hand. The family hugged each other in fear and anxiety as they watched the pink and red tapestry of the walls slowly distort. Steven could only concentrate and shout the words *egredere de vita mea, exi de conspectu meo* over and over again. Lights flickered, tremors could be felt, everything seemed to be destroyed in the eyes of the family until Steven shouted the phrase one last time and that claustrophobic apartment was transformed into the ruins of an abandoned bridge support in *Spoirtown*.

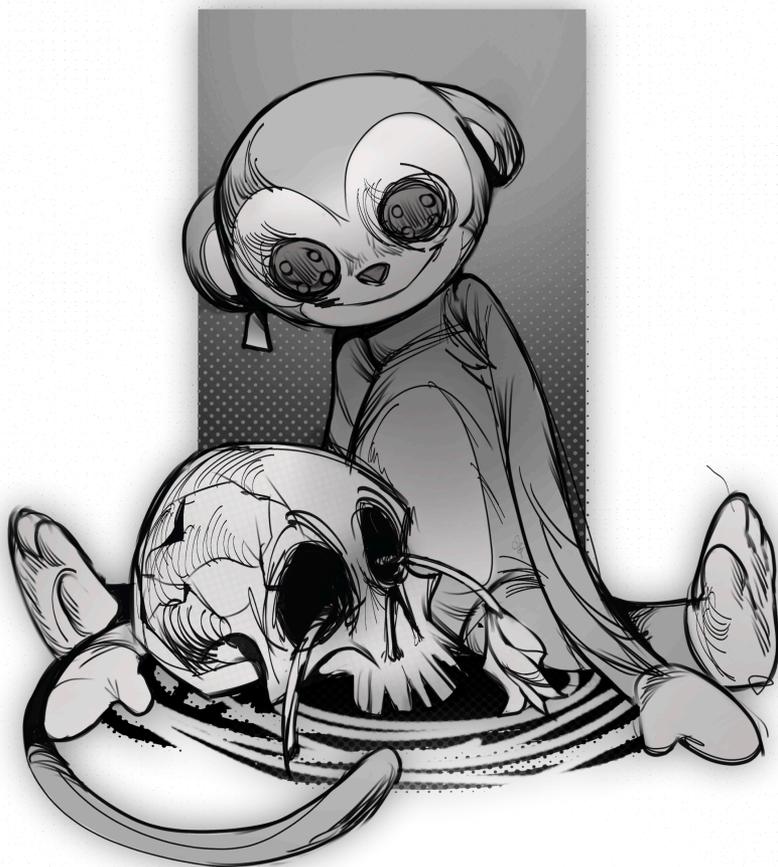
Steven opened his eyes and was surprised to see that the spell had worked, as he was the only person left in the room.

The family tried to celebrate, but they felt too much pain in their skin to exclaim anything but moans of anguish and despair. Eight seconds later they embraced each other in tears because they had finally escaped hell, death and their old problems, which suited them just fine, because they needed space for the new ones.



The next day, Charlie was suffering from nausea and a great pain in his stomach.

ACT II: EXODUS



X NEWS

The sun always rises every day, and every morning its presence is usually felt, but on the first day of a new life the sky takes on a much more noticeable blue colour than usual.

It was a room in a rented flat. Clara was watching the glorious sunrise preparing fried eggs, she was cooking fresh eggs just bought from a grocery shop free of alligator eggs. Jeff was sipping coffee, staring at the paper, looking for a job, sitting at the table in pink slippers and a light blue dressing gown over a white T-shirt. Charlie was sleeping in his new bed; however, although the weather was mostly warm, he was covered in sheets. He felt very cold and restless; he didn't have enough energy to get up, but he didn't feel comfortable enough to continue sleeping either. I think it was the perfect time to tell his parents how he felt.

Charlie got up slowly, and with the urge to vomit, walked intermittently to the table.

“Good morning, son!” Jeff greeted.

“How are you doing, Charlie?” said Clara, dropping what she was doing to hug him. “Are you alright? You look a little pale.”

“Good morning. About that...” said Charlie in a muffled voice, “I feel a bit dizzy and my tummy hurts.”

“What are you feeling?” Jeff asked worriedly. “Is it a burning or did you get a bump?”

“It's more of a...”

That's the last thing he said before collapsing on the kitchen floor.

The next thing Charlie sees when he opens his eyes is Clara patting his head, lying in the back of a taxi, her head on his mother's thighs and her feet on his father's. The taxi driver was given direct orders to get to the hospital as fast as he could.

Clara saw Charlie open his eyes so she kissed him on the forehead and then say, “Here, have some fresh bread. You must eat something.” Jeff was ready to give him water in case he got stuck while eating. Charlie felt awful, but that moment of isolation was going to be a comfort in the future.

Charlie, oh, poor Charlie. You can't get everything in life it seems.

He opened his eyes and looked up at the dazzling light of a long bulb from the ceiling of a hospital room. He turned his head to look for answers, saw his parents on the other side of the door through the glass, saw the gurney he was lying on, saw a bag of serum, and saw that serum going into his veins through wires attached to his wrist. He couldn't believe it. Something was happening. Something was really going on and he couldn't ignore it any longer.

Jeff and Clara were desperately talking to a doctor on the other side of the door. She kept muffling her words, but that only made the expectations worse, as with every sentence she spoke she got closer to the answer to the question: “What's wrong with Charlie”

“We've been doing check-ups and tests on him for a while, and it looks like his situation is a lot more complicated than we thought,” the doctor said nervously.

“Please, just tell us if it's serious or not,” Jeff asked in a desperate tone.

“I think that would require you to come to my office,” the doctor replied with some concern.

Jeff and Clara sat in her office not knowing what to expect. The stress and fear they felt was comparable to when Jeff was about to be shot at the other hospital.

“It's time for you to know,” said the doctor. “After x-raying the boy, we were able to see the source of the pain in his abdomen and the nausea.”

The doctor continued talking, uttering several words, but only one word stuck in Jeff and Clara's head. The only one that could be heard echoing in their minds...

Cancer.

Terminal liver cancer. Charlie was suffering from a deadly tumour in one of his organs, a tumour that would spread until one of the two would stop growing, crushing and killing his insides cruelly, with nothing to do but try to slow it down.

Cancer is one of the most painful diseases, not only for the patient, but also for their relatives, who will have to

watch as the victim gradually loses colour until they lose it forever.

You will know that it hurts a lot to lose a loved one, but unless you experience it yourself, you will never be able to imagine how it feels.

Treatment is naturally expensive, and Jeff and Clara never had enough money for something of that magnitude. They cried. They cried because they knew it was impossible to go ahead with the operation. They knew it was very difficult to have to watch their son's life slip through their fingers. It is never easy. The doctor had been through a similar situation, so she expressed sympathy and said, "I know what it's like to go through this, so I'll make you a proposal: I'll cover the treatment for a few months to make the deposit easier for you, if you promise me that you'll stay determined through this adversity."

The proposal was kind; miraculous, you could say. Naturally they would say no, but they were not willing to sacrifice their son in exchange for showing education, so they accepted. The money they had was not enough, but it was not impossible to raise the funds.



Night fell. The rain brushed the pavement, and Charlie's bed felt the melancholy. He understood perfectly well; he was not naive, he knew the importance of courage in this situation.

Charlie slept, hoping to wake up in a new home.

XI

A BAD DAY

Knowing full well their fortune, our dear Jeff and Clara went on a relentless search for funds. They tried borrowing money from the bank, but apparently you can't do that when you first set up an account. They couldn't get donations either because it turns out that no one was going to donate more than a few coins to two strangers. They looked at every, absolutely every job option they had, but it was hopeless, the treatment needed more than a few months of overtime if they were going to save Charlie.

Two months and a few weeks later, unfortunately, they came up with an idea, and I say *unfortunately* because they would have preferred never in their lives to have thought of a similar madness. What I mean is that they had the alternative of returning to the village and paying off their debt to *The Coffin* in some twisted way. It was a bad idea, but it didn't mean it couldn't be implemented properly.

Steven G. Ledger was still in town, and Jeff took advantage of having his phone number to call him and ask him to do something impressively complicated.

It had been two and a half months since Charlie had started chemotherapy, that's two months and fourteen days since Jeff and Clara had last seen Steven. A little visit wouldn't hurt.

And so it appeared, Steven teleported to *Spoirtown* and was curious about his friend Jeff's new life. Obviously they couldn't receive him without first serving him a cup of coffee. Steven wore a blue jacket over a red shirt, proving once again his total ignorance of fashion. The three of them sat down and began to chat.

"Thanks for coming," said Jeff with some seriousness. We need your help with something very important.

"Let's not delay any longer," said Steven. What is it that needs to be done?

"It's complicated and we're asking too much of you," said Clara, "but we want you to borrow money from *The Coffin* for us."

"But," replied Steven, somewhat confused and puzzled, "what do you want another loan for?"

"There's... something we need to show you," said Jeff after seeking comfort in Clara's look.

They then headed to the hospital to see Charlie. He was in an entertainment area for hospitalized children, similar to *Soufreville's* waiting room but noticeably larger and cleaner, not to mention with more toys. He was sitting in the corner, and you would think he was looking at the colorful and disturbing floor decorated with giant rubber puzzle pieces, but more than anything else, he was reading Arthur's extensive notebook, as it helped him overcome his fear of the

hospital and what they do there. Since he had arrived, that was the only book he was interested in reading apart from *Little Red Riding Hood*, whose metaphor he found very intriguing, but too explicit. Jeff and Clara entered the children's area and there they saw him, in an embarrassing mint-colored wardrobe, (that nasty mint color). Apart from his discouraging lack of hair, Charlie looked regularly good, with hardly any bones sticking out of his skin or his pale colour.

Charlie, upon seeing his beloved parents, went to greet them, but the hugging time could not continue because the nurse notified him that it was time for his chemotherapy routine; to this, Charlie says to his parents with some excitement: "You know, cancer can be removed from the body with a professional operation, and that could largely exterminate it, at least for a few months." His mother patted him on the head and said, "I don't know if that's true, son, but if it were possible, it wouldn't be free."

Charlie walked to his stretcher quite disinterestedly, but he couldn't allow himself to look sad, not when his parents were doing everything they could to make sure he wouldn't be. Charlie didn't remember, but tomorrow was his birthday, so the surprise was genuine when his parents congratulated him and told him they had his present in his briefcase, ready to give it to him tomorrow. What a nice surprise, something to look forward to the next day at last!

At that, Steven walked into the living room and managed to see Charlie in his situation. It was then that he realized why they needed the loan. "Say no more," said Steven, "let's get on with it, for Charlie's sake." On his stretcher, Charlie looked forward to what might be a possible solution to his parents' main conflict, but a little fearfully.

After half an hour, Jeff, Clara and Steven went off to calmly plan their move, leaving Charlie alone with his thoughts on that cold, lonely stretcher, without a companion

or anything to comfort him apart from his yellow stuffed monkey. Charlie stared at the ceiling, planning what could be his last years if he was lucky. He was planning everything he would do after he leaves the hospital, when he would have activities to distract him from his tragic fate. He thought about how he didn't really have much to regret, maybe eating plastic that one time when he was three years old for no reason, or licking metal wires just for their salty taste, but overall, his life was fruitful for a boy his age; However, he wanted to make the most of every second he had left, so he looked in his suitcase for some books to read, and there he came across this huge book of sacred stories, and suddenly all the spontaneous abdominal pains he had ever felt came to his mind, and he realized that the first strong discomfort he ever had was when he held that book for the first time. It was just a coincidence, but it was curious to think that there was something about that book that caused him some discomfort.

Charlie didn't feel like reading *fiction*, so he decided to memorize some cardiovascular diseases from the notebook.

Steven was clear on what to do. He was finishing up a phone call to go with Jeff and Clara to their motel room to finish the meeting, away from any intervention. It was virtually impossible for anyone to hear them yelling in there. Jeff and Clara made their instructions very clear and Steven was ready to leave, but before he walked out the door, he had an idea. Steven told them both that it would be more practical to return by *geographical relocation* from there, and proposed to do the spell at that time. He said it was better to take advantage of where they were so as not to arouse suspicion. The two didn't see why it would be unwise, so they had no problem.

Steven lowered his head and smiled, then began to cast the spell. He began to utter the words: *egredere de vita mea*,

exi de conspectu meo as his surroundings distorted, papers flew across the ceiling and a great tension built up in the air.

Finally, Steven G. Ledger... sent Jeff and Clara back to *Soufreville*.

When they opened their eyes, they both saw with horror the red walls of Mr. Clement's office, with at least twenty men in purple surrounding them. They both felt horror, disgust and, above all, a horrible agony caused by the journey, but, most of all, they felt despair because they knew that from that second on, they had ruined everything.

Mr. Clement, with a cup of tea in his hand, looked at his guests. He was looking forward to them, and it was only to be expected; you quite rightly want to see those who humiliated you on your own ground on their knees.

Jeff and Clara, realizing the horrific betrayal on Steven's part, looked down at the floor kneeling, hugging each other, squeezing each other's arms with their fingernails, watching their lives flash before their eyes, and thinking that their precious son will never receive the briefcase with the gift. And that's when Mr. Clement asks them in a commanding voice: "How was your trip? Did you make new friends? I hope you got everything sorted out, because I don't think you're going to see the light of day again."

In a weak and lifeless voice, Clara struggled to say some of her last words in search of answers: "How did you organize all this?" to which Mr Clement replied: "I'm so glad you asked. I'm going to tell you how I managed to get you guys to literally drop like flies in my office. We knew that bastard warlock had something to do with your meticulous escape plan, so I kidnapped him and offered him a good amount of money to bring you back so I could hang you with

my bare hands. He agreed without objection. He was aware before that the boy had cancer, so he also knew that sooner or later you would need his help. His plan made me wait two long months, but he warned me that you were very smart and would not miss such an opportunity. Clearly he was wrong about you being smart, as I can see you didn't expect at all that you would end up here. It was just a matter of time. No, it was practically obvious that you would need the help of black magic again. Not to go into further details, when he was there, Mr. Ledger called me to give me the situation report, and that's when I realized that revenge works just like patience: *it has bitter roots but bears sweet fruit*. I knew that, as the little rat was alone in the hospital, you would be here, praying for him to be well, knowing that Mr. Ledger is at this moment about to end his life.”

The skinny man, previously injured thanks to Clara, kicked the two in the back, leaving them face down on the floor, as they began to let out desperate screams and cries seeing pure darkness at the end of a hypothetical, claustrophobic tunnel. Jeff wept, soaking the floor with tears while Clara screamed with all the air in her lungs.

A resounding fog of noise echoed throughout the office from Jeff and Clara's suffering. From the outside of the room, the incessant agony was palpable.

Until the desperate noise stopped with a bang, or rather... with two gunshots.



Charlie watched the sunset from the window. Charlie missed his parents. Charlie watched the door from his bed. Charlie was prepared to feel butterflies in his stomach by the time he heard footsteps near the door.

Sadly, you know those butterflies are never going to fly again, at least not after *The Mysterious Wizard*, Steven G. Ledger, opened the door.

Steven and Charlie stared at each other in silence. They seemed to be on the same page, but on the contrary, there were too many things that Steven knew that Charlie didn't have the slightest knowledge of, one of them was that Charlie's fate no longer depended on a tumour in his system, but on a man with magical abilities.

Steven took a chair and placed it in front of Charlie. He then sat down in it as interesting people usually do: with its back to the front and his legs spread wide.

How do you start a conversation in a situation like that? You might be surprised at the answer.

“Your parents are dead.”

Those were the first words Steven used to start the conversation. You don't usually start anything with that specific sentence, but there are always exceptions.

Charlie's poor brain couldn't react to that exact succession of words so abruptly, so the expression on his face at that moment was only confusion. It took six seconds before Steven uttered another sentence: “No kidding, I just sent your parents to *Soufreville* to die at the hands of *The Coffin*. You understand that, don't you?”

There is no instruction manual on how to digest this man's sentences, but Charlie knew exactly what to say in that instant: "Yes."

With a blank expression, Charlie watched as Steven stood up from his chair and without putting it back in its traditional position, said, "They suggested I kill you to tie up loose ends, but I guess it's a better idea to let the cancer do its work." After the brief chat, Steven heads for the door and before closing it, he says, "It was nice meeting you, and happy birthday."

Hearing the door close, Charlie looks at the window again and then looks up at the ceiling.

A tear escapes from his eye. His chest compresses as if two tons were falling on his thorax.

Charlie cries out, choking on his tears.

XII

MERCY

A great and noisy storm was being admired in the streets. The clouds were sending out lightning and thunder not so usual for a summer night. Charlie had spent almost four hours straight crying on his stretcher. It was not unusual to hear screaming and crying in a hospital, especially in the children's ward, so he received no comfort during those three long hours and fifty-five minutes.

Finally, the crying stopped and so did the rain. It was two o'clock in the morning (Happy Birthday!). Charlie's eyes were closed as were his nostrils; his stuffed monkey was covered in snot as was his embarrassing dressing gown. The minutes passed and the night grew quieter and quieter and darker, much darker.

Charlie's head was spinning so much that his thoughts were dizzy. "Are they really dead? Why did he tell me? What would happen to me now? Oh, no. What would happen to me now...?"

During that state of drowsiness, it is common not to perceive reality normally, but, something strange happened next, and it would hardly be identified as something created by the mind. Without warning, Charlie felt the gravity getting stronger or the stretcher trying to swallow him; his limbs were unresponsive and a faint ringing sound could be heard in his ears. Experiencing such a phenomenon, he quickly opened his eyes and saw the dark colours of the room slowly begin to fade. Everything was black and white and shaking at the same time. It wasn't an earthquake, nor was it a meteorological phenomenon, that would have been more comforting. What Charlie was actually experiencing was the manifestation of an entity from the depths of the underworld.

It was no exaggeration. Out of the darkness materialized what could be classified as a *biblical demon*. The main difference between the regular demon and the *biblical demon* is that the *regular demon* is usually used metaphorically to point to a mental disorder, such as insecurity or trauma. In contrast, the *biblical demon* is a bit more real; to be more specific, *physically* real, like the one Charlie was seeing at the time.

In Catholicism, demons are usually described as beasts of the underworld who live off human souls, and who serve *Satan*, the representative of evil and deception. At least one of those two things is false, and don't give it too much thought, demons serve no one. They are demons, why would they follow anyone else's orders? That's what *angels* are for.

The mysterious beast approached the stretcher. It had four large horns, four glowing eyes and four winged arms, two covering it from the waist down and two behind its back. Charlie looked at it with much, much confusion. He didn't believe that anyone had ever seen such a thing, even if the

stories in his book had any truth in their ambiguous wordings.

Charlie's ears listened carefully as the big mouth of the mysterious monster said in a warm voice:

“I see you're in a rather awkward situation, aren't you?”

Charlie was awkwardly silent.

“I thought so,” said the creature. “Allow me to introduce myself. I am a demon from another dimension, or as some call it, *Hell*, and I have a proposition to make.”

“A proposition?”

“Well, you can call it a deal.”

“Yes, I've read about that.”

Despite their malevolent exterior, there is one thing that all the beings of the underworld follow, a single law that they do not break, and that is, no one breaks a deal. They couldn't, mainly because they would die if they did, and there is no afterlife in hell, so it suits them to be honest when they promise something.

“What are you proposing?” asked Charlie very calmly.

“I'm not going to lie to you; I'm looking for souls, and yours seems very accessible.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, in your situation, your soul won't be of much use to you, and in exchange for it, I can offer you one last wish. Is that a good deal or not?”

“Are you kidding? It's terrible. If you offer me that, it's obvious that when I die, my soul was originally meant to go to heaven, out of your reach, so having it would only benefit you; besides, in exchange for what? A favor that won't do me any good? I'm not naive enough to accept something like that.”

The monster is surprised to see the infant's bravery in facing a beast of the underworld like this.

"You're smart, I can tell," the demon admits.

"You're not the first to tell me so."

"Very well, I like you, so I'll give you another chance. Here." He hands him a small porcelain cup. "It's an ordinary cup. You can drink anything from it, but that's not its function; if you change your mind about our deal, just break it and I'll show up at this very spot."

Charlie holds up the cup, contemplating the irony of the deal. In the end he decides to accept; after all, his soul is all he has left.

The monster vanishes just as it appeared, time feels normal again, and the pressure in his chest dissipates. Charlie has options now, and that's better than nothing, but before thinking about any possibilities, he needed to sleep, so he closed his eyes while holding the infamous porcelain cup in his hands and prepared himself for the rough early morning he had left.

Time to wake up. It was fourteen minutes past ten, and Charlie stared at the walls listlessly. Although feeling miserable can be fun, Charlie had to have breakfast, so he went to the dining room and got oatmeal, the same oatmeal he had every morning, but this time, it was blander. He sat against a wall and watched the various activities of the boarding children. His eyes were half-closed and his hopes were at sea level. And so the hours passed. Time went by quickly as Charlie held his cup and stared into nothingness, thinking..., thinking hard, thinking about the only thing he could think about. The thought of celebrating nine years of life didn't even cross his mind.

Night was approaching. Everything was grey. Charlie sat on his stretcher and stared into the cup. It was time for the final decision, so he put the cup on the floor and stomped on it.

Immediately after the small shards of porcelain scattered on the floor, the atmosphere became like the early morning of that day, while, as agreed, the demon returned with a thirst for answers.

“Good, you decided quickly,” said the beast.

“I agree to your deal, but I have conditions.”

“Conditions? Sure, your soul, your rules. I just hope you've given it enough thought.”

Charlie takes a pause for breath. Then he begins to speak with complete confidence.

“I would have never thought that situations like this would be a regular thing in my life, that I wouldn't have the right to be happy like normal people. I never knew what it felt like to have a halfway decent childhood, and the only people who tried to change that are now dead. For a long time I put my best face forward, but it turned out to be in vain. I have been everything any god would expect of someone worthy, and yet here I am, abandoned, terminally ill and with the murder of my parents as a birthday present. I don't know what would have happened to make this acceptable. It just isn't fair, and if there is someone superior to us, they have no right to be all-powerful. I have done a lot of thinking since I discovered the divine existence, and even more since I confirmed it today. I finally understand, and more than ever it is clear to me that there is no moral balance to follow, because it will never be fair to anyone, just as it was with Arthur.”

Charlie looks the demon in the face and with watery eyes and an angry voice exclaims:

“So yes, I've thought it through enough. I've realized that the only thing stopping me from getting what I want is my sense of morality, and I'm determined to lose it for the sake of justice.”

The demon looks at Charlie with admiration; he has never seen anyone his age make such a statement before; however, he had two questions to ask.

“That's fine with me,” he said pompous, “now tell me, what are your conditions?”

“First,” said Charlie, wiping his eyes, “I need to know what it means to live without a soul.”

“It's funny that not many people ask that question. The soul is what makes a being considered to be *living*. Anyone who possesses one will have feelings, personality, empathy and all that comes with it: values, morals and conscience. All living things have a soul, except for insects. At least we think so, although in reality, nobody cares. If you live without a soul you have the same existential value as a stone or a worm, and if someone kills you would carry no moral or ethical consequences.”

“If I have no soul, will I be able to recognize myself in the mirror?”

“No. You will not possess a conscience, so you will have no sense of *self*.”

“That is unacceptable. My second condition is that you keep my conscience intact.”

The demon is silent for a few seconds.

“Fine. You will be able to recognize your own existence, at least I can do that.”

“Right. My third condition is that in exchange for my soul, you cure my cancer.”

“Okay. That's easy, but, before we conclude the deal, I have one last question. Why is so important that you keep your conscience?”

“That's what my next condition is about. I want you to change my gender.”

“Why?”

“I've never felt comfortable as a male. My body didn't feel right when I looked in the mirror, and I just didn't relate to other boys. The girls I have met, on the other hand, have displayed more similar behaviors to me. So I want you to transform me into a female.”

“You're asking for more than we agreed. I can't give you two favors in exchange for your soul; you'd be taking advantage, and don't even think of making the excuse that it's your birthday.”

“Fine. Just remove my cancer and the effects of the chemotherapy. I'll take care of the rest.”

“That's it?”

“As a last condition, I want you to tell me your name.

The demon looks at Charlie doubtfully, but he can't lie, because he would be breaking his word, so he gave him his name.

“My name is Pitt.”

“That would be enough. I'm ready.”

“We have a deal. Give me your hand. After this, you'll never see me again.”

Charlie shakes the demon's hand, completing the deal.

The transformation process begins.

The room is covered in a dazzling red light. Charlie rises as his eyes glow completely white. The voices of everyone who was once a part of his life echo in his ears with a constant thunderous sound in the background. His soul leaves his body through his facial orifices and his insides contract as if he is about to vomit.

After the outrageous spectacle, everything abruptly returns to normal, *Charlie's* body falls to the ground, and seconds later, his hair begins to grow until it covers his eyes. His strength returns and all the marks on his skin disappear, as does the sparkle in his eyes.



Charlie stands with her knees and forearms on the floor, staring at the ground, her hair completely covering her face. The atmosphere feels much calmer and more peaceful, as finally, *Charlie was alive.*

She got up normally, walked to the bathroom and looked in the mirror. She could say she felt happy, but she would be lying. Charlie didn't feel anything anymore. She fixed her hair, washed her hands and contemplated her own presence. *Charlie* was already a name she didn't want to hear; moreover, you probably got tired of reading it, so his new name was going to be...

You guessed it.

Charlotte.

Charlotte Gaspel.

XIII

FIRST DAY

It was twelve minutes to the end of the day. The hospital was dark, the nurses were resting and the other children in the hospital were counting sheep, but in the bathroom you could hear the quiet voice of an infant singing: “*Happy birthday, Charlotte Gaspel..., happy birthday to me.*”

What Charlotte was feeling at that moment could only be compared to the feeling of having just moved out and starting to unpack your possessions. It was a new beginning, a new *life*; but, people say you can't escape the past, and Charlotte not only couldn't, she didn't want to escape hers.

With a cool head it is easy to think. The loose ends are still loose, and the famous revenge was Charlotte's main goal. It was simple: Now that she was free, it was time to make those who made her life miserable pay. It's practically tradition to kill those who murdered your parents, but she wanted to go much further, as revenge was the only fly flying

around in her head. She wanted to do it right, and for that she had to come up with a plan.

While she was quietly brushing her hair in front of the mirror, her brain was working frantically thinking of all the possible ways to make the mafia and the bastard Steven G. Ledger suffer.

The sun began to show itself and Charlotte was ready to leave the hospital. The nurses usually don't check the stretchers until nine o'clock, so she had three hours to complete her escape plan.

The most logical idea was to escape through the main entrance, but that required going down the stairs and not being seen by anyone. Luckily, no one looks twice inside a trash can. That's right, the classic trick of hiding in the rubbish, only this time you had to be careful, because apart from recyclable waste there was also the hazardous ones, which are common in hospitals. Fortunately, the containers were transported on wheels, so it was not going to be suspicious to feel a bit of extra weight.

Anyway, Charlotte had to wait 24 minutes surrounded by plastic bottles, cardboard cups and lots of wrappers until she made it to the car park. She took with her a plastic bag with Arthur's notebook, the plush monkey and a bottle of water. She got out of the dumpster, looked around and headed for the motel where her parents were staying before they died. It was not a problem for her, as she occasionally went to sleep there with them, so the owner was not going to stop her; however, words were exchanged.

“Little Charlie?” asked the owner from his registration desk.

“Yes. Do you like my new hair?” Charlotte replied very calmly.

“It's strange that you come alone.”

“It's not; my parents called a taxi to pick me up from the hospital to bring them soup, as they are very ill and can't get out of bed.” She shows the bag she was holding, pretending it was a bag of groceries. “I took the money they gave me and bought this wig.”

“Okay, do you need the keys?”

“Yes, please.”

After picking up the keys, she went upstairs to the room of his deceased representatives, opened the door and looked at the mess Steven had left with his spell. Papers littered the floor, no chair was left standing, and the atmosphere felt tense.

Charlotte had a few hours to reorganize, so she didn't waste any time. She gathered up her parents' important papers, organized the mess in the room, and had an apple for breakfast from the small fridge. As soon as she reached for her mother's wallet to take out the money she had left, she realized that Steven had stolen it. That was to be expected; he was only giving Charlotte more reasons to murder him; however, he had left a few coins behind to pay for a few bus rides.

It was then when Charlotte remembered something. The briefcase! In it was her parents' birthday present. She wasn't enthusiastic, but she clearly needed to empty that briefcase. After putting it on the bed, sitting down and taking a deep breath, she unlocked the latches and finally opened it. There was nothing in it. Charlotte became suspicious, and then realized that it took her no time at all to open the locks on the briefcase, even though she knew they were created to secure what was inside it. Damn it. Steven made sure there was nothing of sentimental value in that room, or at least he liked whatever was in that case. There was no other option, he had to forget about it and keep packing for the getaway.

Everything was ready. Her parents' IDs and her belongings were safe in her briefcase and it was time to take a break. Charlotte went into the bathroom and turned on the shower. The tranquility of feeling the cold water on her healthy body was incomparable, as she was finally able to wash her hair and feel clean after so many months.

She got out of the shower, dried herself off and primed herself in front of the mirror. After a little beauty session, Charlotte was able to feel like herself, wearing her mother's hair clip on her head and her father's show eyeliner on her eyes.

She put on one of her white T-shirts and black shorts; her next objective was to end Steven's life, but it wasn't going to be easy, as he is a wizard and Charlotte barely knew what *myocardial arterial blockage* meant.

Reality slammed into her face like an open-handed punch. As cold as her inside was, she was still a vulnerable infant; however, dark magic is not the most imposing force in the world. Sure, you can summon beings from other astral planes and have all sorts of advantages, but nothing is more intimidating than an atomic bomb, because yes, science can be more powerful than magic if you know how to use it.

A good idea to get the upper hand over your enemies is to master chemistry, that's a fact. What you can do to your victim's body with a few elements from the periodic table is astonishing; you could make beverages more dangerous than any magic potion, pills more effective than any amulet, and gases more deadly than any spell. It wasn't hard to guess that Charlotte was going to use chemistry as her main asset; after all, she had loved mixing things since she was three years old; if her destiny had been different, she might have been a successful chef.

Obviously, no eight-year-old can master chemistry, and creating an effective tear gas or poison takes at least six years of study, but you know what they say: *better late than never*.

Okay, I was joking, it was a stupid idea.

It had been a long time. Charlotte needed to get out of the flat and find a new refuge. The murder plan could wait, the priority was not to get caught.

While Charlotte's ideas were building in her young head, the hospital still had to deal with a missing child, and naturally, people get worried when a terminally ill infant disappears from a hospital with no trace of its parents. It wasn't long before a couple of detectives were sent to investigate.

Out of the police station came Detectives Quickley*¹ and Allard, ready to solve the case before dinner. Detective Leonard Quickley was a simple man, he liked mysteries and never left anything unsolved. No matter how many sleepless nights it took him to find the missing piece of the puzzle, he always remained determined. Detective Elena Allard, on the other hand, was more hasty, and although she tends to take a sidelong view of problems, she has an eagle's eye and a superb intuition. Many of the cases she has worked on have been solved with her great talent for guessing.

One thing they would never have guessed is that the case they had just got into was going to keep them awake at night for a long time.

The door opened and the detectives entered. There wasn't much to dig into; in fact, the case couldn't be considered "open" yet, that's because the main objective was to question the employees and consult the parents. It was a very nice day, so in a good mood the detectives went to work.

"Good morning," greeted Detective Quickley. "What's the situation?"

“You see,” replied an old nurse, “our little angel, Charlie, disappeared this morning. When we went to pick him up at nine o'clock he wasn't on his stretcher. We've looked everywhere for him and the parents don't answer the phone.”

“Have you searched the whole hospital or just the children's area?” Detective Allard asked.

“Oh, we searched everywhere. We searched with all the available staff, but he's nowhere to be found.”

“And tell me,” asked Quickley, “what is the missing person's illness?”

“He's suffering from terminal liver cancer. He doesn't have much time left. Please find him.”

The detectives looked into each other's eyes, thinking of all the possibilities that could result from this variant.

“Thank you for your information,” Quickley said. “My partner is going to break the news to his parents now while I stay here a while longer to investigate.”

“Thank you very much,” said the nurse before leaving.

Quickley closed his notebook and turned to her colleague.

“What do you think, Allard?”

“I think it may be an abduction on the part of the nurse, but in order to go deeper into that hypothesis we need to question other witnesses.”

“I'll take care of that. For now, she may even be where her parents are. Take.” He gives her the motel's address. “Ask them some questions too, and if they don't show up, they may have run off with their son to avoid paying any more hospital bills.”

“Good thinking, why else would they stay in a motel so close to him?”

“Remember to be alert.”

“As long as I don't have to spend another minute in this place, I'd be as watchful as a wolf.”

“Let's make a bet. If the kidnappers are the parents, you pay for my dinner.”

“I'll take my chances. If it turns out to be the nurse or someone from the hospital, you pay for my dinner.”

“It's a deal.”

They shake hands and each goes off to disprove the other's theory.

Charlotte is still undecided. She clearly needs a roof over her head, but she also has to go to where Steven lives, and that can be tricky, mainly because she would have to return to *Sufreville*, which means returning to her horrific past, but more than anything else, exposing herself to its dangers.

All sorts of questions and situations ran through her head like cars on a highway going in circles, but she was interrupted by the arrival of Detective Allard at the motel, who was interrogating the owner at the front desk as Charlotte descended the stairs.

She paused to think of the unfortunate possibilities that would await her if she made her presence known in such a situation. She was at the top of the stairs, out of sight of Detective Allard and the owner, but not for long. If she risked going out the door at that moment, there was a good chance that either of them would stop her, and that would culminate in catastrophe. On the other hand, she could not think for too long, because if the detective decided to go upstairs, she would not have time to escape and she would be on the register, so the healthiest option was to run to a window and get out by means of some rope.

There was no time to waste. Charlotte quietly climbed the stairs and pulled out her parents' clothes that she had

packed in her big briefcase, went to a window as she knotted the clothes but was upset to see that the window was a little heavier than she thought it would be. She put all her strength into opening it, and it was especially stressful given the situation, but there was no other option at that point. Finally, he managed to get it open as she could hear the footsteps of the two of them coming up the stairs. There was almost no time left and she still needed to finish knotting the remaining garments. Folding clothes had never been so stressful. The steps were getting louder, the rope she had created was working, and the knotting technique was perfectly average enough to untie one end of the rope when it felt Charlotte's weight on the other side, just as she wanted. She threw herself and the knot was able to support her weight before untying, managing to fall unharmed. She picked up the rope and put it back in the suitcase.



Mission accomplished. She vanished like a ghost and no one suspected her escape. And while the exit had been impressive, it couldn't cover the fact that the motel owner is still a witness.

“So you say he came in this morning, just an hour ago?” Detective Allard asks the owner as he tries to open the door to the room.

“That's right, in a wig, as I recall,” replies the owner, opening the lock with his spare key.

“Interesting,” said the detective as she looked around the neatly tidied room, “they didn't answer the phone, they didn't answer the door, and they don't seem to be here either. But neither is the boy. What did he say he was bringing?” she asks the owner, taking out her notebook.

“Soup, but I think something else.”

“Sorry to insist on the wig, but are you sure it was him”

“Very sure. It was his face.”

“Then this case must be a complete joke.”

The detective searched the room for clues, but could only find a common room. Several of the suspects' belongings were still there, and there was no sign of forced entry or exit, so she checked the windows. Since only an hour had passed after the owner saw the victim enter, he could not escape in front of him. An open window was enough to confirm his escape, and in the corridor she found it. There was no trace of any escape. There was nothing, except for a barely hidden pair of socks rolled up together. Bingo! She had found her first clue.

The detective, intrigued by the case, calls from the reception phone to the hospital to speak to her partner.

“Do you have anything?” asks Detective Quickley doubtfully.

“Maybe, but I need you to help me collect evidence. This case may be bigger than we expected.”

“So it was the parents who took him?”

“I can say that none of us were right in the end. We'll have to pay for our own dinner tonight. What did you get?”

“I only learned that the victim disappeared in the night and that the day before he showed unusual behavior, although it is normal for this type of patient.”

“Then maybe you're going to need a pillow to sleep on in the office, because you don't want to go home without solving this case.”

XIV

LAMB

The bench at a bus stop is cold, mainly because no one attaches sentimental value to it except for the homeless; however, Charlotte felt that the bench she was sitting on was a victory, or at least an opportunity. She didn't know the city, so her most viable option for finding shelter was to walk all over the place.

As Charlotte relaxed and regained her energy, an unwelcome child appeared beside her, humming a tune. The infant looked significantly untidy, wearing an orange T-shirt and brown shorts. Charlotte looked around and saw no sign of another adult who might be his guardian, which made her think about the possibility that this mysterious child was an orphan like her; however, nothing connected them enough for her to be friendly towards him. In any case, the boy began to spit words out of his mouth without any restriction or hesitation.

“Can you guess the song that's in my head right now?” he asked suddenly. Charlotte didn't know how to react to that question. She was just on high alert; you never know what an unknown body would do to your defenseless body. The mysterious boy kept talking: “I've listened to a lot of songs this week, so you probably won't guess what's in my head right now!” Charlotte, without looking away, narrowed her eyes, thought for a few seconds and then replied, “*The Orangutan Exit*”.

The boy was remarkably impressed by Charlotte's accurate answer. He then asked her, “How did you know, do you read mind?” She replied, “No. I tried to remember the most popular songs in this area that you can get your hands on and the most frequently played on the public loudspeaker, then I tried to remember the easiest nursery rhymes to remember, and *Orangutan Exit* was the first one that came to mind, so it was the most likely. Also, you were humming it earlier.”

The boy, thrilled by Charlotte's great deduction skills, said, “Wow, so you can read minds.”

Charlotte still couldn't take her eyes off the mysterious boy, and in order to control the situation, she decided to start a conversation.

“Say your name,” Charlotte ordered him.

“My name is Danny,” replied the boy as he extended his hand.

Charlotte, away from shaking his hand to greet him, looked at his outstretched limb and moved it up and down gingerly, hoping that he would leave her alone. Unfortunately for her, the one now known as *Danny* kept talking.

“What song are you thinking about?”

“I'm thinking of a song called: *Children Who Ask Questions Are Fools.*”

“And how's that one going?”

Observing that Danny wasn't taking the hint, he knew he wasn't even close to being dumb, but thought he might be suffering from some mental disability. He didn't look that ignorant in terms of his age, but had the appearance of having eight years of experience existing; however, he didn't seem to get the basic sarcasm.

Seeing that Danny was still waiting for an answer to his question, Charlotte decided to indulge him for once, perhaps out of pity, or perhaps because it would be much easier than explaining to him what *sarcasm* meant. Danny asked her how the song she had just invented went, so she came up with the most creative melody her soulless essence could conceive: “La, la, la, la, la, la, la, la, la, la, la.” If you wonder what this melody sounded like, you'll be happy to know that you don't need to know music theory to imagine it, as it was the repetition of the same note, specifically the note B. It wasn't creative, but it was brilliant. All over the world, any song is hummed using those two letters in conjunction with each other; moreover, because it has no predefined tempo, it can be played in an infinite number of ways, so Charlotte had just created a masterpiece called: *Children Who Ask Questions Are Fools.*

Danny, hearing the crude melody, didn't question the uniqueness of this so-called song too much and started singing it. It was a little less irritating to hear his questions, but at least it didn't put Charlotte in the position of having to answer him.

As Danny kept repeating the same note using different variations, the bus had arrived and Charlotte wasn't going to wait for anyone. She got on the bus, paid the driver, made her way to a seat and sat down with her suitcase full of her

belongings. She was ready to find her new home. The breeze was favorable and control finally belonged to her. After settling into her seat, she turned her head towards the window and saw that Danny was no longer on that bench. Charlotte thought he was gone; but, she turned and saw that he was now sitting next to her. "Where are we going?" asked Danny without any embarrassment. Charlotte answered him with a silent look and a certain indifference. She was only thinking about her future. No matter how long that nice intruder was going to follow him, nothing could take her eyes off her goal.

The bus left. There was no longer a previous life, only sad memories and feelings permeating her cold mind.

A curious thing that happens when you are pursued by anonymous people is that in quiet moments you feel paranoid. It happens mainly because you don't know anything about your enemy, and that's normal, considering that your enemy is the police.

The curious case that Detectives Allard and Quickley were investigating was a real enigma to them, but it was not impossible. Arriving at their offices, they set to work on their hypotheses, organized the information they had and got to work. But before they could create the first file, the captain of the police district, also known as *The Boss*, called the two detectives in to discuss the case. It turns out that they were so excited about solving it that they forgot to inform the captain about the new information they had obtained.

"Do you have any news?" asked the captain in an obnoxious tone.

"Actually," said Detective Quickley, "we have a lot, and yet nothing.

"What do you mean?" asked the captain, but this time, a little more aggressively.

“It's curious,” replied Detective Allard. At the crime scene, none of the individuals we were able to interrogate were suspects, but there were very important clues that led nowhere and ruled out previous theories. In any case, there is nothing to worry about. We'll solve it in a few days.”

“You are my best detectives,” said the captain after a notable silence. “I assigned you to this case because I know you can handle it, but,” he stands up suddenly from his chair and points his finger at them, “don't lose your heads. I know that when you work together you tend to get distracted and cause a trouble.”

“We?” replied Detective Allard in a mocking tone. “We are relentless, sir. You'll see that we won't take our eyes off those files.”

“I hope so,” said the captain after sitting back down, “now get to work. The sun is moving fast and tomorrow could be the end of the world.”

The detectives leave the office and let out a sigh, as the captain tends to get on their nerves. Maybe it's his deep voice, or maybe it's his straight hair that didn't match his huge body worthy of a middle-aged man, but all in all, he wasn't a bad boss, just a bit temperamental.

“Did you hear what he said?” Detective Allard mentioned to her partner.

“Yes. What a ridiculous argument. If tomorrow was the end of the world, we'd have less reason to work.”

“That's why he's the boss, he always knows what to say.”

I'm sure you'll think the police investigation process is very interesting, but it will break your heart to know that Charlotte's story must go on.

The seats on that bus felt like waiting room chairs in hell, they smelled of misery and were hard as a punching bag, not to mention they had a horrible design. There sat Charlotte, doomed to sit in that stinking metal box for two hours and twenty minutes until she reached a busier place, but worst of all, she was sitting next to the most annoying kid she could find; however, if any danger approached her, Danny would make good bait.

A good idea to pass the time was to chat. Charlotte didn't need to satisfy any social needs, but she did know the saying: *Keep your friends close, but your enemies closer.* It was time to put Charlotte's amazing social skills to use.

"Tell me intimate details about your life," Charlotte requested in her sweetest, most deadpan voice.

"Sometimes, after I pee, the tip of my penis burns," Danny replied quietly.

"That's very intimate information, so it's perfect. Tell me more about your lack of hygiene."

"No, you must now tell me something about your life."

"You're deviating from the original question."

"Tell me something about yourself. If you don't tell me, I won't tell you anything."

"Okay." Charlotte thought of information that couldn't be used against her. "I like to eat all kinds of food with a spoon, that's because in my first home I didn't need any more cutlery. The meals served were either very bland, or very simple."

"Where was your first home?" asked Danny with incredible intrigue.

"No, it's your turn to answer; besides, I gave you three details about my life, now you owe me three details about yours."

"All right, my..."

"No. I'll ask the questions."

"Okay."

“Tell me where your parents are, where you live, and what activities you usually do.”

“What was the first question?” Danny asked with genuine confusion.

“It's related to the location of your parents or guardians.”

“I don't have parents, I was born in a place with lots of other children.”

Charlotte doubted the veracity of that answer. Given his clear ignorance, Danny could have been left in an orphanage as a baby, but he thinks he was born there.

“The next question relates to your current residence,” Charlotte mentioned with no intention of sounding friendly.

“What's that?”

“It's where you live.”

“I live in the park, but I have a house in the city where there are a lot of coins that I use to get food.”

“Where exactly is your house located?” Charlotte asked with emphasis on the word *located*.

“In the city, next to a blue house. Now it's my turn!”

“No,” insisted Charlotte, “I need information about that house.”

“Nope, it's my turn to ask you.”

“Okay,” she agreed with noticeable impatience.

“What's your favorite animal?”

Charlotte froze. She had never thought about her preferences in wildlife. Luckily, she knew a wide variety of animals to choose from, but she needed to consider her answer carefully, because if she didn't answer honestly, she would be maintaining a lie that could undermine her confidence. Charlotte considered the advantages of each individual to choose from, and that took her about a minute. Surprisingly, Danny waited patiently for her answer.

“The snake,” Charlotte replied.

“Why?”

“They are fast and secretive predators. Being at ground level, they don't attract attention; they can strangle, poison and swallow their prey, and if they are inferior to their opponent, they can effectively escape, unless it's a hawk. In that case, its length is its weakness; however, its long body is what makes it one of the most majestic animals in its habitat.”

“I like dogs.”

“That wasn't my question. Give me some information about your house.”

“Well, it's not really mine, but it's nobody's either, so, since I got there first, I'll take it, but you can come in if you want.”

“How does it look?”

“It's very, very big, and it used to be grey, but it turned black over time. It's got a lot of papers everywhere and a chest of coins in the basement, although sometimes weird things happen when I'm in there, so I like to sleep in the park and not there.”

Charlotte thought she had won the lottery. That child was the living proof that mercy brings benefits. After a 33-second silence, Charlotte looked Danny in the eye and said with imposing pronouncements, “I want you to take me there.”



At the police station, the atmosphere is usually safe, and it was normal; dozens of uniformed officers in the same room does not convey any message of lawlessness. However, Detective Leonard Quickley felt a great anxiety; the puzzle he

had was incomplete. It was like looking at an asymmetrical picture, no matter how much he analyzed the smallest details, he could not come to any conclusions without new leads, so, the most logical move was to inform the chief that they needed to investigate further in the case. He went to his partner's station to update her, but first he had to wake her up.

“Elena, put your head up. The boss is watching you,” he whispered in her ear.

“What? What's wrong?” She reacted confused.

“We need to look for more clues for the case.”

“What case?” she asked in a sleepy voice.

“The *Gospel* case. We have to go back to the apartment.”

“But we've already searched the motel from top to bottom. There's nothing new to discover.”

“Then we need to question more of the missing child's relatives.”

“I've already checked, and there's no one else, just his parents. No one else. The only option is to go to his hometown.”

“Hometown?”

“Yes. According to their records, they've only worked here for a few months; besides, they barely enrolled before they started working.”

“So they moved here recently?”

“Yes, but we have no record of them anywhere, like if they've lived in a cave all their lives.”

“What about the strange man who came into the room?”

“It doesn't make sense. According to the owner, he didn't leave the room, and the only way out is at the reception desk. There are no windows in the rooms. Besides, there's no way he could have killed the Gaspels without leaving prints, so what did he do with the bodies?”

“He must have left them in the room until the boy arrived. It's likely that at that point he killed him as well.”

“Yes, but he would still need a place to leave the bodies.”

“He could have thrown them out the window and escaped that way.”

“But there would have to be witnesses for that. This place is very busy, and people would notice a man climbing out of a third-story window with three corpses. Besides, such a level of professionalism is impossible for someone we have no record of.”

“Still, it's our most viable theory.”

“I'm afraid so, but it's very strange that his victims are so special.”

“They're like ghosts.”

“Or professional criminals.”

“So, the most likely theory is that the boy escaped from the hospital on his own, met his parents' killer and died. Then the killer escaped through the window with the corpses and some of their belongings, left the room perfectly tidy and disappeared into the crowd.”

“It seems that the victims planned everything very well to confuse us. Only two options come to mind: Either they are secret agents, or they are a very strange peasant family with very bad luck.”

“For now we should think about the second option. At least it would lead us somewhere.”

“No, because neither a professional killer nor people as stealthy as the Gaspels would leave a clue as sloppy as a pair of rolled up socks in the hallway.”

“Wait... Socks?”

“Ah, yeah. I didn't tell you. At the motel I found these socks”. She pulls out a bag with the socks in it “They're children's size, which led me to believe they were owned by the Gaspels, which means the killer used the clothes he stole to make a rope and climb out the window.”

“That's a great deduction, Elena!”

“Yes, but I doubt it's possible, because the rope must be strong enough to hold a grown man, and that means the rope must be tied securely, and being in the street, he couldn't untie it. So I need more reason to think the killer escaped out the window.”

“Do you want to go to the motel to completely disprove your theory? It's even possible that the owner is an accomplice and is giving us false information.”

“... Okay. Let's go.”

They wasted no time. They got in the car and drove to the motel. Once inside, they began to interrogate the owner once again.

“Good afternoon, sir.” said Quickley.

“Hello, detectives. What is it now?”

“We're here to question you again, if you don't mind,” said Allard.

“Haven't you asked me enough questions already?” replied the owner. “I even told them what the boy looked like for his spoken portrait.”

“We just need to confirm our suspicions,” Quickley clarified.

“Fine. Make it quick. I need to clean up the room you guys messed up.”

“Don't worry, we'll be done in no time,” Elena assured him.

“You have thirty seconds,” the owner proposed.

“Make it a minute,” said Quickley.

“No. Thirty seconds,” insisted the owner.

“Forty,” Allard proposed.

“Alright. You have forty seconds.”

Detective Allard put Quickley's pocket timer on the table for a quick interrogation.

“Can you tell us again what you did last night?” Quickley asked.

“I was asleep since nine o'clock,” replied the owner.

“Did he leave the windows closed?”

“Yes. I'm sure of it.”

“What was the boy carrying in his hand this morning?”

“Charlie was carrying a bag of soup for his parents.”

“When was the last time you saw the Gaspels go into the motel?”

“Two days ago, in the afternoon, with a strange man.”

“Did you see the strange man leave?”

“No.”

“Did the Gaspels leave the room?”

“They haven't left since that day.”

“Did you check the window?”

“Yes. I closed it that night and I didn't open it until the next day.”

“Did you close it yesterday?”

“Yes. I don't remember opening it today, though.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“No. I didn't open it this morning, but it was open. Probably some guest opened it for me.”

“We didn't have that...”

The timer went off. Luckily, they had a new clue.

“The killer opened the window to get out!” Detective Allard exclaimed happily.

“Well, can I clean the room now?” asked the owner.

The two returned to the car. The fact that the window was closed that morning gave reason to believe that the killer went out the window, and the owner showed no signs of lying. That old veteran never showed guilt in his entire life.

What's left for them to do is investigate the location of the mysterious killer, put up wanted posters to find the victim, and drink a lot of coffee.

Fortunately for Charlotte, the police were a long way from finding her, and to put a cherry on top of this grotesque cake, she found a perfect shelter.

The two left the bus to head to Danny's supposed home, and after a long wander and lunch breaks, they managed to find it. You could tell it wasn't what Charlotte was expecting, but it was indeed a great house. It had very gothic architecture, a large front door, two floors and a large attic. You could tell it was very old and in very poor condition; its dark and sinister appearance made neighbors not want to look in that direction; the grass growing on the ground nearby was yellow, as if it had never rained in that area. Undoubtedly, an abandoned house by all accounts. Even the darkness of the night made it look more frightening. Danny wasn't lying, but it was curious that an orphaned child would own such a large property; however, it could be easily explained. Once Charlotte has control of the situation, nothing will stop her from achieving her goal. It was as if the angels of the underworld were on her side. That mysterious child was the second greatest blessing of her life; although, there wasn't much competition.

“Welcome to my house!” Danny exclaimed. “Do you want to come in?”

“No,” Charlotte replied, “I'm going to check the outside, if I may.”

“Which outside?”

“I'm just going to explore the garden.”

“Okay. Oh! I must show you something, stay here.” Subsequently, he ran to the back garden.

Taking advantage of the fact that the apparent new annoyance in her life was gone for a few minutes, Charlotte could analyze the situation.

The neighboring houses were quite far from the property. It was practically the last house on the block and occupied a large space, so the neighbors wouldn't be watching what was going on in that old woodpile. Neither the bank nor the government seemed to be aware of that property, and there didn't seem to be any kind of sign advertising the sale or demolition of it. It all seemed to mean that the only thing keeping Danny from living there were moral principles, things that neither of the two orphans had.

After the brief glimpse, Charlotte stood in front of the door with her suitcase, observing the textures of the iron and wood, when from behind her back emerged Danny with a rock in his hands, which had a disgusted face painted on it with crayons. You couldn't see it very well because of the darkness of the night, but without a doubt it was a rock with a very funny face, but Charlotte didn't laugh, mainly because she had the same sense of humor as that rock.

“Enough,” said Charlotte. “Let's go inside.”

The doors creaked as they slowly swung open. The gloom was frightening, and not even moonlight could enter through the small cracks in the ceiling. The inside of the room seemed like a complete blind spot. You could close your eyes inside and you wouldn't know the difference. Instinctively, Charlotte reached for a candle while Danny stood in the doorway. Normally, light fixtures are not far from the front doors, and given the circumstances, that old house didn't seem to use electric light, so, candles should not be lacking on the furniture.

The lack of visibility to other people might cause them fear; however, when you know that in the dark there may be real danger, being afraid won't do you much good. The furniture attached to the walls was noticeable by touch.

Charlotte walked in and made her way to the left slowly and opened the drawer that was in the first piece of furniture she came across. She noticed no traces of wax. The only thing that could be felt inside that drawer were nails, small needles and some nuts. She walked a little further, this time she didn't look at the floor and that cost her a stumble. She literally tripped and fell on the cold, rough wooden floor. Luckily, she didn't scrape herself on any rusty nails. If that were the case, she would have gotten another terminal illness by now. Instead, during the fall she tried to hold on to the tablecloth that was on another nightstand, causing a few pens and a box of matches to fall. Charlotte knows very well what those boxes sound like when they hit the floor, so she carefully searched through the loose planks to avoid hurting her hands until she found it. The box only held about seven matches. One was enough to light enough to see where to walk. She lit one and took a good look at everything within three feet until the flame was extinguished. From the drawer with nails and the table with matches she could assume that the entrance to the kitchen was not far away, and that's where the candles usually are. How fortunate that common sense was not part of the human soul.

After crawling along the wall, she could smell the rust from the pans in the dishwasher. Moisture is easy to recognize in the kitchen. She only had to take a few steps to get her hands on a drawer full of candles. Unfortunately, she didn't count on the fact that the kitchen was very long and finding a specific spot was going to be tricky, but she realized that if she opened the curtains, the light from the lanterns could illuminate at least part of it. The problem was that from the entrance to the kitchen to the nearest window there could be a lot of unpredictable things, and considering that Danny is not going to enter because of his understandable fear of the dark in an overwhelming and intimidating space at nighttime, there was no turning back. Have you ever stumbled on your own when you thought there were more

steps going down the stairs?, well that's what Charlotte felt during those complicated 39 seconds. Finally, the curtains opened and Charlotte could see with certainty where she needed to go.

Danny was sitting on the sidewalk until he heard the sound of the old curtains opening. He quickly made his way to the entrance and stood looking inside with his heart pounding in the thick darkness of the main room, waiting for confirmation that the girl he had just met had not been swallowed up by the house. Several seconds passed. Charlotte's footsteps were not clearly audible, she could only hear shy, mysterious sounds coming directly from the unknown. Absolute silence dominated the room for a few brief moments. Seconds later, a small, long wax cylinder suddenly emerged from the darkness to collide directly with his forehead. It was Charlotte, who had thrown a candle in Danny's face.

Noticing that the reflex test had clearly failed, Charlotte had no doubt that Danny was not going to be a threat to her.

The two of them lit their candles and began to walk inside that melancholy abandoned house. Danny told her which way to go, although it was a bit laborious, considering he was taking cover behind Charlotte as they walked. Once they reached the most decent room on the second floor, Danny said goodbye and ran out the door to sleep outside. Cowardly, some would say, but any fool would know how to identify danger.

Once outside, Charlotte put her briefcase under the bed, lit another candle and left the others in the nightstand drawer. Then she said aloud, "I know intruders from other planes can talk, and if you're going to wreak havoc tonight, you'd better show yourself now so we don't waste time!" A long silence abounded in the room, but she knew that if there was an afterlife, there were also souls in sorrow stuck on the

earth plane, so she didn't move a muscle for three and a half minutes. After that, she knew she could sleep peacefully that night.

The next morning, the imperfections of the house were easily visible. The interior had a rough mix of gray and brown colors that blended nicely with the worn furniture stacked in the corners and the colossal dust-covered spider webs. Everything seemed simpler now that there were no visual constraints. Charlotte unlocked the door and set about investigating the interior. She could tell that before, it was a very nice mansion, although that *before* could easily have been 438 years ago.

A frosty breeze crept through the cracks in the windows and walls. Luckily, Charlotte had her pink sweater on before heading to the basement. A surprise chilled her blood, and it wasn't the terrifying atmosphere of the basement, it was the realization that Danny was still there, asleep under the living room table. He jolted awake when he noticed Charlotte's presence, exactly like a dog. As he approached her to greet her he said the following with remarkable energy:

"Hello! What happened? Did you sleep well? I came in because it was starting to get cold. I wanted to light the fireplace but I couldn't remember how and then I remembered that the coffee table can serve as an extra roof and I fell asleep there. Did you hear any ghosts?"

"No" Charlotte replied with some uncertainty when she saw him, "There are no ghosts on this property. You can rest easy knowing that."

"But how do you know that?"

"I only know that if there were bad ghosts here they would have killed us by now. Now, show me the coin chest."

"Oh, yes! The chest is down here." He runs down to the basement while Charlotte follows him on foot.

Going down the stairs, she sees that the bottom of such a battered house is, in fact, very clean, and above all, empty. There was a window that managed to bounce light from the floor to the ceiling, giving poor lighting, but it was enough to visualize where the floor ended and the walls began.

Danny stood in the middle of the basement, watching Charlotte walk down the stairs as he pointed a finger at the location of the chest. It wasn't hard to assume. It was obviously under the weathered wooden planks, a few steps away from the east wall. Seeing Charlotte heading straight for it, Danny stopped her.

“Be careful,” Danny warned her. When I try to get coins out of there, the chest always closes by itself and the walls start shaking.

“It would have been very helpful if you had told me that right after you accepted the absence of ghosts in the house,” Charlotte replied.

The closer she got to the wall, the thicker the air became. It was obvious that something was going on and the property wasn't really that abandoned. Charlotte removed the floorboards. At that precise moment, she could feel the presence of an entity from another plane. Charlotte paused, as she had never had that sensation before. Suddenly, she heard a deep, chilling whisper that dictated: *You're lost, aren't you?*

That was the sign she was waiting for to confirm that there was a spirit in the house. To ensure that her hand was still connected to her body, she opened the chest with a wooden board and then held it open with it. It was certainly worth getting there. They were legitimate and usable coins, apparently preserved from decades ago. The mystery at that moment was who they belonged to, but that question didn't last long, as the mysterious voice soon presented itself again.

The only light illuminating the basement turned gray, making everything around look black and white. Danny covered his head and got into a fetal position. Charlotte looked in all directions for any sign of danger. The air became very heavy and what was most noticeable inside those four walls was the booming voice of that esoteric identity.

“Stay away from my treasure!” was heard from the deep darkness of the basement.

“Don't tell me,” Charlotte replied with sarcastic intent.

“I've spent half my life risking my life to keep it in my possession. Neither you nor that spoiled child will get another doubloon out of me!” he remarked in his voice.

“I want you to show yourself,” Charlotte demanded.

“As much as I want to kick you off my property, I will not show my spirit to you.”

“Did she say spirit?” asked Danny, completely spooked.

“Explain your rules to me. We're not leaving here until we're all satisfied,” said Charlotte in a commanding voice.

“These are the rules: You leave and I don't kill you right here.”

“We're not that innocent,” said Charlotte seconds after Danny let out a screamed of fear. If you wanted us dead, we would have been dead by now. Your power doesn't go that far.”

“You're right. Please, take a doubloon and leave,” said the ghost in a suspiciously calm voice.

“I'm not an idiot, I know the chest is where your spirit resides,” Charlotte replied boldly.

“Don't get smart with me. You don't even know what you're talking about.”

“Of course I do. I know a thing or two about what we are made of. I know that humans have from birth things called ‘body, soul, and spirit,’ and I also know, from general culture, that souls in torment are doomed to keep their spirit

on Earth, and yours is bound to that chest you don't want to let go of.

The pressure in the room condenses even more until the voice shouts in a very low and disturbing tone, "GET AWAY FROM MY TREASURE!"

The chest shattered the wooden plank that held it open into pieces and knocked the other planks off the floor into the deep hole where they were suspended. (A lousy job of digging if you ask me).

The two infants ran out of the basement as the floor caved in behind them. Once out of the house, the situation did not look favorable, but not impossible to resolve.

"How could you talk to the ghost?" Danny asked in complete disquiet.

"Is this the first time you've heard it?"

"Yes, and I've been visiting him for years."

"Maybe it's because I don't have a soul."

Danny's mouth dropped open after hearing those words in that order. Charlotte hadn't realized it until that moment, but not having a soul is not a very common thing among living people.

"What do you mean, you have no soul?!" he asked shouting.

"It means that I have no value as a living being, and maybe that and some more details related to my history with esoteric subjects give me a strange connection with the paranormal things."

"And what does that mean?" Danny asked with genuine sincerity.

"It means... I have magical powers," Charlotte replied, trying to evade further questions. Unfortunately, it didn't work.

“What powers do you have?”

“I can read minds.”

“Really?!”

“Yes. In fact, I know you're going to say: How did you know?”

“How did you know?” he says, showing an expression of pure surprise after witnessing that simple trick.



Charlotte Gaspel's harrowing misadventures were never going to end. In fact, they are just beginning, for as they experience a new home and a new purpose, the next few days were to be an odyssey for both orphans.

XV

RESENTMENT

Life is full of surprises, one day your parents are murdered and the next you have to free a ghost from its eternal suffering.

“Do you have any money left?” asked Charlotte.

“No. What's left is in the chest,” answered Danny.

“Then we must exterminate the ghost.”

“How do we do that?”

“It's very simple, you just have to stay here and collect all the interesting objects you find.”

“Great!”

Charlotte walked away from Danny, walking towards the bowels of the city while he was running from one side to the other in search of something he doesn't know.

What was our protagonist's goal? Not very complicated; she was heading to the library in search of information about

otherworldly beings, whatever clues pop culture had left was going to work. First of all, the most important thing was to recognize the city. Unlike her birthplace, *Spoirtown* had many sprawling, urbanized locations, so it's no surprise that it's somewhat confusing to locate.

Between apartments and restaurants, a map would be helpful, but since such things are not common in the middle of the 20th century, Charlotte decided to ask for directions.

Long story short, she managed to find the library. It was early, so she had plenty of time on her hands to go through all the encyclopedias she could find on paranormal topics. The results were not very satisfactory. Most of the books he found were pure romantic fiction, and the horror novels were going to take a long time to barely give a shred of useful information. The only thing left for her to do was to search through those infamous children's books.

Charlotte made her way to the small shelf of short little books and luckily, they were arranged alphabetically. She searched from *Andy*, *The Little Mouse!* to *Ztinky Zoos*. By surprise, she was able to get two books with the theme of beings from other dimensions, namely, *My Grandfather Visits Me* and *My Friend Ghostward*. They didn't look like professional sources but they were the best choice. As Charlotte studied the sentences and drawings in the two copies, the feeling of a mysterious gaze lurking on the back of her neck. She looked sideways warily; there weren't many people there, and that made it all the more frightening, even knowing that privacy was more than welcome in her life. Suddenly footsteps were heard, slow, sharp footsteps. There was no other choice, Charlotte had to turn around and use what she had in her hands as a weapon. Finally, she gets into her battle pose, with her eyes wide open and her feet anchored to the ground. All to spot the presence of her new enemy: A blonde-haired girl.

“Identify yourself,” Charlotte said without moving from her position.

The mysterious figure didn't say a word, as she stood still for a few seconds and scurried off to another section.

Charlotte could follow her to find out more about her, but she literally had no reason to do so, so she returned to the abandoned house.

In other news, Detectives Quickley and Allard are lying at their desks full of papers and files. At that, the chief wakes them up.

“Have you solved the case yet?” he asked with a noticeably sarcastic accent.

“Almost there, Captain!” Quickley exclaimed after raising his head, “We've already distributed posters to find little Charlie. They'll be fully installed this afternoon if we're lucky.”

“Is that all?” asked the captain.

“It's not,” added Detective Allard. We made a list of towns and cities where the killer might be. You may wonder why, and I answer that, if the killer is staying in a place in *Spoirtown*, we would have already had a record of some madman dragging suspicious bundles. It may be a wild theory, but it's the most reasonable thing we have, and we haven't slept since yesterday, so I assure you we've come a long way.

“I'm glad you're working hard,” said the captain, “but I need you on another case.”

“What?!” they both shouted in unison.

“There was a break-in reported at a married couple's home and the wife says she saw her husband's truck stolen, and since my nephew, Officer Greyson, is visiting his mother in *Soufreville*, you two are the only ones I have available for this one.”

“Please, we are so close to solving it!” Quickley pleaded.

“I'm not asking you. If you stay on the Gaspel case you're going to drive yourselves crazy. Take this as a break to clear your heads.”

“Thank you, Chief,” said Detective Allard, somewhat distressed. “We'll take it.”

“What are you saying?” Quickley asked her partner, whispering and grabbing her arm.

“After we finish it, we can go back to the Gaspel case more relaxed than before. Don't worry, the killer isn't going anywhere for now; I mean, it's only been twenty-three hours since the boy's disappearance was reported.”

“Okay,” said Quickley with some remorse.

Maybe it caught your attention that this Officer Greyson went on a trip to *Soufreville*, and with good reason; there lies the core of our beloved protagonist's problems, including our dear wizard.

The time to talk about Steven will come soon, but for now we need to conclude Charlotte's paranormal situation.

Charlotte opens the door to the house after returning from the library. Honestly, she hoped Danny wasn't there, but it's not easy to miss him. He was sleeping on the table, taking a well-deserved rest after finding all sorts of things hidden all over the property. Charlotte tried not to wake him as she lifted the eleven things he had collected.

He had brought two candles; a hammer; a small broken spyglass; a long gray cloth handkerchief; a moderately functional compass; a ruler; two silver rings; a small bottle of alcohol; and a large brown bag. It was then that she thought the deceased was probably older than he looked. Charlotte woke Danny up and said to him before he could get up:

“Prepare your weapons, because we're going to bust a ghost.”

“And how are we going to do that?” asked Danny as he opened his eyes.

“Simple,” Charlotte replied, “We just have to make him accept his fate. Generally, people who become ghosts are resentful of the life they've lived. They're tied to this plane, I guess because they left something unfinished and it's eating them up inside. By nature, there are no good ghosts, because what makes them powerful is evil. In other words, if you don't perish in peace and succumb to the impulses of the underworld, you won't be able to leave Earth.”

“Thank you for explaining it to me. I feel better already,” he said sheepishly.

Since she knew he didn't understand sarcasm, she assumed he feels sure that this strange being has a weakness, but to make it clear, she told him what they had to do to get rid of him in simpler words.

“The ghost is very angry because he wants to take care of his treasure,” said Charlotte as she showed him the book *My Grandfather Visits Me*. “In this book, little Erik meets the spirit of his grandfather, and at first he was very afraid, but in the end, he realized that the only thing he had to do to make him go away was to say goodbye to him, as the grandfather was very angry because he never got to say goodbye to his grandson. After they gave each other a hug, Grandpa was able to leave in peace.”

“I get it,” Danny exclaimed, “If we hug him, he can go in peace and we'll live happily ever after!”

Although he couldn't quite grasp the situation, he understood the concept. Finally the children's books were of some use.

The two of them went down to the basement. Charlotte knew what she had to do. She placed two candles on the

remaining floor, placed the two books on Danny's head to keep him still, and began to speak.

"I bring you an offering," Charlotte said aloud.

"Are you still here?" yelled the creepy voice. "I told you I don't want anyone near my treasure!"

"That's not why we came," Charlotte replied.

"Then why did you come here? To give me an offering?"

"No, I just wanted to make sure you showed up."

"Insolent girl!" cried the ghost. "Why can't you leave me alone?"

"Because I'm going to help you. You are bound to greed; your spirit is doomed to drag your soul across the earth while your eyes are blinded by a feeling that no longer has any value."

"You have not the slightest idea what you are talking about!" cried the ghost, very irritated.

"Yes, I have." Charlotte pulls out the gray handkerchief of tattered cloth Danny found and raises it in her right hand. "You were a pirate."

"What does it matter?" he answered using a smug tone.

"What's your name?"

Charlotte had never asked that question to anyone, mainly because she was not interested in knowing the name of the people with whom she shared few sentences, but mostly because the others always asked her.

"My name," said the ghost, "is Alexandre García Montenegro. I was a faithful helper on the high seas. I cleaned and polished like all the other crewmen. We were not very powerful, but we stole with great aggression; and for many years I kept every gold doubloon I could find. I only stole doubloons. They were my obsession. And that boy stole dozens of them whenever he felt like it!"

Charlotte looked at the open chest and asked Alexandre:

“Where were you born?”

“My parents were French, but I was raised in Burgos,” he answered proudly.

“Is that Spain?”

“I always considered it my real home, although we always used to sail in French waters,” he answered with a certain nostalgia in his speech.

“Are you sure those are doubloons?” asked Charlotte somewhat mockingly.

“They're doubloons, Spanish doubloons! I've stolen them all my life, so I know what they look like!” he exclaimed very angrily.

Charlotte stared at the small, silvery coins Alexandre called *doubloons*.

“I'm sorry to tell you this” Charlotte pronounced without any kind of regret, “but those are French francs.”

“What are you saying?” he shouted in bewilderment as he returned the floorboards to their place.

“Your ignorance may also extend to matters of economics, but you can't ignore the fact that all your life you've been stealing from Frenchmen.”

“That's good, I have always hated the French, especially my parents!”

Charlotte walked over to the chest and picked up a few coins.

“I think I see the problem. You thought you could spend foreign money in your favorite country, but in the end, even if you had saved all the money you had, you would never have been able to spend it in life; and now, you're

holding on to a pile of completely useless nickel and bronze. Sure, unless you want to help the French economy.”

“Damn it! GOD DAMN IT!” he shouted at the top of his lungs as the basement shook ferociously, creating an almost dazed noise.

“He's getting very angry,” said Danny totally panicked. “He's not going to go away peacefully like this.”

“Don't worry about him!” said Charlotte as she pulled out the brown bag she had tucked in her shirt, “Help me put all the coins in the bag!”

The two of them hurried to put as much as possible away as the basement collapsed. In the end, they were only able to fill the bag halfway before the wood of the ceiling collapsed. As soon as they finished, Alexandre's ghostly form came into view sobbing noisily. He looked like a wretched middle-aged man with extensive baldness, only with a glowing gray aura and an unsteady figure. The dimples on his face grew larger and deeper the more he screamed in despair.

They came out of the basement and saw how the whole house was also shaking and crumbling. The shock of reality hit Mr. García Montenegro hard, so much so that his spirit had spread throughout the property, leaving the two orphans with no choice but to jump out the front door to feel the sweet touch of ordinary pavement on their knees.

Apparently you can't have everything in life. Maybe Alexandre couldn't leave in peace, but at least it was no longer a problem as long as it wasn't necessary to enter the house again.

It was still early. The two infants were starving, and the wisest thing they could do was to hide that big bag of money on their way to find a new shelter.



Many questions were in the air, but the most frequent was: *What is Steven G. Ledger doing?*

The night before that day, in the cold shadows of *Soufreville*, the previously mentioned wizard was sitting on the cushioned couch in the living room of his home, finishing his cup of coffee and reading some specific pages of his book of incantations. His new house was very different from the old apartment where he showed himself to the Gaspels. This one had a more ostentatious look; the walls had a whimsical red tapestry and the wood on the floor had a very dark tone. The house was by far the most luxurious in the whole town, for it had columns, gilded chandeliers, a pointed ceiling, orange carpets and other details. The interior was decorated with paintings of abstract art; the pillows were thick and very red; the details of the other furniture were touched up with fine gold finishes and it had a fish tank with some fish that he kept as pets. Needless to say, he felt at home in that place. Being the wizard of the mob paid off, there was no doubt about that.

After finishing his drink, he went to make another cup, put the book down on the table and turned on the coffee pot. He returned to the living room and marked a number on his wall phone, put it to his ear and waited. After a few seconds, Steven began to speak:

“Hi! It's me, Steven. I know we haven't talked in a while, but I've been busy. No, I haven't forgotten about you. I know Dad doesn't give you the attention you need, but you're always going to have me.” Four seconds passed and he continued talking. “How was school, did you get any new friends? I don't like your old classmates, remember when they threw you down that well? Good thing you won't be

seeing them anymore. I assure you they're burning in hell right now. Yes, I miss you too, but I'll see you soon, I'm only missing one ingredient to finish the potion. If all goes well, I'll see you tomorrow. Well, I have to go, the coffee is almost ready. Bye, *Deffi*. I love you too.”

Steven hung up the phone. He was happy, because he was finally going to see someone close to him after such a long time.

XVI

THE FALL

The sun in *Soufreville* barely illuminated its rocky streets, the birds sang at a very low frequency and if you have lived there for a long time, you will not be surprised to learn that drug trafficking was very common in the town.

It was true. In *Soufreville* there was a sugar factory. It was the local heritage because it was the main source of income for the town's government, that is, *The Coffin*. It is a very lucrative business, mainly because sugar was not the only crystalline substance they exported. *The Coffin* manufactured a drug called blast, this was manufactured in pill form and sold very well in *Soufreville*, as it benefited the mafia in every way. The factory helped them to get free sugar for their tea and to camouflage their business of illicit substances.

Since you know the main business of the mob, you can get an idea of what Steven was doing at the gates of that

factory. He wasn't looking to do any illegal business, he was just looking to buy a bag of sugar.

Surprising as it may seem, sugar was not easy to come by in town, as it was mostly exported to other places and what remained was kept by *The Coffin*, so the stock they had for others was very limited. If you wanted to buy a whole bag you had to be very important to the mafia; luckily, Steven was an essential figure to them, so he figured he would be allowed to buy in bulk.

While Steven was waiting for the doors to open for him, Officer Greyson was unpacking his bags after arriving from *Spoirtown*. His mother had difficulty walking, and being a widow, she didn't get much help because she was also mute and socializing was never easy for her. Not being able to utter words, the feelings you get from a person with that disability are more evident, and if an elderly widow wasn't pitiful enough, not being able to speak makes being with her a very sad situation.

Officer Greyson did not look much at his mother, and even though he had come a long way to be with her, he had repudiated her for years for always depriving him of his own happiness. It's kind of hard to think of a situation where a disabled widow would be strict with her only child, but families in general are like that. Greyson had nothing to settle with her, he was going to act nice until the weekend was over and then leave that dusty town. He put away his clothes and prepared to buy a few fruits when his mother tapped the ground loudly with her cane, it was at that moment when she pointed at the gun in his waist, hinting for him to take it off. Greyson would not tolerate his mother controlling him even from a chair, so in sign language he told her, "If I feel like carrying my gun, I'm going to carry it even if you don't like it." His mother, setting the cane aside, replied, "As long as you are living under my roof, you will not use a gun near me." Greyson didn't bother to answer her, just

went outside and aggressively kicked down the door. You can tell they are family because they both have very bad tempers.

Perhaps the resentment that dwells in Officer Greyson's chest is a bit unjustified, but he didn't have time to ponder that, as he already had a rather interesting day ahead of him.

Steven G. Ledger got tired of waiting without anyone seeing him, so he decided to go through the fences. This, logically, attracted the attention of those who were watching from inside and they did not wait to stop him. Steven was confused, as he was not getting the attention he deserved.

“Stop right there. What are you looking for?” exclaimed one of the three men in suits who came out of the front door.

“There's nothing to worry about, I'm *The Coffin's Personal Wizard*, and all I want is a big bag of sugar,” said Steven calmly.

“Listen, *Mr. Warlock*,” said the same man in a slightly mocking voice, “if you want merchandise, you'll have to buy it like everyone else.”

“Don't you know who I am?” replied Steven.

“Yes, I know very well who you are, now get out of here.”

Steven looked at the three of them very seriously for a few seconds. The pressure was very strong in the atmosphere, but Steven cut the ice when he suddenly said: “All right, I won't bother you again.”

He turned around and looked like he was leaving, but he turned around again and said, “One last thing...” Immediately, he turns his hand into a large raven claw and extends it to the face of the man in the suit who was talking to him to squeeze his head, causing his skull to disfigure like a stress ball, but without returning to its original form. As soon as the two men reacted, they tried to pull out their weapons; one of them managed to pull it out in time but it

didn't do much good, because Steven was already closing his airways with his other hand while whispering words in Latin, that caused the man in the suit to desperately choke to death. The remaining man looked at him in terror, his heart pounding as if he had been running for two hours without rest, which did not allow him to draw his weapon properly. At that point, the best he could do was run, too bad it all happened so fast that all he could do was fall backwards as he stared in panic at the figure of Steven G. Ledger from the ground. This one stared at him and while moving his hands in mysterious ways, pronounced: *telekinetic imperium* with a gloomy voice. This caused Steven to have total control over the body of the already condemned man using telekinesis, and the first thing that happened was that he reversed the direction in which the victim's elbows and knees were bent and then stretched all his limbs backwards, which caused his spine to split in half, thus folding him like a sheet of paper. After having completely crushed his body, he saw that he was still vomiting blood; he felt merciful and decided to end his suffering by turning his head four times on its axis. Finally, he wiped the blood stains from his face with a handkerchief and walked quietly into the factory, where more company was waiting for him.

Charlotte rested quietly while tasting the famous *street food*. Danny was eating next to her. To be more precise, he was eating fifteen feet away from her.

As she contemplated the vastness of the public park sitting on a bench, Charlotte let her guard down slightly, which did not allow her to see that a person was approaching with nothing more and nothing less than a pink ball, which could very well be a murder weapon. It was a girl of a similar age to Charlotte, she had blonde hair and two oddly placed pigtails. Her eyes were blue and her skin was very white, not only because of her genes, but also because of her cleanliness, so it could be assumed that she did have a home.

The mysterious girl stood watching Charlotte intently as she ate. She stood motionless, like a gazelle watching the light of a car speeding in her direction. Danny barely noticed anyone near him, but Charlotte kept thinking of everything this new threat could do to her at this vulnerable moment. She might just be a girl with a ball, but Charlotte was the one with sauce-stained hands and her *bodyguard* sitting on another bench fifteen feet away. In her eyes, if the mysterious girl had a secret weapon, there was no escape.

Not having a soul, Charlotte did not possess any natural emotions like a dog or a canary would, but her brain was still human, a human with a privileged mind and an exaggeratedly cautious and meticulous personality, so her over-reasoning caused her insecurities. She may not have anxiety attacks, but she can execute absurdly paranoid decisions, so it's no surprise that she panicked when she saw how that little girl stared at her for more than three seconds.

After a long suspense, the girl began to speak with a shout:

“I saw you in the library!” she exclaimed without contemplation.

“Identify yourself!” Charlotte replied in an agitated and outraged manner, partly to make sure I heard her, but mainly because she was too exalted.

“Yes, you said exactly that when I saw you!” she said, as if she had discovered the secret of the Bermuda Triangle.

Hearing all the noise the two were making, Danny, with his mouth covered in food, looked up neutrally.

“Stop yelling,” Charlotte ordered her, “state your name, address and intentions.”

“My name is Annie,” she replied after a few seconds of silence. “My parents tell me not to tell strangers where I live, and my intention is to know your name.”

“Why do you want to know?”

“I know everyone on the block, but I’ve never seen you,” she said, putting her hands on her hips.

“Do you know him?” she said, pointing to his esteemed *bodyguard*.

“This is orphan Danny. Hi, Danny!”

“Hi,” Danny said, almost expelling the food from his mouth.

“How do you know them all?” Charlotte asked.

“Because everyone here goes to the same school, and I want to be friends with everyone,” she said, her mouth full of her own words.

Having another ally was not on Charlotte's list. It was very risky and up to that point she had been very lucky, but it could be over at any time. Now they had money on them, so they both had to be much more careful, but Charlotte still wouldn't answer the implied question with the headline: what's your name?

“My name is Sarah,” Charlotte said, but with caution to make sure Danny's mouth was full so he couldn't speak. “Nice to meet you,” Annie told her as she extended her hand to greet her. Charlotte couldn't believe she had to always greet by shaking hands when it's so easy to use words, but she wiped herself with a napkin anyway and greeted her properly. “You have a rather deep voice,” Annie said. “That's the way I was born,” Charlotte replied.

“I'm new here, can you tell me where the school is?” asked Charlotte.

“It's a few blocks that way,” she replied as she pointed the way. “When do you enroll?”

“I don't know, I'm just curious,” she told her as she took a sip of her boxed juice imposingly, since in terms of information about the other, she was winning.

At that, Danny finished eating and shouted, “She's an orphan too!” Charlotte couldn't believe that Danny had said such insolence, but more than anything else, she couldn't believe that he had discovered that on his own without giving her that information before. Then she realized that she shouldn't worry about Danny saying her real name, but rather that he might think about her being an orphan as well. After all, she had never properly introduced herself to him.

“I beg your pardon?” Annie asked in confusion.

“She spent all night in the abandoned house and her parents never came looking for her,” said Danny with all the pride of an international detective putting away the zodiac killer.

“Is that true?”

Charlotte had never wanted to break someone's nose so badly.

“That's right,” said Charlotte, closing her eyes and frowning, “I'm an orphan too.”

“That explains your condition!” Annie exclaimed. “Why don't you go to the orphanage?”

“Orphanage?” asked Charlotte. She'd never been offered anything like that before.

“Yes, since you are new and have no parents, you must go to the orphanage or else you will live like Danny for the rest of your life!”

Charlotte was conflicted. On the one hand, being in an orphanage would make her vulnerable to the authorities, but

on the other hand, she would have a safe place to come and go without worrying about being directly exposed.

Before she could think of anything, Annie was already talking to her parents across the park about signing her up for the orphanage in the city. It was a moment of helplessness, but not entirely in vain. After all, maybe it wouldn't be so bad to let others take control of her life, at least this once.

On the other side of the story, the alarms at the sugar factory were ringing loudly. Steven had achieved his goal, and the only cost was to murder much of the factory staff.

As he exited through the back door, he silenced the alarm with one of his spells, allowing him to walk away without any complications. There he was, dragging a large sack of sugar, covered in other people's blood and with a smile on his face. Don't misunderstand, he didn't want to kill anyone, but imposing his power before *The Coffin* pigs would make anyone's morning.

As he walked down the rocky street, he couldn't help but notice that everything around him was empty. There was no one outside, which was a little scary, but understandable, as hearing an alarm in one of the most dangerous buildings in town gave no message that it was safe to be outside; besides, it was very convenient to have no witnesses.

There were only a few blocks left to reach his destination, but the trip felt eternal, and looking through the fog, anything could appear, and in a stressful situation like that, it's normal to hear things where there are none, but it doesn't hurt to walk a little faster. It might be too late to stop and too early to say for sure, but it was a fact, someone was walking in his direction through the thick fog. Steven opened his eyes wide and sharpened his senses as much as he could but could not prevent that across the corner was Officer Greyson carrying his bag of fruit. He, seeing a man in a smart

suit covered in fresh blood dragging a large bag across the ground, understandably froze and put his hand on his gun. As soon as Steven saw his alert position, he immediately assimilated that if he made one move out of the ordinary, Officer Greyson could blow his head off; but what's one more victim? It would be much more productive if he just made his own stomach consume him until only the bones were left, so without further delay, Steven dropped the bag of sugar and began to move his arms to cast the spell

If Greyson was a good cop, he wouldn't have gotten out of that situation alive. Fortunately for him, he is not, because he shot Steven in the hand as soon as he saw him move them in mysterious ways, which made him reasonably indisposed to use magic to defend himself. Steven, as he watched the large hole in his right hand transform into a fountain of blood, immediately knew that the best option was to run for home. Officer Greyson was following him as he yelled for him to stop, but that trick rarely worked in the history of mankind. Steven was still running and feeling the bullets bouncing on the rocky street when in a desperate attempt, he tried to formulate the geographical relocation spell while still moving in zigzag, but it was not a good idea, because being so focused on the movements of his remaining fingers, he stumbled and hit his head before falling unconscious. Officer Greyson, observing his body on the ground, rushed to tie him up with the bag of fruit he was carrying in his left hand, throwing all the eggplants to the ground.



It was not a very fortunate time for the great wizard, and just like those eggplants lying on the rocky street, his future looked dark.

XVII

THE BOTTOM OF THE BARREL

There was always a lot of tension in that married couple's home, but for some reason, the wife conveyed no sign of distress over the recent theft of her husband's truck and the mess left inside the house.

Detectives Quickley and Allard were bathed in the warm waters of boredom. They both had the same theory of what happened at that scene, but time had to be killed somehow, so they continued to question the lady.

“So,” said Detective Allard, starting the conversation, “nothing else was stolen?”

“I don't know, maybe,” answered the lady without being convinced.

“Based on what she told us,” Detective Allard continued, “they entered the house, searched all the rooms, but ended up stealing only the truck.”

“Maybe the thieves didn't know where it was,” added Detective Quickley sarcastically.

“Yes,” replied his partner, playing along, “trucks are always hard to find.”

“Please help me get it back,” she pleaded nervously.

“And tell me,” Allard insisted, “it was your husband who called us, wasn't it?”

“Yes... I mean... No.”

“Interesting,” said Allard while acting as if he was writing in her notebook.

Suddenly, the house phone rings and the lady rushes to answer it to escape the conversation. Quickley and Allard were looking at each other earnestly to confirm their more than obvious theory when suddenly the lady called Detective Quickley to let him know the call was for him.

Quickley went to answer the phone and began to speak.

“Leonard Quickley speaking”

“Quickley!” exclaimed the captain on the other end of the line.

“Tell me, boss,” he answered vigorously.

“A few hours ago, Officer Greyson brought a potential criminal to the hospital from *Soufreville* and he needs your help to question him and make sure he doesn't end up arrested.”

“But... wasn't the main idea to arrest him?” he asked in confusion.

“I'm talking about to Greyson.”

Quickley was a little concerned with the situation, but getting involved in it was more interesting than staying on the case he was assigned, so he ended the call and turned to his partner to say, “I was called from the station to help Greyson in a sticky situation, do you think you can handle the truck thief on your own?” Detective Allard looked at him

with a smile accompanied by a frown and replied, "I pretty much just need to do the paperwork. You go do your duty."

After starting the car and heading to *Spoirtown* Hospital, Detective Quickley saw that the hospitalized suspect was lying with both hands in casts. Greyson says he was worried that his other hand was fractured, but it was obvious that he had casts put on both of his hands because he was afraid that those would be his most lethal weapons.

Quickley saw Greyson sitting in a chair next to the gurney and asked him:

"What did you do to this man to make him unconscious and with his hands destroyed?"

"It may seem strange to you, but as soon as I saw him, he looked like he had committed at least five crimes."

"What did he do?" Quickley said after watching Steven for a few seconds.

"I suspect he caused the alarms at the sugar factory over there to go off. I saw that he was carrying a sack of sugar and it was covered in blood."

"Did you see him in the act?"

"No, but it's obvious that he was the responsible of all that fuss."

"And he attacked you?"

"He tried to do witchcraft on me."

"Excuse me?"

"He started moving his hands funny, so I shot him and that's why he's got them like that."

"Don't you think he was just mute and trying to communicate with you?" Quickley said excitedly.

"I know how to use sign language, and he wasn't saying anything."

"That's not the point! Shooting a civilian without evidence or signs of aggression can make you lose your job!"

"Not if you prevent it."

“Are you out of your mind?” he exclaimed in disbelief. “I’m not a lawyer, I’m an investigator!”

“Then investigate how I can get away with this!” he replied very uneasily.

Detective Quickley looks at Steven with all kinds of doubt, but it's very clear to him that there is no possible scenario where Greyson would come out looking good.

“Does anyone else know about this?” Quickley asked anxiously.

“Just him,” pointing to Steven, “and you.”

“Okay. Here's what you'll do,” he ordered firmly, “In your report you won't mention anything about the reckless shooting, you'll just say that you saw him leaving a crime scene in a suspicious manner and tried to escape but he tripped, broke his wrists and was knocked unconscious.”

“And what will happen when he wakes up?”

“You'll be away from him and I'll be in charge of the interrogation.”

“Thank you so much, Leo,” he said as he shook his hand tightly. “You're amazing.”

“Just make sure it doesn't happen again.”

Officer Greyson walked out of the room, leaving Quickley alone with Steven. The detective looked directly at his face and his wound caused by the hit. It was a very peculiar situation having to sit next to a hospitalized suspect waiting for him to wake up for questioning, but if life gives you lemons, throw them away and you'll deprive yourself of a good dose of vitamin C.



A new dawn emerged. Charlotte woke up in her new home. That's because Annie's parents wasted no time in signing her up, and there wasn't much to pack either. An ellipsis like that leaves a lot of doubt in the air. Good thing I don't like to skip important events.

When Annie's parents asked Charlotte if she didn't have anything extra to pack, she remembered that she left her briefcase at the haunted house. There were many things in there, including: clothes, documents, medicine, and a plastic bottle of water. There was also Arthur's extensive notebook and the yellow plush monkey.

That briefcase contained Charlotte's entire life, and it was essential to have it by her side, but it was safer in an abandoned house than in a crowded orphanage, so she decided it was best to leave it there.

Already staring at the ceiling at six in the morning, Charlotte felt the need to take a bath so she could say goodbye to the freedom to dress, since in that orphanage all the children have to wear a uniform all day long. She already had it laid out on her bed; it was uncomfortably colorful and consisted of an orange sweater, a white shirt and a black skirt. The institution didn't want to pay for shoes, so those were free to choose from. A curious fact that made up for the lack of shoes was the fact that the orphanage knitted its own black socks, and there were plenty of them, so many that you could find dozens lying around.

Her room was a small space between four walls with two bunk beds and two work tables, but only one chair. It had a barred window facing the street and a door leading to the hallway that led to more rooms like it. The walls were decorated in rainbow colors, if the rainbow was a depressing abyss covered with sorrow and grime. It wasn't the best home in the world, but at least it was one.

Her three roommates were asleep, which is normal at that age and time of day. It was not going to last long, for

soon the corridors would begin to be polluted with the thunderous noise of small, dazed bells announcing the start of the day. The teachers at the orphanage usually do that every morning: shake small bells loudly along the corridor of the rooms.

An interesting thing about orphanages is that they are never run by kind and caring people. Usually, the most authoritative people in those places are middle-aged ladies with psychological problems whose major purposes in life are: To make younger generations suffer and to protect their authority with their lives. In other words, strict teachers want to fulfill their frustrated dream of being the most popular person in high school.

They began to roughly open the doors to each room to achieve a better morning trauma for the infants and Charlotte couldn't have been more prepared. She was already dressed and with a 200-sheet notebook that had been given to all the orphans respectively. Curiously, Charlotte was not given anything to write with, but that was not necessary, as if you looked at the floor long enough you might find a pen or two next to some sock.

At 7:06 classes started and at 8:25 breakfast was served. Wednesdays were the only days where they didn't serve recycled meat, too bad that day was Saturday.

As it sounds to be in an orphanage, it is easy to understand the decision to abort a child, but that was not the case for these playful souls, so it is best for them to enjoy themselves while they live.

Since we are all in sync, we can understand why Charlotte used her notebook as a journal to pass the time. The classroom was not much different from any other room, as the only thing that made it different was its little mint-

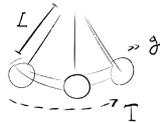
colored desks, (that nasty mint color). It is important to emphasize those desks because they did not serve their main function well. The seat was bigger than the table and, since they were connected to each other by a metal extension, you could only sit on one side and to make it worse, the table was not completely horizontal. The legs were also not level but that was not the fault of the desk, but of the floor.

29 students, 27 desks and 1 teacher. It was going to be a very interesting morning for Charlotte.

In her makeshift journal she wrote down everything that was going on, so it's best to read what she wrote.

It is seven minutes past seven. My classmates are divided into two clear groups: Those who are sick of the education system and therefore are with their heads hidden between their arms lying on the table, and those who don't care about getting on in life, and therefore are talking very loudly and making a lot of mess. The teacher who came to introduce himself today doesn't look very friendly or very cheerful, but I don't know if he should be.

The professor started writing on the blackboard a lot of things that help him to complement the point he was making, but it's not interesting at all to know about the basics of thermodynamics of his ex-wife sleeping together.



$$T = 2\pi \sqrt{\frac{L}{g}}$$

$$\pi = \frac{314}{100}$$

After several minutes, I think I understood some of what he told me among so many fancy words, and that is that the period of a pendulum is proportional to the square root of the length of the pendulum and inversely proportional to the square root of g , which is quite interesting, but I think a bit advanced for the age we are, although in the same room we are children of various ages. I'm no educational expert, but things like "square root" are told in top shelf books in libraries. If so, I feel good that they teach something useful in these places.

Forget what I said, now he's teaching us about the sounds of farm animals.

They took my notebook away from me. Apparently they think because of the impeccable spelling it belonged to a college student who left some things written on the first few pages. Too bad when they saw my handwriting they realized that I wrote all those things about the professor and apparently he didn't like it. I spent a few hours in the detention room for being the only person who wrote coherently in that room. At least I think so.

After a peculiar class session, Charlotte and the others went to eat their daily breakfast. This time it was oatmeal. Oatmeal is fine as breakfast, but this one was very thick, that's because the orphanage usually saves on resources, so they didn't use much milk.

Charlotte sat down with her tray of oatmeal. As she watched the other children frolicking around the dining room, she began to think about Danny and why he was at a bus stop so far from where he came from. Maybe he was lost; maybe he was looking for another home, or at least someone to hold on to.

There was no time to think about such things, because a new opponent was approaching and she didn't look friendly. She was a short, brown-haired girl, accompanied by her two older brothers and her complex braids. Mincy was her name and annoying was her purpose. "You have a boy's face," she would say. Charlotte noticed that her eyeliner had faded from her face after two days, so her complexion denoted a little more masculinity. "That's how I came into this world," she replied.

Everything to Mincy was a complete drama; therefore, she would not let the conversation end there.

"Where did you come from, the garbage?" asked Mincy with full intent to offend.

"This is an orphanage, so most likely everyone here comes from a garbage dump," Charlotte replied.

"Trash girls don't need food," she said as she took her plate of oatmeal from her.

Charlotte watched her walk away with her breakfast and felt something burning in her chest, which was weird, because she wasn't supposed to feel anything after being revoked of her soul, but for some reason, she felt a huge urge to make that girl suffer.

Wretched is the life of those who awaken from eternal sleep. Steven opened his eyes to find a police officer asleep in a chair next to the stretcher where he was lying with his hands motionless. Seeing that his situation was not optimal, he decided to quietly get up and walk to the door, but it wasn't long before Detective Quickley raised his badge and enunciated:

"Good morning, *sleeping beauty*. I would be grateful if you could answer a few questions, if it is not too much trouble."

“Where is my amulet?” Steven asked without any respect.

“I told you I would ask the questions.”

“It looks like a metallic triangle attached to a dark rope,” Steven insisted.

“Sir, I have no idea what you are talking about. When I entered this room you were not wearing any amulet.”

“Where are my clothes?”

“In another room. If you're in good shape, you'd better come with me so we can get this inconvenience over with and you can get out of here.”

Steven stared at Quickley and decided to cooperate, since in this kind of situation you have to step carefully. After a deep sigh, he agreed to go along with the detective.

The great wizard was taken to the room where his clothes were left and, seeing that his amulet was missing, he knew that his only way out was his own cleverness, and given that in order to get a bag of sugar he had to murder several guards, it was not the best scenario for him.

You may have guessed that the necklace was not just a lucky charm, but to some extent his main source of power.

Steven was processed and placed in the interrogation room in complete tranquility, wearing the suit he had worn the day before, as well as bandages on his hands and forehead. Detective Quickley sat down across from him and began to interrogate him.

“Help me with this, will you?” said the detective eager to finish. “If you confess now, you'll be in jail for just a few years”

“Confess? Did I do something wrong? I don't think I remember anything since the head injury,” Steven acted innocently.

“Very funny. If you had amnesia you'd ask more questions about your injuries.”

“Okay. Can you take off my bandages now? They covered my hands so much they look like casts.”

“That’s because they’re casts.”

“But I was only shot in my right hand! I don’t have any broken bones,” he exclaimed lightly.

“Nope,” Quickley said, “you shouldn’t say you were shot, you should say you fell and broke your hands,” he said, making a quotation mark gesture with his fingers.

“No. He shot me.”

“Well, I’ll tell you what: If you don’t press charges against Officer Greyson, we’ll forget about your suspicious appearance at a crime scene.”

“Are you serious?” He exclaimed indignantly. “Have you seen my current state?”

“Look, justice is far from perfect, but we can take advantage of it, and if you help us you’ll be free and go back to your village.”

“All right,” he said after thinking about it for a while, “but I want my amulet back.”

“Thank you very much. Wait here, I’ll see if I can locate it.”

Quickley gets up from his chair and walks out the door to talk to his partner on the other side of the glass.

“What did you get?” Detective Allard asked.

“He’s not willing to sacrifice himself for the greater good, but he won’t press charges if we say he broke his hands by accident, as long as we return an item he lost.”

“Are you kidding?” she exclaimed, leaving him in mid-sentence.

“I know it’s not the right thing to do, but I received orders to defend Greyson at all costs.”

“Are you out of your mind?! Greyson must face the consequences of being trigger-happy. He’s the reason civilians hate cops.”

“If anything happens to Greyson, the chief is going to fire me. This job is all he has and he'll probably do something crazy if it's taken away or even suspended.”

“I can't believe you're letting this go,” she said disappointed.

“Did you find out who he is?”

“Steven Gideon Ledger,” she snorted, “a street magician who didn't change his name despite a history of scams and petty theft. He has no next of kin. He had a sister, but her current condition is unknown.”

“Thank you, Elena.”

“I'm going to keep his registration photo to remind you every day that you let him go free,” she whispered furiously in his face.

After that, Allard leaves the room with a slam on the door. Quickley presses his forehead with his fingers to console himself for what he will do. He goes to the phone on the wall to call Officer Greyson to ask him about the location of the amulet.

“Who is it?” Greyson answers from his house.

“Greyson, it's Quickley. I need to know where the necklace the victim was wearing is. The one you shot.”

“Hey, hey, don't talk to me like that. How would I know that” he said as he looked at the object hanging from his forearm.

“Please tell me where it could have ended up. Your job and your freedom depend on it.”

“That thing must be cursed. If it wasn't, the suspect wouldn't need it so badly.”

“Can you put your superstitions aside for a moment?!” he exclaimed furiously “It's someone else's property and if you don't give it back he won't leave you alone!”

“On the contrary. If I give it to him, he'll kill me.”

Quickley lets out a compressed scream between his teeth as he slams the phone against the wall.

“Get over here right now,” he ordered Greyson aggressively.

“I'm sorry, but the best option is to lock him up.”

“If you take him to court, you're going to lose!”

“I'm going to get a good lawyer and we'll end this the right way. I've already booked the auditorium for tomorrow.”

“You're going to complicate everything!”

“It'll be worth it.”

“Give him the damn amulet!” he shouted in desperation.

Greyson hung up. Quickley hung up too, but a little slower than usual. Then he turned and screamed his lungs out, covering his mouth with his forearm.

Steven was impatient. Without his amulet, his only way to inflict damage was to dictate curses from memory or create some potion, and unless he found some cauldron in the station, there was no way to escape by force. At that, Quickley came through the door and told him the following:

“Listen, we didn't find your amulet. You'd better find a good lawyer if you still want to press charges.”

Steven held a long silence staring into nothingness.

“Who has it?” He asked with no expression on his face, looking Detective Quickley in the eye.

“It's missing, I told you.”

“You're lying. Tell me the name of the one who shot me.”

“I can't do that,” he said fearfully.

“Greyson is his last name. What's his full name?”

“I'm very sorry, your fate will be decided tomorrow. For now, you're under arrest.”

“What's his name?” Steven insisted.

“You have the right to remain silent,” Quickley said as he prepared to put Steven in handcuffs. “Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law.”

“What's his name?!” he shouted in exasperation.

“You have the right to an attorney,” he continued. “If you can't afford one, the court will appoint one for you if you wish.”

“You're going to die, Leonard Quickley!” he said as the detective slapped handcuffs on him from behind.

“You can ask for a lawyer even if you decide to answer the questions without one and you are entitled to a phone call, but I don't think you have anyone close to help you.”

Steven stopped his struggling and came up with a simple way out. He asked to make a call and it was granted.

Quickley removed his handcuffs and placed them back on his front so he could use the phone. Steven was lucky to have the mob on his side, help like that would come in handy at such times. He marked the number forcibly and waited. Mr. Clement answered.

“Speak.”

“Good morning, sir,” said Steven with a smile.

“Who is it?”

“I am Steven Ledger, the wizard. I'm calling to ask for your help.”

“Help?” he asked incredulously. “You're very funny, Gideon.”

“I beg your pardon?” he said as his smile faded.

“You think after the show you put on in my factory I'd even think of letting you live?”

“But I've done my time. I'm under arrest in *Spoirtown* with serious injuries. If you pick me up, you can kill me there.”

“You endangered *The Coffin*! Now we're on the radar! And if there's one place I want you to rot, it's prison, and be thankful you're out of my reach.”

Mr. Clement hangs up and Steven's hopes collapse, crawling across the cold floor of the police station. Being so close to achieving his goal, Steven hit the bottom of the barrel and was handcuffed to it.



Speaking of barrel bottoms, Charlotte just wanted to drill a hole in the orphanage wall with her teeth to relieve the headache that insufferable little girl gave her all day. Night was approaching and it was time to spend time with her three roommates. What do you know, they are triplets! Actually two of them are, because the other brother was in another room, being replaced by another girl. So they were two identical boys and one normal girl. No need to memorize their names, as they just go into their room to sleep. Charlotte looked with admiration at the speed with which three infants could become entranced. Naturally it takes her two hours to fall asleep, because her brain works harder at night and her economic and social situation was not exactly one that evoked a clear conscience. After selling her soul, Charlotte's nights feel shorter.

She lay down on her bed and tried to fall asleep, but for some reason, something was holding her back from being able to close her eyes completely. After 33 minutes of trying to sleep, a strange sound caught Charlotte's attention. As she stood on the bed and peered through the bars of the window, she spotted her esteemed henchman throwing rocks at the

wall. Danny wanted to get her attention to wave from the sidewalk.

“This is no time to disturb,” Charlotte replied.

“Do you need help?” he said, whispering unnecessarily.

“Why do you say that?”

“It's just that if I were you, I'd want my *future self* to help me get through the early days at the orphanage.”

“No, I don't need help,” she replied, trying to let him think that what he said could be used in normal conversation so he wouldn't try to explain it.

“Well, I'll go now!” he exclaimed, ignoring his earlier attempt to be stealthy.

“Wait,” said Charlotte in a strangely pleading tone.

“What?”

“... Do you remember the room I slept in at the abandoned house?” she asked slightly embarrassed.

“Yes, it was the spider room.”

“Under the bed I kept a briefcase. If you can get in, open it and bring me a stuffed monkey inside.”

“Okay.”

Danny ran off to get the doll without asking any more questions. Some might say it was an act of bravery, others might say she took pity on her friend, but deep down we all know that her mind was so focused on the instructions that he completely ignored the dangers of entering that house.

Charlotte went to bed again. She asked Danny to bring her a toy that was several miles away in the middle of the night in a place with high risk levels. She was 78% sure he wasn't coming back, so she tried to sleep.

An hour later, Charlotte saw a small stone enter the room. She refused to believe that if she peeked her head out the window she would see Danny with the doll in his hands; however, she stood up on her bed again and there it was, the

prized yellow stuffed monkey that Danny retrieved without any apparent scratches.

“How did you manage to bring it?” she asked more puzzled than impressed.

“Well,” he said while breathing heavily through his mouth, “when I entered the house everything was quiet. Apparently the ghost was asleep. Finding the briefcase was difficult because it was all dark, but I managed to get out with only scrapes on my knees.”

“You're unbelievable.”

“Shall I throw it to you?”

“Yes,” she said after looking around.

The monkey made it through the bars of the window and Charlotte could feel that dusty plush again. Something inside her felt good, maybe it's because of her childish impulses, which she can't let go of. Then she looked at Danny and said:

“Thank you, it means a lot.”

“You're welcome,” he smiled back, “I wish I had a friend at the orphanage too.”

“I've had him since before my parents died.”

“What's his name?” referring to the doll.

That's right, the yellow monkey doesn't have a name. Charlotte looked straight into its button eyes and decided to baptize it with a name she could remember.

“Arthur,” said Charlotte determined of her answer. “His name is Arthur.”

“I like the name.”

Danny let out little laughs and skipped away repeating the name *Arthur* as if it were the most interesting word in the world.

Charlotte put her head on her pillow and, hugging Arthur, was able to close her eyes finally.

XVIII

COLD BLOOD

A good day starts with a good habit. In Charlotte's case, the first thing she did when she got up was to write down in her notebook all the types of torture she could imagine to make that miserable walking rat everyone calls Mincy suffer. Among all the options, the most reasonable ones were: Make her swallow a stew with the flesh of her siblings; lock her in a flooded bathroom with the pipes clogged for three days; hang her by her toes; use her as a piñata; and, pull her teeth out with pliers and a hammer. She'll figure something out someday.

The first few hours of school began and, apparently, the science teacher woke up creative that morning, because it occurred to her that students would work best doing projects in pairs. I bet you can't guess who else had the same class that day. Don't break your head, it's Mincy. The students aren't sorted by classroom, so they just take students who look the same age and randomly put them together in different classes at the same level. Lucky Charlotte to have

her work partner be the same girl with the name that flooded the pages of her notebook with hateful words.

Time to work. Charlotte approached her desk and hoped that seeing her arrive would make her appear a little weaker without her two bodyguards, but nothing could be further from the truth. As soon as Charlotte leaned over to sit down, she pushed the chair away, causing her to fall and scrape her back and neck. If it's happened to you, you'll know that any physical pain inflicted on you by another person has a special addition that drives you to want to give back. Charlotte felt the same way, but twice as much. You can imagine what she had to endure to keep from ripping that b*tch's fingernails out.

Hey, don't judge me, sometimes you have to put yourself in her shoes.

The two didn't exchange a single word, they just cast their eyes forward and occasionally looked at each other in disgust, but neither was going to give the other the satisfaction of showing annoyance.

The job was to dissect a frog. Educational institutions that condone such practices should feel bad for even considering them, but at the time it was no big deal. Every couple received a frog. Luckily, they were all already dead and all the students had to do was cut open their bellies with a scalpel to see their organs. Charlotte didn't quite know what the purpose of this activity was, but once she saw the slimy amphibian lying on the table, she realized that she could put into practice everything she had read about surgery in Arthur's extensive notebook. The teacher explained to them that the frog's insides are mostly human-like and that they could even play with its vital organs to pretend to be a surgeon. Charlotte couldn't wait, but her impatience was outweighed by her caution, so she made sure Mincy didn't stab her with the scalpel as soon as it was

handed to her, but she had nothing to worry about, because she was already a few feet away from the table due to her fear of amphibians.

Everything was going wonderfully. The teacher left the room for a smoke. Everyone was busy doing their own thing and nothing could stop Charlotte from examining the anatomy of that little jumping creature. She got her scalpel and began to open the carcass. At this point, Charlotte was so focused that she let her guard down. All those smelly innards and perfectly assembled miniature organs distracted her from what is her main danger: The girl behind her. She saw Charlotte's bowed head and couldn't stop the urge to slam it against the table and onto the dead frog.

So it was. Charlotte could do nothing but breathe on the amphibian's already squashed slimy insides. She rested her arms on the table trying to get up, but Mincy was pushing her with both hands and was determined to keep her in that position until she started crying and could no longer defend herself, but from the looks of it, that wasn't going to happen. Charlotte panicked. Her scalpel was just millimeters away from piercing her forehead, but luckily, it remained horizontal the entire time. No one in the room did anything to stop Mincy, it was more fun to watch the new girl cry over a frog's guts.

Anger and helplessness ran through Charlotte's veins like hot soup. The infamous last drop of impatience finally spilled the glass and caused adrenaline to act over rational thought. Charlotte pushed her chair back with her feet, causing Mincy to lose her balance and freeing her from the entrails trap she was in. She grabbed the scalpel and buried it in Mincy's left hand, pinning her to the floor, and when she began to scream she rushed over to hold her other arm and shut her up, but what better way to shut someone's mouth than to expose them to their limit? She picked up the dead frog on the table and shoved it hard into Mincy's mouth as

she moaned in despair. Charlotte didn't want to teach her a lesson, she wanted to cause her a trauma so she wouldn't dare to even look at herself in a mirror without feeling disgust, so she made sure the frog went deep into her larynx and ended up swallowing it, along with her vomit if necessary. She pressed the corpse against her throat and held her jaws open; the other companions stood in a circle watching Mincy wet the floor with her saliva and tears as she sobbed in terror moving her legs in desperation. Charlotte grew tired of watching her body refuse to swallow an animal whole, so she snatched the scalpel from her hand and positioned it on her neck, threatening her that if she didn't swallow the frog, the wood of the floor would begin to attract fungus from the moisture left by the large amount of blood that would come out of her body. Mincy, upon feeling the blade's edge on her neck, could only burst into tears and vomit up the remains of the amphibian. Charlotte stepped back and let her psychologically break down, writhing in her bodily fluids.

Hearing all the noise, the teacher walked in and witnessed the sight of a girl crying on the floor with remnants of what were functional organs of a living being strewn about, surrounded by several shocked children and another girl with what appears to be cold blood smeared across her face and a scalpel covered in warm blood in her hand. "She started" stated Charlotte.

It wasn't long before the two appeared sitting in the principal's office.

Mincy was cleaned up and slightly hospitalized with bandages on her hand, but she was still sobbing. Charlotte was as expressionless as usual, but she felt incredibly good. Taking violent revenge gave her a burst of pleasure greater than a dopamine injection. It wasn't something human she felt, it was something more.

The principal looked them in the eye and apart from seeing a clear situation of institutional aggression, he saw two infants with difficulties in solving social problems among peers. To make a long story short, he launched into a lengthy monologue about respect that lasted at least three minutes, and at the end, he told them to shake hands and work out whatever it was they had as the friends they were. Mincy pulled her face from between her hands and slowly looked fearfully into Charlotte's penetrating eyes; she watched as Mincy trembled in panic and holding back her shivers of pleasure, she held out her hand and waited patiently for her to finish sweating to impose her dominance.

Finally, they held hands and walked away unpunished from any consequences. The education system never worked, but that was a big step backward for the history of education. Who am I kidding? Nobody cares about that stuff anyway.

A better structured system than the educational one is the justice system, as it managed to get Steven Gideon Ledger 61 years in prison just after noon. Detective Quickley walked out of the courtroom with him and could only take a deep breath to relieve all the residual nerves. Steven looked tired; he had nothing to do if they let him go free, so to get it over with fast, he pleaded guilty and set out to prepare for a lifetime behind bars.

Despite everything, Steven still had something to do and he wasn't going to forget it even in death: murder Officer Greyson. Thanks to his court appearance he was able to learn his full name and he couldn't be happier in all honesty, because now that he knows his name and what he looks like, he can make a voodoo doll and torture him to death without even being close. It's a pity he can't go back home to make the doll, but you know what they say: *Black magic will follow you wherever you go*. He was ready to be sentenced, but before he could break in his new prison clothes, Detective Quickley told him that his destination was not the

local jail, but one reserved for terrorists and highly dangerous criminals, and it was hundreds of miles away from *Spoirtown*. That was no big deal for Steven. After all, he was in no hurry.

Before they left the building, Officer Greyson stopped them so he could say a few things.

“Leonard, I’m sorry it had to be this way, but I’ve never been so sure of anything in my life.” Then, looking at Steven, he said, “That bastard had to lose.”

Steven, out of anger, looked at him with eyes of superiority, partly because he wanted to contemplate every detail of his body structure and thus make a more realistic dummy, but when he slightly lowered his gaze, he noticed that under his shirt he wore a pendant, and not just any pendant, because the bastard had his amulet. Who would have imagined it? His most useful weapon was less than a meter away, hanging from his enemy’s neck. Steven never considered going through that kind of psychological torture.

“Thank you for your help, Greyson,” said Quickley with the purpose of getting away from him as soon as possible, “but I think you should go now. I’ll take him to his new home.”

Steven stared helplessly at Greyson, handcuffed and walking down the stairs of failure.

Since they finished early, Quickley offered Steven to have lunch together in his cell so he could get his last meal before going to a high security prison. What did he have to lose? Steven accepted.

Both of them, eating pasta, began to talk.

“It must be hard to be a policeman and still be a slave to others,” said Steven without any kind of censorship.

“Why do you say that?” he asked confused and offended.

“It's just that I couldn't help noticing that you're always the one taking orders.”

“I don't know what cartoon you watched to think that a dialogue like that would save you, but I'm nobody's slave.”

“That's what the natives of Ecuador said when they were harvesting for the Spaniards.”

“Can you use a more general analogy to make your point? I don't know the history of Ecuador.”

“It is practically the same as that of all the countries of the American continent: Slavery by the Europeans until they end up contaminated by their culture with no choice but to abandon or transform their own roots.”

“You may be right, but you were also born in Europe.”

“I'm not European, I'm from the United States.”

“What?” He asked in surprise, since in his file his nationality was different.

“I moved to Europe to start a new life. One thing came to another and I ended up in France, unfortunately.”

“Don't hate France for being the country where you were captured.”

“No, really. This country sucks.”

“Well, enough of the friendly talk, I'll get to the point.” He suddenly became serious and took out a folder with pictures. “Who made these wounds?” he asked while pointing to a photo of one of the victims of the factory.

“Do you have so little faith in me?” he said, looking him in the eye and smiling slightly, genuinely acting as if he felt underestimated.

“Don't play games. These corpses are not normal. What did you do to them?” he asked even more seriously as his heart pounded noticeably.

“What are you going to do, interrogate me again? You can't do anything anymore, because, even if you don't want to, you're not even remotely close to the power your owners have.”

The atmosphere grew thirteen times heavier, and it seemed as if the outside world fell silent in a dark hush.

“No one else knows about this. The forensic team agreed to keep quiet, but I need to know how the hell you closed this man's goddamn airways.” Quickley told him, whispering but his voice cracking in disbelief.

“You want me to show you?”

“Don't bother bullying me, it's obvious that without your amulet you can't hurt me. If that weren't the case, I wouldn't be talking to you. Tell me what you know, you f***ing psycho.”

“Listen to me, Sherlock, my abilities are beyond you. I've killed before, and the carnage that resides in that factory is far from the cruelest thing I've ever done to a person. They deserved it, and I enjoyed it while they bled all over the floor, but I'm not a psychopath. You don't know anything about me, and if it wasn't for that damn cop, I'd be long gone from this filthy place by now,” said Steven with a noticeable anger and determination in his expression.

“And to think I offered to let you go free.”

“Oh, I won't forget. You're one of the nicest people I've ever met, but I know you, Leonard Brandon Quickley,” he said slowly. “It's a somewhat difficult name to pronounce, but even more difficult to forget. The deep anxiety shall fall on your head someday and you will know it'll be because of me, and only I can free you from that torment.”

“Did you just threaten me with black magic?” he asked slightly offended.

“Basically.”

“So you really are a wizard. That explains everything,” Quickley put the photos in his folder. I’ll be sure to inform the prison guards to be especially careful with you. I’ll tell them you’re schizophrenic, that’ll ensure you at least a straitjacket.”

“You wouldn’t dare.”

“I promise that I will do everything in my power to ensure that whatever life you have left will leave you traumatized in hell.”

“You’ll wait for me there, and you won’t like it when I get there,” he said, seriously threatening.

“Don’t tell me,” he said incredulously.

“I’m serious. I know what the flames of the underworld look like, and you’re going to love them, every one of them, as they pierce your organs with high pressure.”

The atmosphere felt thicker than condensed milk, but that didn’t alter either one’s biorhythm, as they stared at each other for a while before saying goodbye.

Lunchtime was over. It was time to let the condemned man rest.



That night, he would sleep at the police station, but the next night would sleep at home.

XIX

SHINE OF HOPE

The moonlight imposed its presence in the orphanage, waking someone up in the middle of the night. From so much madness Charlotte felt tired and confused. Feeling that anger was not normal, much less the pleasure she felt afterwards, so the wisest thing to do was to talk to the demon that now possessed her soul, but Charlotte did not know how to summon it. She thought for a long time in her bed until she came to the conclusion that if she broke a cup like she did last time, maybe she could get his attention somehow. Since she was losing nothing by trying, she headed for the kitchen in the middle of the night in maximum silence.

There were all kinds of containers in the kitchen, and Charlotte began to search through them cautiously. She found pots, pans, glasses, teapots, coffee pots, bowls, bottles, plates and oddly deep spoons until finally she found a porcelain mug. Impatiently, she picked it up and closed her eyes, thinking of everything she could think of to make the

forces of the afterlife notice her presence, then placed the cup on the floor and stepped on it, making a noise too loud to be missed in the middle of the night. Luckily, it didn't wake anyone, but it wasn't necessary to get into trouble, as Mincy's brothers were already prepared to take revenge, searching the rooms for Charlotte, and that broken mug managed to divert their attention to the kitchen.

Charlotte wasn't expecting any of that, and understandably so, she's still a child fighting with other infants, and oddly enough, that behavior brought her notable consequences, like two twelve year old troglodytes hanging her by her feet at the entrance of the orphanage, but let's not get ahead of ourselves, she barely realizes that the trick of stepping on a cup in the dark didn't work. Turning around she saw the two brothers standing on the other side of the kitchen, and she quickly started thinking about how to get rid of them.

The most logical thing to do was to grab any object around her as a weapon, which would be easy, because kitchens are practically minefields for children, but the brothers went running towards her as soon as they saw her trying to find a knife. They grabbed her by her limbs and covered her mouth with stockings. One held her arms and one held her legs, rendering her completely helpless. The first brother whispered terrifyingly calmly, "Since you like pranks, we'll play an even funnier one on you," and just as you read in the previous paragraph, the two brothers, with all the joy in the world, tied Charlotte's hands with those black stockings and lifted her with a rope up to the iron pipe holding the sign with the name of the orphanage. A great presentation for the prestigious *Red Sea Orphanage*.

They stayed for about twelve seconds or so underneath her to make sure she couldn't escape, and outside of wanting to, Charlotte's priority was to survive, because being upside down for too long can cause permanent damage to her cranial structure. After spending enough time watching their

victim dangling in the cold of the night, the two brothers decided to go inside. Charlotte knew that if she didn't change her position soon, her eyes were going to turn red and her blood would ooze out of every available orifice in her head until she died horribly.

The situation was as following: Her feet were tied with a rope under a stable iron extension welded to the building; the other end of the rope was held by a fire hydrant, so it could not be overlooked, but since it was the early morning hours, there were not many people who can be of help. She was ten feet fourteen inches above the ground, so the height would not kill her, but something that could save her would be a sharp object to cut the rope, however, she did not have time to grab the knife from the kitchen, so that option is out of the question. The last alternative would be to scream for help, but her hands tied behind her back did not allow her to remove the sock that silenced her screams. The only thing left to do was to force her abdomen to divert the blood going to her brain to her back.

Since Charlotte has been pretty lucky these past few days, waiting for someone to show up wasn't a crazy idea.

Nine minutes and no one showed up. Time for plan B: Swing until her head hits the bell next to her. There is only one problem, and that is that the bell is three feet away, and to get there, she will have to act as a pendulum for quite some time to get the necessary momentum, which will not be healthy for her white sclerae. There was no other way out, so she proceeded to swing with all her strength and coordination. Gradually she felt more and more strange, but she held firm and as if she were a rustic toy, she managed to rise high enough to collide with the bell.

The sound didn't alert anyone inside the orphanage, and I'd say Charlotte couldn't see the sun after that, but I'd be lying. Danny was nearby, and after hearing the terrifying call of iron in the early morning, he ran straight to the orphanage, because a bell ringing in the darkness somehow gives him the image of someone like Charlotte asking for help. Or maybe it was simple curiosity.

Charlotte could only see the deep darkness of the streets, only illuminated by the piercing yellow lights of the street lamps. As her vision became increasingly blurred, a chubby little boy approached her in order to untie the rope.

She awakens from what was a painful fainting spell. Danny looked at her as she opened her eyes and smiled to see that she was still alive after the small blow to the head she had received when she was freed.

"Danny," said Charlotte in a dizzy voice, "how did you get here so fast?"

"I haven't left the Orphanage," he replied, "I'm keeping your things in the alley next door for when you want to escape from here."

"My... My things?" she asked disoriented.

"Yes, I brought your briefcase so you'll be ready when we leave. At night I use all the clothes inside to cover myself."

"Wait," she said, coming to her senses, "how do you know if I want to leave or not?"

"No one likes it here, that's why I ran away."

"I can't believe you messed up my stuff, but thank you for helping me."

Charlotte realizes it's the first time she's said the word *thank you* without having a soul, which wasn't very satisfying to her.

After getting up, Danny hugs her tightly as if it's the last day in the world. Charlotte's eyes go wide open, as if

someone had punched her in the stomach. She didn't return the hug in any way, but Danny wouldn't take his arms off her body, making those six seconds a torture for her. Finally, their bodies separated and Charlotte just wanted to lie down and rest. Since she hadn't planned on sleeping that night to try to summon an otherworldly being, she hadn't taken off her uniform, which was an advantage so she didn't die of hypothermia while passed out, or in the three minutes she hung there while Danny tried to untie the rope.

Charlotte walked toward the front door only to stop and look at Danny. He looked at her sheepishly, as if to say it's not worth going back inside. She then looked down at the floor and said to Danny with her eyes closed:

“Listen to me, I have until tomorrow to make those bullies pay. Let's go get some tweezers to rip their fingers off.”

“I know where there are some!” he said without paying attention to the last part of the statement.

There's nothing more relaxing and detoxifying than walking in the dark of night, unless you live in a dangerous place or are terrified of the dark. And there they were, going for anything they could use to torture those roughnecks, when suddenly, Danny identified some new newspapers lying on the floor. “Great!” he shouted. Not many understand his enthusiasm, but when you don't have a lot of resources, newspaper sheets are multi-purpose; plus, they're fun! Charlotte was about to tell him to leave the newspapers on the floor where he found them, but as she read the main headline, she decided to take them out of his hands to corroborate what her eyes saw.

A witchdoctor is locked up in a maximum security prison! “He attacked me with his magic wand,” says the officer responsible.

Next to that poor paraphrase unscrupulously called *Catching Headline* was a photograph of Officer Greyson next to the infamous parent killer: Steven G. Ledger. Charlotte could not believe it. *The One who reigns in Heaven* seemed to take pity on that soulless creature by putting his chief nemesis on a silver platter.

Reading carefully under the light of a street lamp, she could learn that he was going to be transferred to that special prison that same day in the afternoon, and that the only thing that separated them was a walk of a few miles.

It was time to act, and she knew it, so she told Danny: “Get the money. We should make a trip to the hardware store, because this is going to be a busy day.”



The bars open. Steven leaves the police station to enter the prison for dangerous criminals, just as children leave school to enter college. There is an art to leaving one prison to get into another.

Steven's way of celebrating his *year-end vacation* was to get into the back of an armored truck and be transported for several hours without a clear sense of where he was, but you know where he is: in a nice, tightly packed suburb called *depression*. He suffered a small crisis of helplessness knowing that his ambition and ego were primarily responsible for his downfall. Knowing that the project he worked on for so long will be reduced to ashes was a heartbreaking landscape to behold. His gaze was lost between his fingers, his now eight fingers. He could not escape such a situation, not only because he would not be able to execute any spells with his hands, but because he saw no point in escaping anywhere else. Like being between a sword and a wall, but the wall is also a sword.

Hours passed, the small truck for individual prisoners was a few miles away from reaching its destination. Outside was nothing but a deserted yellow field and maybe a few trees. The sky looked clear and the road empty, but one of those statements was a lie. It's going to worry you to know that it was a pretty nice day, because there was someone in the middle of the road: a child lying on the ground like a roadkill. Don't be alarmed, Danny was fine, although he appeared to have bloodstains scattered all over his body and the pavement.

The truck saw that in the distance and stopped a few feet from the body. Usually these trucks are piloted by highly trained guards, escorted by other highly trained guards who don't stop for anything, but it's kind of funny to admit that no one cared about the prisoner they were carrying. In the front seat was only one dubiously trained driver, he couldn't even be considered someone qualified for that kind of job, but you know what they say: *Let the fattest guy on the team go cover the goal.*

The driver stepped out of the vehicle and went to check on the boy's condition, and was relieved to see that his chubby figure was moving making it clear that he was breathing. Taking a closer look, he noticed that he had no trace of being run over, he had more the appearance of being wounded with a metal crowbar and left as bait. One of those things was true, and you'll be happy to know that the hit on the head with a metal crowbar was not received by Danny, but by the driver seconds later, while he was distracted.

The plan went perfectly. Charlotte saw the driver fall to the ground while holding the crowbar. Danny, hearing the thump, stood up and saw that his effort in standing still with red paint under the sun was worth it. Charlotte takes a deep breath to stabilize the adrenaline her body produced after coming out of the weeds to attack a middle-aged adult with all her might.

“Is he dead?” asked Danny, a little scared.

“Go look, is he still breathing?” said Charlotte without showing any kind of expression.

Danny approaches the body and puts his ear to his back, and hearing that his heart was still beating, he said to Charlotte: “Yes, he's still breathing.”

Right after that, Charlotte mercilessly delivers more strikes to the head of the already corpse, smashing his skull like a boiled egg.

The playful journey they were both engaging in had suddenly become quite serious, unceremonious and unromantic. Charlotte's first murder was not going to be anything special or even poetic, it was simply an act of pure evil.

Watching the real blood mix with the fake, Danny took a few steps away to allow himself to be startled by the shocking act of violence he had just witnessed. Charlotte, seeing his reaction, tried to reassure him with the words, “Don't worry, he was a bad man.” Danny then asks her, “Why, what did he do?” to which Charlotte replies, “Deprive me of my revenge.”

Steven was already starting to get anxious about the driver's sudden stop. He expected to hear the front door close so they could move on, but that was not the case. What startled him was hearing the back door being slammed by what sounded like a crowbar. Charlotte then waited for the prisoner inside to give signs of being Steven G. Ledger. Finally she managed to hear, “What's going on out there?” That was enough to confirm that someone inside lived.

“Is there anyone else with you? asked Charlotte, raising her high-pitched voice.”

“No, just me,” Steven replied with some uncertainty.

“In that case, listen carefully. I'm sure you remember me, because I haven't forgotten you. I'm going to do you a favor, if you give it back to me in return.”

Steven tries to identify a child with whom he has a debt to settle, but no one comes to mind.

“Okay, I'm listening,” he said, just out of curiosity.

“I want you to take me to *Soufreville*. I know you can do it. In return, I'll release you from your sentence.”

In the end, a light shines on the future of the graceful wizard. An easy escape home, with plenty of time to start over.

“It seems reasonable to me,” he said, and though upright, somewhat excited.

“Then we'll set you free.”

The lock protecting the door at the back of the truck was understandably strong, a simple crowbar couldn't break it. Lucky they also brought a pair of pliers. In a flash, the doors opened and the wizard emerged from the darkness as usual, but this time in a different outfit. And he was not the only one.

At the sight of freedom, Steven also spotted two children standing in front, one covered behind the other, the one in front being an old friend, but completely changed. After getting rid of his handcuffs easily, he bowed and showed his gratitude to those who would be his saviors, but as he looked up, he saw something familiar in that little girl who looked at him with the coldest gaze a living being could have. He could not believe his own eyes. It was *Charlie*, that cute little boy he met less than a year ago, with the difference that now he was wearing a skirt, black and white sneakers, a white shirt and an orange sweater. Frowning, trying to

identify his face, he said incredulously, “Charlie? Is that you?” Charlotte looked at him as if she would then have to describe in detail every inch of his face and replies, “Almost.”

Danny steps forward and says to Steven:

“No, her name is Sarah, and I'm Danny.”

“Well, nice to meet you, *Dannyel*,” he said as he shook his hand. “And nice to meet you too..., Sarah, I can assume.”

“I won't shake your hand for the rest of my life, Mr. Ledger,” she said with her arms crossed, as if she was spitting in his face. “Besides, my name is not Sarah, it's Charlotte. There's a lot we need to talk about.”

“Your name is not Sarah?” Danny exclaimed, very surprised.

“Actually,” Charlotte continued, “Charlie is a name I stopped using when I turned nine.”

It was then that Steven started to connect the dots. Seeing that her hair was genuine and her eyes were empty like a deep pool in winter, he could sense that her birthday present was not a very ordinary one. Strangely, the question he was going to ask her next was not related to her mysterious *reincarnation*, but to her sudden change of appearance.

“I'm glad to see you well; although, I'd like you to excuse me if I ask, why the feminine attire?”

Charlotte understood his concern, but did not want to give him the pleasure of knowing her orientation to her own identity.

“My manner of dress is of no personal interest to you,” she replied. “I would like to omit the irrelevant aspects of our plans. May we proceed?”

“Don't be mad, Charlotte. After all, *the devil is in the details*, isn't he?” he said supercilious. “Just one more question. How did you get here?”

“Very easy!” Danny replied. “We paid a taxi in the early morning to take us to the police station. Then we paid him extra to take us to the jail it says in the papers. Afterwards, we got out here, and Charlotte covered me in paint and told me to play dead.”

“Thank you, Danny,” said Charlotte sarcastically with her eyes closed and her index finger and thumb pressed against her brow. “Now, do what you do best. Locate us in your house using that weird relocation spell.”

“Actually, I'd like you to call it *teleportation*. It's easier and faster.”

“I'll call it whatever you like, but we need to get back to *Soufreville* before your absence becomes a problem.”

“Ah, yes. That won't be possible. I need my ring and middle fingers to do it properly, and I'm afraid they came off my hand the moment I was shot. So, the fastest way back would be with this armored truck.”

“Wait,” Charlotte concentrated and began to think about this sudden change of plans. “Okay. We'll play it safe, as long as we don't take too long.”

“We'll be there tomorrow morning if we don't stop.”

When she finished listening to him speak, Charlotte climbed into the passenger seat and began to do something similar to a tantrum, emphasizing her impatience, repeating several times: “Let's go now. Come on, let's go. Let's go now. Let's go now. Get in. We have to go. Let's go. Now!” as she frantically shifted in the seat.

Finally they left. They loaded Charlotte's suitcase with all her belongings. Danny slept in the back of the truck, while Charlotte remained sitting in the passenger seat, holding the metal lever tightly. Steven was driving, although a bit tense

because he understood that the person he was sitting with did not possess a soul to feel scruples, so he knows that she would not hesitate for a single second to expose his brains as happened to the previous driver. Either way, he didn't want to get rid of Charlotte, as he was in dire need of a *right hand*.

Keeping your eyes open for hours when you didn't sleep the night before is difficult, and more so for an infant. Suddenly, Charlotte felt the lever getting heavier. She knew she was going to fall asleep at some point, but she refused to let her guard down. Steven noticed how tired she was, so she decided to break the ice after long hours of silence.

“Listen,” said Steven without taking his eyes off the road, “I know that neither of us is a *saint* here, but I feel I should make it clear that what I did to your parents was against my will. I only work for *The Coffin* for personal needs, so... No hard feelings?”

Charlotte shot him a stare. She wanted to make it very clear what she thought about him.

“I know you didn't let me live in the hospital out of mercy. You just wanted to wash your hands of me, confessing to me what you did. You knew that if I managed to survive I would look for you. Don't talk to me about *hard feelings*. I saw in the newspaper what you did to get arrested. Don't tell me you're going to let those missing fingers remain just a memory. If you're vulnerable it's because *The Coffin* doesn't want to help you, and if you didn't kill me it's because you need me. I'm not going to give up my *hard feelings*, but once you help me, we'll be at peace.”

Steven was surprised at how quiet *Charlie* turned into that talking dictionary. Manipulating her was not an option, so he answered her as truthfully as he could:

“You can sleep easy, I plan to do a lot of things when we get there and I need you awake by then.”

Charlotte decided this time to trust. Her eyes were already too heavy and the seat was actually very comfortable. She closed her eyelashes and set the lever aside. At first she just had her eyes half-open to check that Steven wasn't doing anything strange, but she couldn't do that for more than seventeen seconds.

The co-driver's chair had never felt so comfortable. Charlotte opened her eyes when it was already dark and the first thing she saw was Steven's empty seat. Exalted, she reached for her crowbar and saw that it was gone too. It seemed like a clear betrayal, but looking out the window, she found Steven only a few feet away trying to open the door of a house with the crowbar. Suddenly, Charlotte realized that they were no longer on a deserted road, but on a regular avenue.

It was very unwise to make such a scene at that hour, so she got out of the vehicle and headed towards Steven.

“What are you doing?” she whispered.

“Oh, I'm glad you woke up,” he answered without stopping forcing the door. Help me get in. The bastard who lives here has something that belongs to me.”

“What belonging deserves so much risk?” she asked angrily.

“You'll understand when you grow up. Ah, finally, opened.”

Access to that medium-sized house was gained. The noise didn't wake anyone, except some dogs, but no one will believe them. Steven directs his gaze to Charlotte insinuating her to join him inside, risking everything they had achieved up to that moment. In the end, if he doesn't get back

whatever is his, he probably won't want to continue, so there was no other alternative.

The darkness of that house seemed familiar. It wasn't the first time she had searched for something in a dangerous place in the dark, but Steven was acting as if that was his house, as he walked normally towards what would be stairs leading to the second floor. Charlotte was surprised by the lack of security, but she didn't know that this property belonged to Officer Greyson, and he's not afraid to shoot any intruder at night, so he didn't fear for the vulnerability of his home. You can imagine why Steven was so eager to get inside.

Charlotte was looking through the windows for something that might interest her. Steven was not slow about anything. He crept through all the doors on the second floor until he found the bedroom. Charlotte wondered how he acted so confidently, this being someone else's house. Then she understood. Opening the door where Officer Greyson slept, Steven could see his precious amulet around his neck. He stood still for a few seconds, thinking about how to remove it without waking him. Charlotte, on the other hand, observed the amount of useless objects he had. Her curiosity directed her gaze towards an instant camera he had on his nightstand, and it may not be a big deal, but little *Charlie* always wanted to collect pictures of all the amphibians and insects he found in his house.

The plan was easy: tiptoe to his bed, pull out the necklace and kill him with it.

Time for the show.

Getting there was not difficult, as the important thing was to move slowly. Charlotte was doing the same, but to steal the camera. Slowly, he put his hands on Greyson's neck and carefully removed the necklace from his head. It was

fascinating. Officer Greyson's deep sleep facilitated the tense moment, but before he could put the amulet back on, Steven was startled by a sudden noise.

The phone began to ring. Steven, out of fear, hid under the bed. Charlotte did the same. Greyson awoke and turned on his lamp light. "Who is it?" he asked very annoyed. The two under the bed couldn't hear the voice of the person on the other end of the call, but it sounded annoyed. "What do you want now, uncle?" he replied ignoring the obvious. The other voice was replying a task Greyson was supposed to accomplish, but hasn't completed, thus the anger. Charlotte could only make paranoid theories about who was calling, mainly because it could be bad news for them. The tone of voice began to calm down, and something related to a weekend could be heard. Greyson replies, "I had to get back, and like it or not, my job comes first." Unscrupulously, he hung up the phone and realized his necklace was missing. Then he saw the open door and became paranoid. Charlotte and Steven were seconds away from being killed, mainly because Greyson grabbed the shotgun he kept in his closet at full speed. Steven knew the scumbag only needed two seconds to shoot him, and he didn't even have the amulet on. It all came down to strategy, Charlotte knew, and for that reason, it's always good to know what you have on hand, and a camera would suffice. Suddenly, Charlotte emerged from under the bed and took a precise flash photograph of Greyson's face. He barely realized there was an infant in his room when he was struck by light in the darkness of the night. This blinded him for a few seconds, just long enough for the two of them to run away.

Upon recovering, Greyson ran for the front door to catch them. The two were already on the first floor when they saw Greyson at the top of the stairs. He, with all the anger of a middle-aged gentleman, ran down the stairs pointing the shotgun, but that, as crazy as it sounds, was not a good idea. Running down the stairs in the dark at full speed pointing a

gun caused his legs to fail him, making him fall down the steps with the grace of a swan on a bonsai tree, but the swan would at least have the decency to not hit its head so hard.

The officer's obese body rested sore on the ground. His eyes were open and his shotgun was still in his hand. Steven snatched it from him right away and noticed that Greyson hadn't actually died, he was just incredibly out of consciousness. His chest was still showing respiratory movements, his eyes were squinting furiously and it looked like he would soon go into a coma. Charlotte watched him very carefully; seeing him suffer made her shudder with satisfaction and she volunteered Steven to kill him for him. The wizard had a better idea.

He stopped Charlotte from taking any action and asked, "Do you have the photo you took of him?" She replied that she did, and picked it up off the floor to show it to him. Steven smiled darkly and said to Charlotte with illusion in his eyes, "Come, I have a better idea to get rid of him." He quickly went to get some Greyson's clothes and a rope. He put on his amulet and compressed a shirt to make a bundle that he ended up covering with another shirt. He cut off the sleeves and divided the bundle in two with the rope, making a last-minute voodoo doll. He took the picture and tacked it to the smaller bundle. To make this kind of voodoo doll work you need an amulet that channels the power without having to put candles and other things on the floor. With a bundle with a rope and a picture you can torture anyone if done correctly.

Steven held the doll and pronounced carefully: *Arnold Connor Greyson*. He then turned his gaze to Charlotte and invited her to torture him as she wished. She held the doll and shook it, causing Greyson's insides to jiggle back and forth, moving his belly quite comically. Charlotte began to understand the workings of her new toy and had a little fun rolling her head around. Turning the two lumps on opposite sides she could see that the neck of the body became a

natural squeezer, spinning her head around and detaching her skull from his spine. His skin began to change color, taking on a reddish hue, and the more he turned his head, the more purple his torso became. Steven was somewhat proud of Charlotte, for, although limited in creativity, she was quite resourceful when it came to her work.

Greyson's disfigured corpse lay on the ground, and there it remained.

The two returned to the vehicle. Steven couldn't stop laughing, for his revenge was accomplished, and now that he had his amulet, anything was possible. Charlotte, somewhat exalted by the situation, asked him what he needed the amulet for, and he answered: "You see, when you are free, impotence is your greatest weakness. That's why you need to have some help from beyond to never lose."

The connection formed based on a series of serious crimes managed to make Charlotte feel safer next to one of the most dangerous people around, as ironic as that sounds.

After a deep breath, Steven concentrated on achieving the teleportation spell and ending the nightmare, but he could not. He had already memorized everything he was supposed to say, he just needed two more fingers. Luckily, his new *right hand* was nearby.

That's right, Steven was about to entrust Charlotte with a great macabre responsibility: Execute an advanced spell.

"Listen, kid," said Steven with visible remorse, "I need you to pay close attention to what I'm going to tell you."

Charlotte looked directly at him and put all her attention on his words, since it was not normal to see Steven serious.

“This” said Steven holding up the necklace, “is a magical amulet, and it doesn't sound very professional, but believe me when I say that there is nothing ridiculous about it. Its power is immeasurable. You see, there are two types of magic: White magic, which is something sacred, is a method used to help others, therefore, it is useless. Black magic, on the other hand, comes from the evil, from hell itself, and seeks, more than anything else, to benefit the sender and harm the receiver. As you may deduce, I use the last one, and once you commit to mastering it, sacrifices must be made. This amulet cost me an arm and a leg, not literally, of course. Human arms and legs are not that valuable. What I mean is that I had to make a deal with a demon to get a power channeler to have the ability to use magic through my body directly. Using it doesn't give you magical powers, but if you know how to execute spells, an amulet makes it easier for you. It makes it so easy that it's practically impossible to lose it, because in a way it seems to *call you* when you're not wearing it. What I want you to do now is to cast the teleportation spell, since you need at least ten fingers to cast it. Black magic may be welcoming, but it is not inclusive.

Charlotte went blank. A task like that was insane. Given that the only experience she had with black magic was playing with a doll, Charlotte was hardly an aspiring wannabe. However, the offer was so tempting that she decided to accept.

Steven placed the amulet around her neck for a moment, giving Charlotte an incredible feeling of power, but she still had to cast the spell, and for that she must pay twice as much attention to what her new *tutor* does and says.

The first thing Steven did was to show her step by step the hand positions. These being only six, it was not very complicated to learn them. If he made a single mistake things could end very badly. Once he finished perfecting the six positions in order, she only had to repeat what Steven

told him, but this time with the amulet on. They could not waste time. Charlotte put on the amulet again and Steven dictated the Latin words to her. With a somewhat slow pace, they finally managed to see that nothing happened. What went wrong? Steven knows. Charlotte wasn't trying to cast the spell, she was just following directions. It's a common mistake when it comes to doing black magic. Following directions is a bit contradictory when it comes to casting a spell, because you're doing it to please someone else when you should be thinking only of yourself. This very thing Steven tells her, using exactly those redundant words.

Charlotte would try again, but this time, focusing on her own benefit. She closed her eyes, repeated the words, moved her hands and as she did so, both of their hairs would begin to rise as if gravity was being lost. Charlotte's interior was practically an amusement park in hell, as everything seemed to be working and the customers were having the time of their deaths, but the magma on the floor naturally caused all the machinery to be in flames, and the acidic winds caused majestic and metaphorical rings of fire.

The entire truck was transported to *Soufreville*. That was a great victory. The side effects were already starting to affect them, causing Steven and Danny to have pains in their skulls and feel like their skin was covered with salty prickles.

The pain woke Danny, who was guarding the briefcase with the belongings in the back. Steven looked out the window and shouted, "We did it!". Charlotte opened her eyes and confirmed it. They made it to their original home location, but still hadn't arrived at their destination. After celebrating briefly, Steven tried to start the vehicle, but it seemed to have suffered a major breakdown after the trip. The situation was not too bad, but they still had to consider the fact that they were not at Steven's house, but in front of the hospital. It would be very difficult for Charlie to pass that place, but not for Charlotte.



The prodigal son has returned.

ACT III: REVELATIONS



XX

ALPHA

If we step back a bit from the dark side of the moon, we can observe two detectives working at their desks. While our protagonists were still on the road, Quickley and Allard were trying to pick up the Gaspel case, and it wasn't going very well.

Leonard Quickley was feeling a little stressed, but he didn't have much reason to be; I mean, he had to cover up a case of questionable morality; he came face to face with an explicitly deadly killer on the job; and he was manipulated by more than one person, but it all worked out in the end, right?

“How's it going?” asks Detective Allard, surprisingly appearing, placing a picture of Steven G. Ledger on his desk and flashing a big smile.

“Ah!” he exclaims, scared. “You scared me.” (See?)

“How did yesterday's judging go?”

“You saw the news, the little witcher didn't even defend himself, so it was very easy to be his lawyer” he said, leaning his face in the palms of his hands.

“Hey, don't get mad about what I said before. You know I tend to be very moralistic sometimes. You did what you had to do. At least it ended well for everyone.”

“I'm not worried about that, it was just a very weird case; I mean, all of a sudden here comes a strange street magician hurt by a fellow and I have to get the idea that he's a criminal who controls the paranormal.”

“You know, that's the life of a cop in France. And as rotten as society is, at the end of the day, it's not that big of a deal.”

Quickley was about to tell her that it really was, because he knows what Steven did to end up in that jail. He knew that his supposed magical powers were not rumors. But then he remembered that if he let anyone else know about the horrible crime scene, surely everything around him would collapse somehow, so he just said:

“Yeah, no big deal.”

“Hey,” exclaimed Detective Allard, “I know what will cheer you up: we're going to close the Gaspel case.”

“Really?” she asked reluctantly. We've already assumed that whoever made them disappear escaped out the window. No fingerprints, no witnesses. And putting up posters all over town looking for the victims doesn't work, maybe because they must be dead by now.”

“You know, we've never considered that the killer didn't kill all three.”

“What are you saying?”

“I mean, all this time we've assumed that the killer stayed in the room the night before the child disappeared. We know the boy escaped from the hospital and went to the motel. What we don't know is whether the killer escaped that

day, or the night before, which is why the child was able to save himself.”

“Now that you say that..., it makes sense, but... Why would the child escape through the window? And more importantly, how?”

“That’s another thing we don’t know, but we didn’t consider the theory that the child is still alive. We know he escaped from the hospital without being seen, so maybe he could have escaped from the motel the same way.”

“Yes, and on the night before that, the killer could have escaped more easily. Of course! It’s all based on the time of day. How did we not think of that before?”

“We were more concerned with how the killer escaped with two bodies. It’s still a very concrete question, and unless the Gaspel kidnapping/murder/escape was planned years ago, there’s no logical way to solve it. Maybe the kid and the killer worked together, I don’t know.”

Ironically, it was the words “logical way” that turned on Quickley’s light bulb. For two whole seconds, the detective managed to tie up all the loose ends. He took Steven’s picture, his partner’s hand and told her to follow him to the car. They had one last visit to make to the crime scene.

“Wait, what was your idea?” Allard asked as Quickley drove.

“You said there was no logical way to solve the case, and I hope that statement is true.”

“I don’t understand what you mean.”

She didn’t understand, but in Leonard’s head only the words that Steven said the day before echoed, especially three in particular: “I’ve killed before.”

The motel door slammed hard against the wall as Quickley had slammed it to get in, perhaps a bit too

dramatically. The owner sighed in tedium, for he was already tired of dealing with so many law enforcement officers. Quickley ran to the front desk, where he was, and with a sparkle in his eye asked him if he remembered the face of the mysterious man who accompanied the Gaspels. The owner said he vaguely remembered him, as he had only seen him for a few seconds. Quickley showed him the photo he was carrying, hoping to jog his memory by saying, "Did he look like him?" The owner looked at the photo for a remarkable length of time. "I don't know," he replied, "I see a lot of faces every day. The only thing I remember about him is that he was wearing a very bad taste suit." That was proof enough. Leonard Brandon Quickley had solved the case! The plot holes in the story were being filled in with black magic, as if it was a poorly written script.

He let out a shout of relief and joy, for not only had he completed an incomplete case, but the person responsible was now behind bars. The two got into the car as soon as they received the information.

"We finished it, Elena!" he exclaimed happily.

"The case?" she asked quizzically "Are you telling me that Ledger is the murderer?"

"Exactly! With his magical powers he managed to leave the scene of the crime without leaving a trace."

"So, we had the killer we were looking for, the one who could make two, maybe three bodies disappear without leaving a trace right in front of us for two days?"

"That's right, a total delirium."

"Leonard," she said a little worried, "do you really believe that superstitious Greyson?"

"I not only believe him, I support him. The forensic team made a deal with the captain not to release the photos they took at the factory where Greyson found him, but I saw them. I know what Ledger is capable of. You should have just

seen the state the bodies were in, that's not something a normal person can do.”

“Leonard, are you talking about a conspiracy?”

“More or less. The captain was supposed to make sure his nephew didn't get fired. But for your safety, never ask him. We don't know what he might do to you if he mistrusts you.”

“Leonard... That's a very serious accusation. Not only are you saying that the captain withheld evidence essential to Ledger's trial, but you're also assuming that magic exists.”

“So you don't believe me?”

“That's not it. I just want you to be absolutely sure of what you're saying, because without any physical evidence, you won't be able to do anything against the captain.”

“What? I don't plan to do anything against the captain. What's the point?”

“I'm sorry?” she shouted a little angry “If Ledger actually committed the crime he was charged with and the captain withheld key evidence of the murder of several lives, we must have him punished in some way.”

“Are you crazy? To do so would be to reveal ourselves against the system, and not just any system, we're talking about an entire police force. It would be suicide.”

“Justice must prevail, that's all I believe in. And I joined the police to make my environment a less catastrophic place. If someone does something wrong, we must make them pay.”

“But that's not how things work. You said yourself it was no big deal.”

“I thought the incident was just an act of violence towards a common criminal!” She was exasperated.

“Can we just let this go? We didn't make Greyson pay for getting away with police abuse and you were fine with that.”

“But this was Ledger, for God's sake! It's not the same as ignoring the murder of dozens of already identified civilians!”

“Relax, Ledger is already paying his time; besides, they weren't civilians. He said they deserved it.”

“That's what they all say, Leonard!”

“Look, even if I wanted to sue the captain, I don't have the photos. We'd have to go to *Soufreville* ourselves to photograph the remains that forensics couldn't clean up.”

“Well, you can be sure that I'm going to go there myself to interrogate every individual who lives there.”

“To *Soufreville*? Trust me, you don't want to go there. Don't you read the news? It's one of the most dangerous places in the area. If you go there claiming to be a cop, they'll stuff you and use you as a trophy.”

“I'll go undercover then. Will you go with me or not?”

“Hey, wait a minute. You just found out about this and you already want to sacrifice yourself for the cause?”

“If you're such a coward, why didn't you become a lawyer?” she said angrily.

“Just forget it. I shouldn't have said anything to you.”

“Oh, no. Now you'll have to put up with me. We're going to *Soufreville* whether you like it or not. Aren't you sick of the boss's deals?”

“The boss treats us well. He only pays special attention to his nephew.”

“Are you afraid?”

“You know what? I'll walk to the police station,” he said as he got out of the car.

His partner drove beside him as he walked, honking the horn and saying, “Oh, come on. I didn't mean to upset you, chicken. Put your pants on and let's talk about this.” Quickley didn't look at him, but replied, “Having common sense is not being a coward. No one understands that, apparently” She didn't say anything, just kept driving to the police station, waiting for Quickley to stop her, but he kept walking. The weather wasn't bad, but a cloudy day is still a day when it's best to use a vehicle.

As bad as he feels about the matter, Allard has to mull over the best options to fix it. His morals are not easy to break, and that can be a problem.

When you become an adult, your soul becomes a monotonous list of unbreakable rules by which you will guide your decisions. Children tend to have a changeable soul, their spirit is moldable and their body is flexible, which makes them a blank page with a completely unpredictable future, full of energy and varied decisions. An adult changes the universe around them, and a child is changed by the universe around them.

Although Charlotte is a child, she no longer has a soul, and that deprives her of changing her way of thinking. She changes the universe around her, since the world has already changed her enough.

Walking through the streets of *Soufreville*, seeing the damp rotting homes, dodging broken tiles and watching drug-ridden homeless people, Charlotte felt at home again, but it was no longer as magical as she remembered. The sweet memories of the past only came alive when she had vibrant emotions to go with them. She no longer saw that magic of the unknown around every corner, she only saw the stark reality she had such a hard time seeing a few years ago. It's like watching an old movie from your childhood after many years, only to realize that it's really not as good as you remembered it. Danny still saw the magic; a new place results in something to be amazed by, and seeing the gray plants growing on the ravaged walls was captivating in a way.

Steven led Charlotte and Danny to his house, hoping it hadn't been usurped by *The Coffin*.

They finally arrived. It was, without a doubt, a large property, as eccentric as its owner. There were no houses

around it, just as he had demanded. Somehow, *The Coffin* people must be doing something to not be watching the surrounding area, since they were no longer associated with Steven because of his betrayal. Maybe the local police wasn't so dead after all.

Soufreville was a gloomy place, but it had no lack of police stations, fire stations, or commercial areas, so the mafia wasn't as overbearing as *Charlie* remembered. *The Coffin* was ignored by the police because it suited them to be peaceful, but that was no impediment for the two sides to do whatever they wanted.

The three entered using a hidden key. Everything was in the same place where Steven left it. If everything was going so well it was because they had little time left, that's Steven's philosophy. "Make yourselves comfortable," he said, "for now you will live here." It was a little scary to think of an adult saying that to children, but under the circumstances, it was a gentle proposal.

Danny gazed at the majesty of the pretentious paintings against the vibrant colors of the walls. Charlotte saw only insecurity embodied in unnecessary expensive consumerism. Steven gave them a tour of all the rooms on the two floors. Downstairs was the kitchen; the living room; the dining room; two bathrooms; and a large fish tank with various fish. On the second floor was Steven's room, which is locked; another bathroom; a locked room; an attic; another room, but not locked; a library with all kinds of magical artifacts; and a bay window, which was accessed through the attic. In the library were several bookshelves containing few books, but many crystals; in the center was a large cauldron; around it were other display cases, and on the floor was a black carpet with purple shades. Steven's room was private, so I am not going to give details to avoid intruding on his privacy. The room where Charlotte and Danny were going to sleep was quite spacious, there was a big bed; a night table, and

the walls had a unique mix of orange tones. It was simply perfect for resting after a few days of complete rowdiness. Everything happened so fast that there was barely time to digest all the events of the entire week. God created the world in seven days, so they say, so you know that's not an insignificant period of time.

Charlotte left her briefcase there and went to the fish tank below, where Steven was showing Danny all the names of the four fish in that little underwater castle. There was a goldfish named *Deces*, and it was really beautiful, because its scales gave the illusion of being various colors depending on the light it caught. There was also one called *Guerre*, it was a betta fish, a very rare one, but incredibly glorious, since its long red fins made its presence inescapable. A very funny one was the telescope fish, whose name was *Faim*; its eyes were very large and its black scales made it stand out on the white floor of the tank. Lastly, Danny noticed a very curious one, it was a puffer fish named *Conquete*; it looked very nice and friendly, as its color was white with small gray spots. Undoubtedly, very peculiar fish that you would not see in the same place. Steven said that he would have liked to have seahorses so the four fish could ride them, but that is practically just a joke, because we all know that seahorses are nothing like land horses, since they have no limbs, hair or teeth; their verticality does not allow them to ride and they cannot even whinny.

Anyway, the fish tank was captivating, but it was time for dinner. None of the three of them had eaten anything since noon, and it was already approaching the early hours of the next day. Steven headed to the kitchen to make them something; in the meantime, he suggested they take a bath. As they both stank, and not only of paint, blood and iron, but also of sweat, they went to take a bath. I see it necessary to clarify that there were three bathrooms, and two had a

shower, so they bathed at the same time, but in different bathrooms.

It was a relief to feel warm water on the skin again. Charlotte had the second best bath of her life, although first she inspected every nook and cranny to make sure she wasn't vulnerable to attack. The amount of hygiene products was fascinating: shampoo, conditioner, liquid soap, solid soap, and almost nothing else. It should be noted that the most that Charlotte had ever seen in a shower before was a sachet of shampoo and a dead cockroach. The trust she already had with Steven allowed her to relax, but she knew that even though they were in a temporary alliance, he was still her enemy.

She came out of the bathroom with her dirty clothes on and a towel over her head, and although she couldn't wash her recent clothes, she did have spare underwear in her briefcase. As she came out, she was surprised to see that next to her, Steven had laid out clean clothes for her to wear. She wasn't surprised by Steven's generosity, but rather that he had women's clothing in her size. Even if it was doubtful, Charlotte didn't think it was *cursed clothing*, for she saw that on top was a note that read, "I know it's a very suspicious gesture, but I couldn't bear to see you in the same clothes every day."

After mulling it over for a while, she decided to wear it. She went into the bathroom again to change and saw that it was a very appropriate outfit: for the torso, she had a white polo shirt; for the bottom, she had some comfortable black chandal pants; and for her shoes, she had some very amazing black leather boots along with some white socks. No one would expect Steven to be able to take care of infants properly, being such a strange guy, but you never know a person until you enter his house.

Walking down the stairs, Charlotte could see Danny in a pink T-shirt and white shorts eating some bacon

sandwiches that Steven had prepared for them. Americans are like that, so generous with pork. Charlotte was able to sit down to eat something in peace that wasn't street food, public cafeteria food, hospital food or poor people's food; she was finally eating quality home-cooked food, even if it was just two pieces of bread with strips of meat in the middle.

Steven sat down to eat his sandwich, making the three of them look like a sort of family of abandoned relatives. It was a genuinely nice situation, mainly because Danny kept bobbing his head sideways happily, making Steven laugh.

After eating, Charlotte stopped beating around the bush and suddenly slammed her hands on the table and raised her voice to say, "What do you want!" Steven stopped chewing and with wide eyes answered her:

"What do you mean?" He finished swallowing.

"You want us to do something, that's why you treat us well," said Charlotte with some disgust. "Whatever it is, I want you to know that I'm not going to abandon my initial purpose of settling accounts with you".

"Charlie, you're being irrational..."

"My name is not Charlie!" She shouted very annoyed, practically interrupting him, "My name is not Charlie! My name is no longer Charlie because you killed the authors of that name!"

Steven, dumbfounded, remained calm and told her:

"*Charlie* is short for *Charlotte*. I know you're going through a difficult time, but don't lose your temper like that. I thought selling your soul would get rid of those angry outbursts."

"What?" She asked in surprise. "I never told you I sold my soul."

“Oh, please,” he said haughtily, “do you think I was born yesterday? You don't get rid of cancer that fast naturally without supernatural help. I see it well in your eyes, without any trace of life. Not a single light is reflected in your black pupils. Revenge doesn't change you as much as abandoning all hope. And unlike you, living with my soul allows me to enjoy the life I have left, but it is still a burden. I cannot live happily alone in this dark world, so I want to make your company as pleasant as possible. I won't ask for anything in return, I swear.”

Charlotte said nothing; instead, she sat back down and looked at the floor, not because she felt guilty, but because she was trying to think of the vulnerabilities left exposed to her. Danny, oblivious to it all, just burped in a funny way. Burps aren't funny, but in awkward silence they are the most hilarious response possible. At that, Steven started a small chuckle that grew louder and louder. He was laughing like a maniac as he pounded his fist on the table, denoting that it was a genuine guffaw worthy of a drunk uncle at an anniversary party or a cartoon villain. Danny accompanied Steven in his laughter for several seconds until they grew tired and Charlotte slowly stood up from the table to take her plate to the kitchen. Retiring to her room, Steven said to her as she climbed the stairs, “Remember, I'm going to need your help tomorrow for a spell.” She did not respond.



Looking up at the retouched, yellowed ceiling, Charlotte could only think. If Steven intended to get rid of her, it wouldn't be in her best interest to gain her trust first. It was obvious that he wouldn't poison them at dinner, for if he wanted them dead they wouldn't be in his house right now. She could only come to one conclusion: He really only wants children. It sounds kind of shady to think that he's keeping

children's clothes just for that reason. It's even weirder to consider that maybe he doesn't have clothes for newborns, but infants and up. Maybe his desires weren't exactly sweet and innocent. Maybe there's something in that room that's hard to forget.

Danny opened the door. It wasn't two single beds, so they had to share the same one. Before Danny laid down, Charlotte went to get a sheet, with it she was going to separate the bed into two parts, rolling it up to make a kind of wall two inches high. Each one was going to sleep on his side, without touching the sheet. A simple resolution to a common problem, but it doesn't usually work, because at night, a hyperactive child like Danny moves around a lot in his sleep.

At 5:58 a.m., Charlotte could hardly sleep. Danny's meaty hands were reaching over the sheet separating them and grabbing the other sheet covering them. Finally, she decided to get up. She went in search of her stuffed monkey to hug him as tightly as possible. As she held him, she sang very softly the song *Children Who Ask Questions Are Dumb*. That activity calmed her nerves somewhat, as she was already feeling regular.

On the other side of the door, lights could be seen on, and Charlotte wondered if Steven had slept even a little. She stepped out of the darkened room and noticed that the light on was located in the library. Cautiously, Charlotte made her way there, trying not to make any noise. Slowly turning the doorknob, Charlotte could hear the sound of pages turning and metal artifacts falling. Her heart rate increased the more she opened the door. She could barely see Steven digging through all of his books, dropping the other items from the shelves. You could see the remains of glass on the floor, as well as the desperation in Steven's movements. After a while searching through pages, the wizard gave up and laid his hands on the edges of the large cauldron, head down, as if in

frantic thought, tapping his right index finger on the outside of the metal, making a deep tinkling sound. Charlotte so far was imperceptible, but her blood ran cold when she heard Steven say, “Charlotte, come, please.”

Obeying, she opened the door fully and stepped inside, standing beside him. Steven looked her in the eye and said in a hesitant tone, “Are you... sure you need to...? No. Do you think your friend is going to...? No,” he blinked noticeably and took a more confident stance, “You know what? Forget it, I need you to help me.”

That was a strange dialogue. What was he going to propose at first? Why was he hesitant? Those were reasonable questions, but before doubting, she decided to pay attention to his next words.

“Because of my visible disability,” Steven explained, pointing to his right hand, “I won't be able to continue with the spell I have in mind, so I want to ask you a question, and I want you to answer me as honestly as possible.”

Charlotte looked at him with her eyes wide open, showing her attention, while she nodded her head.

“Are you willing to enter the infinite vortex of darkness; manipulate what you know today as reality, and guide yourself into the deep pit of perdition, using the power forbidden by any kind of righteous authority?” he said very seriously.

Charlotte, listening to him, felt that the maximum forces of the universe had taken her there to fulfill the greatest purpose of her life, to achieve what she had longed for since she was conscious: absolute power.

“Completely,” she answered without closing her eyes.

“Well, your future is sealed. There is no turning back. There are no merciful exits. There is no escape or consequence to justify the actions you will be willing to commit.”

Charlotte, without taking her eyes off Steven, replied with as much glee as her soullessness could manufacture:

“Sounds like a wonderful plan.”

“In that case,” Steven proclaimed with joy, “I name you my apprentice. “He placed his left hand on the sides of Charlotte's head, poorly simulating a royal nod. “This doesn't mean you have to learn a lot from me, I just want you to be my loyal assistant. I can really use someone with both hands full.”

“I understand, but... What spell are you planning to cast so urgently?”

Steven saw in her very complicated facial expression that she was willing to do anything to learn black magic. He turned his back to her and said earnestly:

“Resuscitation.”

“Resuscitation?” she asked with curiosity and a bit of astonishment, “Who are you going to resuscitate?”

Steven lowered his head, and raising it again, looking up at the ceiling he said:

“Jeff Gaspel and Clara Moreau.”

XXI

FALLEN ANGEL

Detective Allard chewed on her pencil as she shifted her foot nervously in her office chair. She honestly considered the idea of going to *Soufreville* to search all those bodies and maybe have her boss jailed, but thinking about it more coldly, it's crazy. Is it really necessary to risk so much for so little? In the midst of that thought, Quickley rushed into the police station to tell his partner some incredible news: "The kid's alive!"

To put you in the situation, first place yourself in the present. Leonard Quickley came running through the door on October 24, 1966 at 4:42 pm. At that precise moment, Charlotte and Danny were sleeping in the police truck while Steven was driving. Ten minutes before that, Quickley was walking through the park to get to the police station, when suddenly, a peculiar little girl approached him to ask him something.

“Are you a policeman?” asked Annie, Danny's blonde girl friend.

“That's right, what's the matter?” Quickley answered.

“Look, I think I know the girl in the picture,” she said as she showed him one of the wanted posters around town with a talking picture of Charlotte on it. “It says here her name is *Charlie*, but she told me her name was *Sarah*.”

“She told you?” he asked in surprise.

“Yes. I assumed it was a typo. I met her not long ago right here. She asked me where she could stay because she had no parents and I told her there was an orphanage nearby. The next day, my parents took her there.”

“Kid, this is very important.” He bent down and made eye contact with Annie. “Are you absolutely sure?”

“Yes,” she replied. “She had the same hairstyle.”

“Where is she now?” He asked as his heart rate slowly accelerated.

“I told you, at the orphanage here.”

Leonard, without even time to think, rushed to the police station.

“The boy is alive!”

“I'm sorry, what?”

“The Gaspel's son who had cancer. He ran away and now we know he's in an orphanage.”

“He can tell us what happened to his parents!” She said emphatically.

“We might even know more about Ledger!” he said even more excited.

Sudden cut. The two are knocking on the orphanage door. Quickley notices a rope and black socks on the floor. “They probably don't clean the outside much,” they thought. One of the teachers opens the door and the detectives

introduce themselves, asking to be let in to ask the principal some questions.

Black socks kept appearing on the floor, some on the ceiling. Finally they arrived at the principal's office, where they became very serious and began the interrogation.

“Good afternoon, officers,” said the principal. “To what do I owe the honor?”

“Yes, we need you to confirm something,” said Allard as she placed Charlotte's portrait on the table. Has a student with these physical characteristics been enrolled at this institution? She answers to the name *Sarah* or *Charlie*.”

“Now that you mention it,” said the principal, “just yesterday she came to my office with another girl. They had a fight about something, but they've worked it out. You see, senseless arguments are not tolerated in this institution.”

“Can you tell us where she is now?” Quickley asked.

“All right, let me check it out.”

The director looked in the files and told them that *Sarah* was installed in dormitory 19, on the second floor. The two thanked him and headed for that location. They entered in search of clues that might evidence Charlie's presence, but found only a notebook lying on the floor. Although the evidence was little, it was a perfect object to investigate, so they began to read it. Without a doubt, it was an impeccable writing, worthy of an infant capable of escaping from a hospital without help.

At this hour the children are in class, so it was prudent to head to the classroom assigned to their group to find it. Quickley and Allard felt the adrenaline rush of being so close to victory that they could taste it as they walked through the halls. They opened the door to the corresponding classroom and stood at the front, next to the teacher, to make an announcement.

“Attention, please!” Allard exclaimed. “We are the police and we are looking for one of your classmates. Whether male or female, we need you to tell us if you recognize this face.” As Charlotte's portrait was displayed, the class fell silent until one girl began to make noises of discomfort and fear. “You with the braids,” said Quickley, pointing to that girl; “do you know her?” A few children began to laugh quietly when suddenly another said loudly, “Of course you know her, she made you eat a dead frog!” At that point, the others began to burst out laughing. The detectives turned to Mincy, the girl with the braids and watery eyes, and asked her seriously, “Where is she now?” Mincy, gasping, told them she hadn't seen her since yesterday.

They searched all over the orphanage to ask every teacher they came across about Charlotte's location, but they all gave them the same answer, “No one saw her today.”

The two returned to the car. The most reasonable theory was that she ran away again, but... where to? It was obvious that Charlie was no ordinary child, for his intellect was impressive. Not only did he manage to escape from a hospital, a motel and an orphanage, but he managed to hide his identity with a female alter ego. He was, without a doubt, a special case. A wizard and a child prodigy escaping from the law for reasons unknown. What's next, time travel?

“Where can he be now?” Quickley asked.

“He can't be far away. He only escaped yesterday,” Allard replied.

“Let's review. He escaped from the hospital, tidied up the motel room, stayed in an orphanage, and then?”

“It seems to be all about Ledger.”

“What do you mean?”

“Think about it. Charlie went to the motel, where we already know Ledger went. What did he see that made him run away?”

“By his brief record at the orphanage, I don't think he's easily disturbed.”

“I don't know. Maybe he went looking for him.”

“But why?”

“I mean, what if running away with him was the last step in the Gaspel's great escape?”

“It wouldn't make sense, why then would he stay in an orphanage?” Wouldn't it make more sense to escape sooner if the two of them are accomplices?”

“Dammit! We're so close, but still, we end up at a dead end.”

“Elena, we've been at a dead end since we started; however, look how far we've come. We're probably only one step away from finding the Gaspels. We just need a specific location and we'll be done with the case.”

Elena looked down at the floor of the car, pouring more coal into the great steam engine that is her brain. Suddenly, a name came to her mind.

“Soufreville.”

“What?” Quickly asked.

“That's where he should be!” She said excitedly, “That was his target!”

“Why?”

“That's where Ledger was captured. If we plan to find out where the Gaspels escaped, that's the place.”

“Are you sure it's not an excuse to find the bodies?” he asked suspiciously.

“Think about it, Leonard. On any possible theory, Ledger being there after the incident is the only proof we need.”

Quickley immediately got on the same page as his partner. It was their only option. The only thing left for them to do was to ask the chief's permission to continue the investigation from there.

“No,” the chief replied without stopping what he was doing.

“Why not?” asked Quickley and Allard in unison.

“The case is closed,” said the chief, looking them in the eye. “We assume that Ledger was the one who killed the Gaspels. You are dismissed.”

“Sir,” Allard insisted, “we have witnesses who say the boy is still alive.”

“You're done,” he said angrily. “You are not going to *Soufreville*. That's an order.”

“What are you afraid of, sir?” Allard insinuated.

“Allard!” exclaimed the chief, rising to his feet. “Don't disrespect me like that. Get out of my office right now.”

“Elena, let's go now,” Quickley pleaded quietly.

Allard, almost huffing, left the office slamming the door. Quickley looks at the chief begging for mercy with his eyes, because he knows his patience is going to run out soon. The chief shakes his head, letting him know that they won't go to *Soufreville* even if their life depended on it.

I think we all know how this is going to end. For now, let's move forward in time a bit.

“Are you going to revive my parents?” Charlotte asked, completely surprised.

“Certainly,” Steven replied, “because ever since I took the job of leading them straight to their death I've had nothing but regrets. I want to fix that mistake by sending them and you to a better place to live.”

It was a little early to judge Steven, but Charlotte's image of him wasn't exactly that of a good Samaritan. She didn't know him well, he never showed cruelty to her, but somehow, the fact that he had been a prime culprit in the death of her parents leaves a psychological mark. Anyway, that's the only argument she has against him; besides, Steven was also the one who got them out of *Soufreville* in the first place, so rather than holding a grudge, she should consider the idea of trusting him a little.

"Steven, is this some kind of joke?" Charlotte asked with all sorts of doubts.

"To perform the spell," he continued, "we need to make a potion. This potion will be key to bringing not only their souls, but also their bodies back to life."

"Body, soul and spirit?"

"All of it."

"How is that possible?"

"In black magic it is easy to modify any of these three elements. In theory, that area is completely forbidden to those of good morals, for it is no longer playing with matches, but playing with a flamethrower, which only *The One Above* can do. Luckily, *The One Below* gave us firearms so that we can have fun spreading chaos. And that's what we'll do."

There was no reasonable way to disagree with that philosophy. Finally, it was time to take justice into her own hands, adjusting the threads of fate in her favor.

"What do we need to complete it?" asked Charlotte, completely determined.

Steven smiled.

“I already have almost all the ingredients. The only magical addition we're missing is some sugar.”

“Really?” she asked seriously. “The ingredient you decided to leave last is such an earthy one? Is that why you got caught in the sugar factory?”

“Hey, I always do the hardest thing first. The thing is, I ended up with the sugar I had left sweetening my coffee.”

“How much do we need?”

“Two kilograms of brown sugar.”

“And that's all?”

“Yes, but in this town we have a shortage of everything. Sugar is a private privilege for *The Coffin*, so it's much harder than usual to get that much.”

“But... Why didn't you look in other cities?”

“That's a bit complicated. With the exorbitant amount of places where I'm banned, I don't think I'll find one that will be so kind as to sell me something.”

“Then teleport to a place where you're not wanted.”

“It doesn't work that way.” He bent down to speak directly to her. “Teleportation only takes you to places you've been, places you know, and mainly where the amulet has been. You are never completely free of your past.”

“So, that means you were in *Spoirtown* before you moved here.”

“You don't miss a thing, do you?” he said, smiling.

“Do you need to do this spell urgently? Because I have other plans in mind.”

“Well... Not that I'm in a hurry, but I'm not supposed to be here. You know; in the eyes of *The Coffin* I'm in jail.”

Charlotte put her arms in a thinking position and turned to walk in circles, which is quite productive when it comes to focusing your mind. She was thinking of so many things, so many probabilities and alternate endings for this story to end. Thirteen seconds later, she said the following:

“Can I borrow your book?”

“What book?”

“*Black Magic for Beginners*. I know you have one by that name.”

“Actually, I don't need it that much,” he said, trying to justify the fact that he still has it. “I usually use other methods to learn my incantations.”

“Do you have it or not?”

Steven shows an embarrassed expression, squinting his eyes and dropping his arms and then reaching for it and handing it to her. Charlotte was flipping through the pages cautiously, as if monitoring the veracity of the book, when she found something.

“Where is the missing page?” she asked, showing what was left of a ripped-out page.

“That's the one with the *geographic relocation* spell, or *teleportation*. It turns out I needed it more than I thought I would. I lost the page, but I have all the procedures here,” he said, pointing to his head.

Charlotte kept looking. Many of the written phrases were in Latin, but the directions were in French, which caught her attention.

“Why are the directions translated?”

“It's curious. Books and guides related to the dark arts are not very hard to find, since the communities around the topic traffic them among their members. I got this one before I got here. Since it was in French, I had to become more familiar with the language, so I took the opportunity to escape to this country.”

Unbelievable. Black magic is not something exclusive. There are communities around the world that keep it alive,

and that's a lot in itself, as people hardly dare to talk about it unless they come across something they don't understand.

The entire book had impressive spells, including: *Change Limbs*; *Blinding Spell*; *Reverse Pelvis*; *Boil Blood*; *Close Hole*; *Animal Metamorphosis*; and *Extirpate Skin*. It was fascinating how much power it would give you to learn each and every one of those spells, which Steven narrowly succeeds in doing. By the seventh Latin sentence you memorize, it becomes tedious and confusing.

“Interesting, isn't it?” Steven mentioned after seeing Charlotte's concentration.

“So where did you say you got it?” She said without taking his eyes off it.

“In the UK. It wasn't easy...”

“Don't talk,” she interrupted him as she continued reading.

Steven watched with curiosity the determination in the attitude of his new apprentice. At less than thirty-seven he already had a legacy secured.

He could say that the three of them had a happy ending, but Charlotte's burning sense of revenge still lingered in her little heart. It will only be over when she gets rid of everyone who made her suffer, and the list is not short.



“So what are we going to do?” Quickley asked his colleague in his workspace at the police station, just a few hours after the above; that is, the morning after trying to convince the chief.”

“Obviously,” Allard replied in an anguished tone, “to solve the case, we need to go to *Soufreville*, clear up our doubts and, if we are lucky, find Charlie.”

“Why don't we just let the answer float through the air, it doesn't hurt once in a while.”

“Quickley,” said Allard with anger and surprise, “are you listening to yourself? You never give up on anything. Never. Remember when we couldn't find the pedophile who purposely left clues? What was his name?”

“Vincent Rogers; a.k.a. The *Immeasurable*. Yes, I remember,” he said reluctantly.

“I didn't want to pursue the case because we hadn't found him for four months, but his show-off manner motivated you to put him behind the bars, and that's what we did. You managed to find his pattern of attack before he even realized it.”

“Look, this is not the same. We're investigating the disappearance of a family that nobody cares about. There are cards stacked against us and there are jobs at stake.”

“But we managed to lock up a magician! Doesn't that thrill you?”

“We didn't lock him up. If anything, I had to protect him on a threatening level; besides, it wasn't us who found him, it was that idiot Greyson. You know, we didn't even realize he was involved in the case until much later. This is bigger than us.”

“Everything will always be bigger than you, Leo. Sometimes you have to take the bull by the horns.”

“I thought you were against bullfighting.”

“Not if the bull attacks you first.”

Suddenly, a fellow cop tapped Quickley's shoulder. It looked like he was in trouble, because he announced to him that the chief wants to see them both in his office immediately.

Again, they sat in the chief's office, thinking that he at least considered the previous day's request.

“Why did you call us?” Allard asked with a mixture of hope and fear, unlike Quickley, who felt only fear.

“Did you think you could get away with it, Leonard?” asked the boss in a threatening manner.

“Excuse me?” Quickley stammered.

“Where's Ledger?!” he shouted, banging on the table.

“What are you talking about?” He asked astonishingly confused. “Isn't he in the maximum security prison?”

“Don't get smart with me! You made a deal with him, didn't you?”

“Deal?” Elena asked.

“Yes! Yes! A deal! A deal you made so that he could escape!”

“Sir, what exactly are you accusing me of?” asked Quickley with trembling hands.

“That's why he didn't defend himself in court! That's why he didn't attack anyone! You helped him escape!”

“Ledger escaped?!” Allard exclaimed.

“You're involved in some way too, don't play innocent!”

“Can you tell me what exactly happened?!” shouted Quickley in a very excited voice.

“Steven G. Ledger,” he said more calmly, “didn't make it to the other jail. They tried to contact the driver, but he did not respond. We were overconfident in sending only one man. The prisoner must have arrived there fourteen hours ago. He clearly escaped and destroyed the radio. Or maybe the driver was an accomplice, along with you, Quickley.”

Quickley let his gaze wander into the void. He didn't respond to the accusation, mainly because the fact that Steven is loose was occupying his whole head. His partner tapped him on the shoulder telling him to react, but it was not working. Suddenly, Quickley looked at the two of them and said in a very neutral voice, “We have to go to *Soufreville*.”

This time he was not going to be held back.

“To *Soufreville*?” asked the chief. “Didn't you hear me? I told you no.”

“You don't understand,” Quickley replied. “*Soufreville* is the only place he can be, and if we go now we can reach him, unless he has teleported.”

“What do you say?” asked the chief, rather annoyed.

“It's a theory,” Quickley replied. It's the only reasonable way to escape from a motel with two bodies. While he was being held he couldn't do it because he didn't have his amulet, which is why I thought he'd make it to the maximum security prison without any problems.” Quickley looked into the void again. He finally realized, “Greyson. He's in danger.”

“What?” The chief replied.

“He has the amulet. Before Ledger goes anywhere, he needs to get it back.”

“Don't you think it's too late?” said Allard.

“It's not,” replied the boss. “I called him in the middle of the night yesterday to let him know that his mother was alone all weekend. He sounded quite alive.”

“Then we have time,” Quickley said.

“Wait, wise guy,” the boss replied again. “You're not getting off that easy. I'm going to call him now. If he doesn't respond, you have my authorization to go and search the property.”

The captain called Greyson's house once more. After assimilating that there was no answer, he obviously thought he was out of the house, but he still gave the detectives authorization to inspect the area. Nothing is lost, right?

The two ran to the car to check out their partner Greyson's house. As you may already know, they were not in for a pleasant surprise.

XXII

PLAGUES

*J*ournal. Day: 1.

For a better experience in learning the dark arts, Steven gave me this notebook. I should probably write down only the important things, but, being in an environment where I can lose my memory somehow, it's better to write down all my observations so I don't lose them.

Today we went out to the backyard. He says he is going to teach me how to cast defense spells. I'd say it's better to learn to attack rather than defend, because after all, that's what others defend themselves for, to ward off attacks. If I'm good enough at attacking, I won't need to defend myself, but Steven says you have to do the hardest thing first.

It was a strange experience, because he was wearing the amulet all the time, while I had nothing. I was moving my hands like a schizophrenic with no results, but he says I'm doing fine. He says my coordination is pretty good, and that's important when it comes to maneuvering. I'm still having trouble with Latin phrases. I keep mispronouncing the R's. Danny looks at us in admiration, as the sparkles coming out of Steven's hands are hypnotic. Sometimes I wonder what it must feel like to have such a poor grasp of reality.

It wasn't hard to adjust to the quick arm movements. It's fundamental the position of your limbs, I think it's like a sign language for underworld beings or something.

I already asked him. It is not a sign language. In fact, when you have the spell very clear in your mind, it is not necessary to conduct the energy with your body, but only with your will. The most powerful wizards have the ability to move the reality around them without even lifting a finger.

As soon as Steven put the amulet on me, I managed to perform the defense incantations perfectly. I think I caused him some envy, because it was not so easy for him. He told me that not having a soul helps a lot in handling black magic, because I have nothing to hold on to my humanity. Morality and empathy are the main weaknesses of every dark sorcerer.

I managed to get Steven to let me look at the book again. There is no memory erasing spell, but I did find one to control the minds of others. It's barely a fraction of its full potential, because it's only good for manipulating not-so-complex thoughts. Perhaps a superior book will teach how to control the whole body.

It's already late afternoon. Steven and Danny have been playing with the ball. I still don't trust his very kind attitude. He probably feels very lonely in his big house.

“Hey,” said Steven, suddenly appearing, “stop writing. *The Coffin* is here.”

That's news. What did he mean by that? Were they outside? Were they inside the house? You can't just say something like that.

To be more precise, *The Coffin* was about to arrive at the door. This time we see the unforgettable duo again: The beefy one and the blond one, who apparently don't take a sorcerer's house very seriously, because, despite knowing the dangers of black magic, they don't carry protection or backup in case someone ends up bewitched. Apparently, the mob is not intimidated by superstitions, although, ironically, that was Greyson's strongest weapon.

“You bastards,” said Steven from the window as he watched them trying to open the door, “you don't even have the decency to wait a week.”

“What are we going to do?” Charlotte asked as she watched them with him.

“Good question,” he turns and starts walking towards the library. “You're going to gag Danny so he won't move. I'll create a curse to protect the house from future attacks.”

“What?” Charlotte asks seriously as she follows him. “What good will that do now? What if they get in first?”

“That's why I must hurry.”

“But didn't you say that curses take longer to cast than basic attack spells?”

“That's right, but I can't cast attack spells without my missing fingers. A curse is safer for repelling intruders.”

“Are you serious?” she asked offended. “What about me?”

“What about you?” He said as he opened a book even bigger than the previous one, called *Curses for Beginners*.

“Yes. I can do attack spells if you let me try.”

“You?” He asked genuinely doubtful. Obviously you're not ready. You think that just because you can teleport, you can do anything? This is a serious situation, and, I mean, I'd fist them out of my house myself, but I'm especially vulnerable on the physical side. Any hit to the head can knock me out and any cold can put me in bed for months.”

“What's that got to do with it?”

“Sorry, I tend to talk under pressure a lot. I'm not as strong as your little eyes might assume. Don't distract me!” he shouted in agitation. “I'm wasting time when I could be in the middle of a paragraph I need to memorize that I can't even find.”

Charlotte looked at him with different eyes. He let his true skin show. She no longer sees a greedy, sneaky jerk, now she sees the reason why he is a greedy, sneaky jerk. He was simply too weak to not fall into the clutches of black magic.

“Give me the amulet,” Charlotte ordered him.

“Forget it, go protect Danny,” he said without taking his eyes off the book.

“How long did it take you to learn the geographic relocation spell?” she asked firmly.

“I don't know, two weeks, maybe.”

“How long did it take me?”

Steven stopped moving and looked seriously at Charlotte.

“I'm not giving you the amulet. There is no time.”

“In the book,” Charlotte stated without looking away, “*geographical relocation* is in the most advanced section. It instantly transports enemies to other locations, causing them

fatal pain upon arrival. If used for personal benefit, it has no side effects. To perform it requires advanced expertise in pronunciation, concentration and coordination.”

“How do you know this so accurately?”

“Because you didn't lose the page. You couldn't have. You had it hidden in your nightstand.”

Steven, intimidated, rises abruptly and shouts:

“You broke into my room!?”

“It wasn't hard. As you can see out there, you have no idea what *security* is. You forget to lock your bedroom door again when you go to the bathroom.”

“Do you really distrust me that much?”

“Why do you lock your door then?”

“Are you out of your mind? There are two gangsters behind the front door!”

“It's important to know when your enemies go to the bathroom because it's their moment of greatest weakness. Danny's in it right now. I'm six steps ahead of you, Steven. Give me the amulet and I'll end this situation faster than you taking a piss.”

“Did you memorize a whole page while I was on my way to the bathroom?”

“Of course not. I took a picture of it with the camera,” she said as she showed him the photo, which was tucked in the back of her pants. “By the way, it's very strange that your room is so full of useless things, what's the point of collecting so many clothes and decorative mugs if you're always on the verge of death?”

Steven clenched his own skull with his fingernails, desperate and screaming through his teeth in frustration as he cringed. Then he looked into Charlotte's soulless eyes with an angry expression. She, showing no reaction whatsoever, insisted one last time.

“Give me the amulet.”

Pulling the spell book off the shelf and exhaling loudly through his mouth, Steven took off his amulet to find a spell that would work for the situation. Charlotte put it on and felt the power bristle her skin from the inside. Paranoia pays off, after all.

The two mobsters made it inside. The chunky one set about inspecting the downstairs while the blond one climbed the stairs to search the upstairs.

The library was locked from the inside. The blond man noticed, and made sure to keep an eye on that door as he entered the other rooms. The guest room, empty; there was nothing valuable apart from Charlotte's briefcase, which contained three underpants and a few socks, along with a string of clothes strips, a stuffed monkey and an excessively large notebook. On the bed he could see a slightly smaller notebook, whose handwriting was a bit more childish. For now, Steven wasn't giving a good sign of his abode, but that didn't interest the blond man, who impatiently tried to open the other doors, but they were all locked. Only the bathroom remained, which appeared to be in use. If he got close enough, he could hear small hands rolling the roll of toilet paper, wasting all its contents, causing its sheets to scatter on the floor and return to their original position repeatedly. As he put his hands on the doorknob, disappointment fell on his head when he saw that that room was also locked. As he had had enough, he began to kick the door with spite and vent, and in his usual manner, he did not draw the attention of the burly man on the floor below.

Between all the noise emanating from his feet and the wood, the blond man heard small footsteps behind him, which caused him to turn around pointing his gun. Despite having an overview of the entire hallway, he couldn't see

anyone, but he did see something: the library door was open. It didn't take a genius to realize that this was the way to go if he wanted to hit a target. He approached slowly, and with gun in hand, he finally opened the door, managing to see that inside the room there were only books scattered on the floor, broken glass and a lot of junk that is not worth describing, because the important thing lay in everything else, more precisely, under the table in the center, where Steven was.

As he took a step onto the dark carpet, the blond man heard footsteps down the hall again. This time he wasn't going to miss it. He covered the only exit down the stairs and kept his eyes peeled. The hallway was quite long and dark, and, being straight, there was nothing to give room for imagination outside of the deep darkness at the other end. The bathroom light at the end of the hallway was off, all the lights were. Suddenly it seemed as if the power had gone out, which is normal in *Soufreville*, but it was not because of any fault in the circuits, but because Charlotte wanted it that way.

It may not seem obvious, but black magic often presents itself in the most *cool* way possible. Behind the shadows there is always someone willing to come out in dramatic fashion, and this time it will be Charlotte, the whites of her eyes almost standing out in the darkness, her leather boots making a powerful presence next to her red hoodie and her amulet dangling from her neck as she walks calmly into the blond man's range of vision. He, barely managing to see what was looming, began firing. The bullets bounced off the blocking spells she conjured, and seeing that the shots were useless, the blond man dropped the gun completely petrified and began to pray on his knees, imploring mercy before God. Charlotte considered it an indignant and pathetic move, for she considers it far more dignified to fight to the death than to surrender to a celestial being, and so, she stood in front of him and said:

“You're asking the wrong person for mercy.”

Her blonde head flew through the air after being successfully affected by the *Explosive Brains* spell, which consisted of putting your fingers around the victim's head to generate a shockwave in their brain, which, naturally, shatters the entire skull, making a big mess all around them. I know, it's cool. That was a magnificent display of blood and gray matter, satisfying as well as disgusting, because feeling the eye sockets of the mobster who almost shot your parents on several occasions sliding over your face gives a peculiar sensation.

The gunshots and sounds of flesh spilling across the floor and walls didn't sound like a situation under control, so, the chunky man approached the stairs to ask if everything was all right. From the second floor rolled the corpse, spreading its blood on every step until it reached the beefy man, whose shocked expression at the sight of his companion's headless body prompted him to call for backup. The decision that led to his doom was to try to reach the house phone, because Charlotte was still in there, and she disconnected the phone cable just before the burly man could finish marking the number.

Fear ran down the back of his neck, as did his sweat. A situation like this puts into perspective everything you've done in your life and everything you won't be able to do later. He drew his gun to confront the girl lying on the dining room table, but didn't fire, because he knows somehow that if he pulls the trigger, he's going to regret it seconds later. Charlotte looked down at him from above, standing on the table with the phone wire in her hand, knowing that he knows that the one who has the power in that situation is her. She let the wire go and got down from the table to tell the burly man a few things before sealing his fate.

“Is it a coincidence or is it just that *The Coffin* doesn't have enough budget?”

“Who are you?” asked the burly man politely without lowering his gun. “Ledger's son?”

“It's just that it's so strange that I only know two mob agents and it's you two,” Charlotte replied.

“What are you saying?”

“Answer this question: Are there more *Coffin* employees, or is it just the two of you?”

“We,” he replied, “are the ones in charge of collecting payments, supervising and corroborating certain concerns. We are..., actually, I am, practically the boss's first line of defense.”

“I get it. You and your headless partner are the bait.”

“Excuse me?”

“You're pawns; you know, *first line of defense* is a fancy way of saying you're the first stones they throw into the void to see if they can get down.”

“Interesting observation, but I must do my duty, no matter what game piece I am. If you let me go, I'll let the boss know that there's nothing that can be taken out of this house.”

“Yes, of course,” said Charlotte sarcastically, clearly upset. “You think I'm an idiot, don't you?”

“Look, I'm not going to...”

“Put your gun away.” The burly man obeys. “Now I want you to tell me, where are they?”

“Pardon?”

“WHERE ARE THE BODIES?! she shouted suddenly, breaking his voice, as she moved her hands vigorously to create a spell, generating a reddish light.”

“Which bodies?!” he asked in exultation.

At that moment, Charlotte lost her composure. Something inside her did not seem to be in tune and she had a rage attack, which caused her to end up killing the burly

man by shouting the words: *incendia insaniae, damnatorum fibra cremant omnia corporis.*

Within seconds, the chunky man's body began to burn in radiant purple flames. His tormenting screams were his only solace as he lay twisting on the floor in pure agony. Charlotte just watched with a pout of anger and some frustration. It was a very difficult sight to watch.

A few seconds later, the noise ended.

Danny came out of the bathroom a little scared, he saw blood on the floor and a little on the walls and, he already has enough experience with Charlotte to assimilate that she had something to do with it. He went into the library where Steven was, still hiding under the desk.

“What happened?” Danny asked.

“Danny?” asked Steven. “Oh, you see, two mafia men broke into the house and Charlotte is taking care of them.”

“Two? How scary! Where's Charlotte now?”

“I don't know, I just hope she managed to get rid of them.”

“Why are you here?”

“Well, I'm helpless right now, and she's not, so I stayed here while she did her thing.”

“I don't hear anything now, do you think it's over?”

“Well, let's go see, but give me your hand to be sure.”

The two walked down the stairs slowly. At a peek, the image they witnessed was that of a guy lying on the floor with his head missing, and another roasted next to the phone. Beside the latter, Charlotte could be seen sitting on the floor, covered in blood and staring into the void. There was a long silence until she began to speak.

“I need more,” she said in a calm voice.

“More?” asked Steven.

“I used the first attack spells in the book, memorized them when you were teaching me the defense spells. I must improve my arsenal.”

“Hey,” said Steven consoling her, “you did a good job here. I even suspected you were going to teleport at the slightest opportunity. If you managed to take out two experienced gangsters with basic spells, you'll have no problem learning the more complex ones.”

“They weren't experienced gangsters,” he said, looking Steven in the eye, “they were bait.”

“Bait?” Steven asked.

“They knew it was dangerous to come in here. If they don't come back, they're going to send more men or demolish the house.”

“So what's your plan?”

Danny kept touching the rosy skin of what was the burly man. In his eyes, they were just two more bad guys who got in Charlotte's way. Seeing so much violence embodied in your surroundings isn't very traumatic if you don't humanize the corpses.

Charlotte stood up and said with determination:

“I'm going to take down each and every member of *The Coffin*, but to warm up, I'm going to take down others who made my life miserable.”

“Who do you have in mind?” Steven asked.

“Before you helped us get out of *Soufreville*, my parents and I were holed up in the hospital. This information was totally unknown to *The Coffin*, but it was revealed to them by members of my father's theater group, and this information, in turn, was revealed to me by one of them moments later.”

“Your father's old group? I think it rings a bell. They're certainly strange, but they don't seem so bad.”

“I don't care about their moral bent. If they contributed to the murder of my parents, they should be eliminated.”

“Are you going to make some kind of list?”

“There's no need.”

“Okay. So... who wants an ice cream?” he asked aloud with enthusiasm.

“Me!” replied Danny instinctively. “Please! I haven't had ice cream in a long time!”

Things began to light up in a twisted way. The field was completely clear for Charlotte, and it looked like everything was going smoothly, but we still had one small problem to solve, which was that Detectives Quickley and Allard were on their way to join in the crossfire.

“It doesn't look good at all,” said Allard, looking at Greyson's disfigured body.

“Do you already believe that magic exists?” said Quickley with a certain arrogance and concern.

“No doubt about it,” she replied.

“Call forensics.”

“Wait, you're going public, aren't you?”

“Are you blind? This is total delusion. Do you know how much this will affect the captain?”

“That's the point, Quickley. If we keep this under wraps, the world will never know the danger it's facing.”

“All the news does is create panic. If we keep this quiet and manage to capture Ledger and the boy, everything will be resolved and no one will get hurt.”

“What if we find out there are more criminal magicians? They won't believe us.”

“You know what?” He takes out his pocket camera and takes a picture of the corpse. “Here,” he says, handing her the camera, “if things go wrong, you can have this picture and any others you want published, but first we need to solve the case.”

Elena stares at Quickley with narrowed eyes, wondering if the deal is worth it. After digesting it, she accepts it and they decide not to show the photo to anyone until they put Ledger behind bars..., again.”

“Hello,” the captain answered from his office phone.

“Hi,” said Quickley on the other end of the call, “Captain, we have some bad news.”

“Speak, Quickley!” he replied excitedly.

“Ledger stabbed Greyson in his sleep. Forensics is cleaning up now. I am really sorry.

“My condolences,” Allard added.

The captain was silent for several seconds.

“Listen,” Quickley continued, “we're going to *Soufreville* to look for the killer. There's no other choice, chief.”

“...Well,” replied the captain.

“We'll be back with a report, Captain. I'll see you later.
“Hangs up the phone.”

“Are we leaving?” Allard asked.

“Affirmative. Bring what we need.”

“Yes!” she says quietly as he clenches her fist in victory.

The decision was made. By noon, the two had already packed water, snacks, emergency weapons, notebooks, and other items for survival in an unfamiliar environment. They loaded everything into Quickley's car and set off.

Many people tend to like road trips, perhaps because they enjoy the downtime, the views and the long minutes of silence, sometimes accompanied by music. Sharing a seat with another person in a moving vehicle for hours is not so pleasant at times, but it is a necessary formality for many.

Besides, it's not so bad to share ideas with your co-worker, especially when you're both talented detectives.

“Have you ever wondered if there's a purpose to the intermediates?” Quickley asked after a few hours of driving.

“Intermediates”

“I mean, the roads between destinations. Do you think they have a purpose?”

“The answer is pretty well accommodated in the question, I think.”

“No, it's more of a philosophical question than a rational one. Looking at it from a philosophical point of view, do you think the space between two important events has a purpose?”

“Philosophically, I think the question is somewhat silly. Without the intermediates, the important events would not exist.”

“Yes, but we usually omit them, as if they were unimportant, when in fact, the saying goes that *it's not the destination that is important, but the path you take to get there.*”

“You are confusing resolutions with personal goals. A purpose would be to *pick up your lunch*, and a personal goal would be to *be a singer*. I think in the purpose you don't need to appreciate the journey you take, as that would take away the merit of the reward. Maybe you do need to appreciate more what you do in the course of becoming a singer so you don't feel frustration and lack of motivation, but, in general, I think the *intermediates* are just tasks that need to be accomplished in order to achieve our goals.”

“That's a great formulation, but I think the journey we take for any purpose should also be appreciated, or at least in certain cases. I guess it's the most optimistic way to live life.”

“But I don't think it's the most productive, at the end of the day.”

“Which is more productive, finding a greater amount of happiness, or completing the proposed happiness without distractions?”

“Literally, the latter makes more sense.”

“That’s strange; I thought the more obvious approach was the first one.”

Different perspectives make two people think. The two detectives were silent the rest of the way to *Soufreville*.

A good bitter coffee goes great with a planning and training session. Steven hated drinking unsweetened coffee, but he hated even more not drinking coffee at all. A little milk would be enough to lighten the taste.

Charlotte never stopped reading. Book after book, her knowledge was expanding, and even if she didn't have time to learn everything, at least she didn't ignore anything. The idea was to flip through every page she could until she finished looking at Steven's entire repertoire of black magic. To look sideways at every illustration and keyword imbued in each notation until she got an idea of how great her power could become.

“So, what are you going to learn first?” asked Steven with his coffee cup in his hand.

“I’m quite interested in learning English,” she replied without stopping reading.

“I suppose it's important for certain things, but wasn't the important thing about revenge?”

“Of course it was. I'll learn English as I go along; then I can read even more books. The first thing I'll do is look in the central park for the theater group and study their schedules.”

“It won't be easy. You have to cover your identity, because even though you dress like a girl, you still look like *Charlie*.”

“Do you think I need a mask?”

“Maybe, but you should also watch out for the local police station. And since word is out about your disappearance, I don't doubt the sheriff is in the loop.”

“Sheriff?”

“*Sheriff, chief of police, town protector*, whatever you want to call him. He doesn't do much, but if you get suspicious, he'll be a stone in your shoe for sure.”

“Strange” she said, closing the book she was reading, “I've never been informed about that.”

“That's how relevant he is. Hey, if you want to keep a low profile, you'd better change your clothes. That bloody T-shirt and leggings don't make a good first impression.”

Charlotte saw what she was wearing. That's right. She may have washed her face, but she was so busy documenting herself that she forgot to keep her hygiene intact. Suddenly, she had an idea. It was time for a change of look, and she knew just what to wear.

She reached for her sweater from the orphanage and carried it into the kitchen.

“Steven, can you sew?”

“Well, I'm not bad at it.”

“I want you to take the logo off this sweater.”

“What for?”

“I'm going to redesign it.”

“But why?”

Charlotte looked at him and said very confidently:

“To look good.”

At the front door, Danny was standing guard. Actually, he was sent outside to keep watch, but he's just going to play in the garden. Meanwhile, the detectives finally arrive in

town. The plan was to stay at some motel and then check the local police station.

“So..., this is *Soufreville*,” Quickley mentioned with some discomfort as he got out of the car.

“Don't get too attached, let's move on,” Allard replied, pulling out the briefcases.

They unpacked everything they had packed, then headed for the *Séjour Émouvant* motel, where the owner did not look like she was getting good reviews. Leonard Quickley introduced himself and asked for a room with two beds. The owner eyed the two of them suspiciously, as if she was checking them out to pull out any excuse to create an awkward moment. The nearly seventy-three year old lady raised a brow and intuitively said, “Recently divorced?” to which Quickley replied with a small laugh and the words: “No, we're co-workers.” “That's how they start,” the lady mentioned. Not to drag the situation out any further, Allard insisted that she give them the room, but the owner replied, “I'm sorry, we only have one-bed rooms. Don't you know what motels are for?” Faced with a lack of options, they ended up agreeing.

The room wasn't too bad: the damp spots on the ceiling didn't smell bad and the cockroaches didn't crawl out of the walls. The bed didn't look in bad shape, there was a bedside table next to it, and they even had a bathroom with working faucets.

“Do you want to take a break from the trip or do we go straight to what we came for?” asked Quickley.

“I'm not going to wait another second,” Allard replied.

Not another second did he wait. Wasting time was unthinkable. They left without delay for the police station, as

if they were against the clock or wanted to get out of that town as soon as possible.

In spite of his companion's hurry, Quickley's mind was not entirely focused, and that thought he had in the car reminded him of an old poem he read in his teenage years called: *In the Middle of the Water*. The poem goes like this:

*In the middle of the seas there are lonely islands.
In the middle of the tides there are aimless ships.
You see the water from the top; you see it so distant,
but the illusion is faraway, therefore, so foreign.
You come closer until you can recognize your face,
you look at your reflection, so clear and so blurred.
You see through it, you see through you.
You see living beings from an opposite world.
You see the sand, so simple;
and the darkness, so complex.
You fear what you don't see, so you see you.*

It was a very beautiful poem, but it did not have a very comforting story behind it, as the author published it three and a half years after writing it, which means that, at the time his fellow writers read its eleven lines, the author was already nineteen years old, which meant that he wrote it in his youth, and his writing skills were not optimal. However, he did not want to change a single word of that verse, which caused some disagreements in his community of writers. After several mysterious events, the author was found dead in an alley with twenty-four stab wounds in his chest. The identity of the killers is still being debated. From that day on, the author went from being an amateur to a recognized figure in the world of literature.

Quickley kept thinking about that poem. Nothing about water seemed objective or structured, like the liquid itself in its natural state. Water is the most productive material on the entire planet, for everything about its hydrogen and

oxygen molecules seemed to have a purpose. Water is never useless, even at rest. Quickley pursued the concept of water in his partner Elena, as it was a good way to understand her attitudes. Detective Elena Allard is instinctive, intuitive and insightful, her decisions are objectively right and her perception of what is morally right is protected with a stainless steel armor. How could he relate her to a fluid as ambiguous as water? On the one hand, if he chose to reflect his ideals in her, perhaps he would see them as dark, or sheltered under a deep blue void of uncertainty. Perhaps he needed to dive into her vast ocean of perceptions and ideas in order to understand her and change the direction in which she flows.

“Are you calling or should I call?” Allard asked.

“What?” Quickley answered, waking up from his little trance of distraction. “Ah, we're at the station. I'll knock on the door.”

As soon as the knocking at the door was heard, another kind of noise was heard from inside the station. It didn't sound serious, and indeed, it was Sheriff Tom Vane, the most cartoonish officer the town could possibly have, and that's saying quite a lot, even if there isn't much competition. The noises that could be heard were of glass crashing to the floor, furniture bumping into each other, and clumsy footsteps among bottles of alcohol. The commissioner opened the door after a few seconds.

You could see his professionalism in all its glory. His eyes were suspiciously red and his clothing a little far from neat, not to mention his strange way of standing. The commissioner looked no more than twenty-eight years old; he wore a noticeably faded blue suit, as if he had put it on quickly, along with a half-unbuttoned shirt and a very mismatched tie. You didn't have to be a detective to realize that the *sheriff* wasn't doing a very good job.

“Good midday,” said the commissioner, looking the two detectives in the eye. “How can I help you?”

“*Midday?*” Allard said confused.

“Yes,” replied the commissioner, “it's almost noon and I guess that's the best way to say hello at this hour.”

“I understand,” said Allard, adjusting to the state of sanity of the officer in front of her, “I'm Detective Elena Allard and this is my partner Leonard Quickley,” she said as they both showed their badges.

“So you are Sherlock and he is your Wattson,” said the commissioner.

“We both have the same rank,” replied Quickley, somewhat annoyed.

“Whatever you say, *Wattson*. My name is Tom Vane, head of this precinct.” He extended his hand with them to greet them but received no response.

“Can you let us through?” Allard asked.

“Please make yourselves at home.”

Upon entering, the smell of misery and despair was noticeable. The interior of the precinct gave no real impression of breathing fresh air or working often, mainly because of the only seven police officers lounging around and appearing to hide illegal substances behind their lunch bags.

As much as the two wanted to sentence these oxygen wasters, it was neither the time nor the place. As law enforcement authorities, they have control over everyone in *Soufreville*, including Quickley and Allard. The police control the town and the mob controls the police; or in other words, *The Coffin* gives them drugs and they leave the mob alone. Allard was closing her fists tightly to control the temptation to arrest them all for not doing their jobs, but the look on Quickley's face wouldn't even let her consider the idea.

“So... What can I do for you?” Tom asked.

“We just need you to answer a few questions,” said Allard as he pulled out his notebook.



A few seconds later, in the main park, children were running around the plants while adults were looking for a quiet place to smoke. After all, it was October, and the town was celebrating autumn as it did every year. In the center, where the stage was located, a group of dancers were practicing a play. Jeff Gaspel's theater group was nowhere in sight, but it didn't hurt to keep looking. Charlotte didn't seem to be trying very hard to go unnoticed, as she wore a plastic mask that stood out from the other infants' heads. The mask was a generic image of a demon's face: red skin, two horns, evil grin, beard below the lower lip and sharp chin. If we have a specific context, we could say that Charlotte was just a girl with a cheap mask strapped to her face, a white shirt, an orange sweater, black skirt, white stockings and black boots. Her goal was to watch, analyze and create a plan of attack, and the absence of the theater group was not going to prevent her victory.

Seeing the attractions closed and the mostly empty stalls brought back memories. The Ferris wheel was no longer operating properly, and is not usually used until some holiday appears. The wreckage where the unstable carousel once stood still remained next to some flowers and tombstones in the shape of a cross, in honor of all those children who died in that accident.

Charlotte looked at that cemetery surrounded by a wooden fence, trying to remember the faces of those girls who ripped her happiness out of her hands, but her memory only paints them as little demons with their eyes scratched out with a pair of crosses. Even if she tried, Charlotte could not recall that trauma; she only remembered that feeling of happiness when witnessing poetic justice. The only human

thing she had left was fading like ink in water, creating a homogeneous mixture of feelings and resentments. Without a soul, Charlotte was just a pile of bones, nerves, flesh and motor energy whose actions were guided by the instinct for revenge and power, so a moment of empathy did not fit into her overall reasoning. However, something strange was happening. Her eyes began to water, letting tears fall from under that mask. It was unacceptable, her face began to twist, her chest ached and her hands trembled, as if a dam of water was finally reacting to her cracks.

Charlotte lifted her mask, revealing her agonized expression and kneeling down. All the memories that had once broken her in the past come out of the grave where they were buried, making her heart burn with intensity, or at least that's how she felt. She spent almost two whole minutes suffering physically and emotionally with her knees on the ground until she felt a hand touch her shoulder.

Charlotte didn't have the strength to jump from the shock, so, trembling, she turned her head slowly. The man crouching next to her awoke an alarm signal, as he was wearing a purple suit.

XXIII

VIGILANTE

Purple was the color by which *The Coffin* was identified. All the men in the mob wore that color denoting their authority, but, although that hand touching Charlotte's shoulder belonged to a man wearing a suit of that color, it was actually Clyde, the blond psychopath, wearing a costume for a character he was going to play in a play that afternoon.

“I know it's hard,” Clyde said, to which Charlotte is speechless, as her head kept spinning. “I myself saw how the roof of that mechanism descended on those poor souls. It is, no doubt, the result of several lustrums of stubborn attitude, a total indifference to life, and the atrocious perseverance towards money and its material benefits.”

Life before the escape to *Spoirtown* was quite limited. Most of Charlie's time was spent reading in the library and playing with his parents in the park or at home, so he didn't have much opportunity to get to know the members of the

group, but he knew how they looked, talked, and behaved, and Clyde has never opened his mouth offstage. “Please forgive my sudden intrusion, but I felt compelled to comfort another person related to the victims. You know, my cousin also passed away in that accident.”

Charlotte looked down at the wreckage and wiped away her tears.

“It wasn't an accident,” she said seriously, still looking at the tombstones.

“It wasn't?” asked Clyde.

“The one responsible for the collapse of the whole mechanism was a simple rodent. A raccoon was the executioner of all those lives. I know because I saw it.”

“It's not wise to draw that conclusion. The machine was composed of sensitive materials; its mechanisms were old. It is obvious that the attraction was in no condition to be used.”

“If we keep pretending that nothing happened we will never learn. If we keep leaving nails sticking out of the wood, our feet will keep getting stabbed with tetanus. Ignoring what's in front of us will bring unhappiness and misery unless we act.”

Clyde watches Charlotte as she stands up and puts her mask back on. “Is there going to be a play this afternoon?” she asked. Clyde looked a little more serious and after a few seconds replied, “*Giselle*. You might like it, we're going to add dialogue.”

The blond psychopath walks away from there. Charlotte still doesn't know why they called him that, but she's not going to bother to find out. To her, everyone in the group deserves to die.

At home, Steven was looking for Danny, as he was no longer in the garden. He searched the kitchen, the dining room, the bathrooms, the main living room and the guest

room, but ended up finding him in the library, eating one of the glass on the shelves.

“Dannyel!” Steven exclaimed.

Danny, trying to chew what was in his mouth, looked at him and chewed faster.

“What are you doing? Let go now, it's dangerous!”

“No,” he said with some difficulty.

“That's a crystal of gluttony! If you swallow it, it won't do any good! Ironically, though, you're eating its effects.”

As he tried to pull it out of his mouth, Danny resisted, like a dog biting the handle of a knife. After much struggling, Steven managed to get it out without it breaking.

“Did you swallow something?” asked Steven agitated.

“No,” he answered, looking at the floor.

Steven looked to see if there were any other small artifacts missing. Luckily, he had only eaten part of a glass container that was lying on the floor.

“What's the matter, Danny? Are you hungry? Did you not eat well?”

“... It's not it,” he answered quietly.

“So?”

“I don't know what's wrong. Is Charlotte going to be all right?”

“Dannyel,” he said comfortingly, “don't worry about it. Everything is under control. I never thought you'd be one of those kids who, when they're nervous, put sharp objects in their mouths to feel them go down their esophagus.”

Danny looks down at his feet, looking for something else to chew on, without giving an answer.

“What if we go to the park this afternoon to see a play? It's the fall holidays and they always do something interesting around this time.”

Speaking of the play, I'm sure you'll be interested to know what the theater group was doing. Not much of a mystery. They were all rehearsing around a big tree. Mari, the shy skinny one, was *Giselle*; she was wearing a very colorful pink dress. Joanna, the fat conceited one, played *her mother*, wearing a nun's costume. Viktor, the fat grumpy one, was the forest ranger *Hilarion*, wearing an archer's costume. Emilio, the kindly midget, was the nobleman *Albrecht*, and his robes were golden, elegant, and limited in movement. Hautel, the tall fool, was dressed as a *tree* with a cardboard tombstone attached to his belly. Clyde, the blond psychopath, was the *nobleman's assistant*, the one who advised him and held his sword, and he wore his purple suit.

“My love will never be taken away from me, because when I place it in someone, it will be eternal,” Mari pronounced, practicing the lines with fervor.

“Oh, for heaven's sake,” Emilio pronounced in another part of the script, *“I have just condemned her. I condemned each and every one of you in this town. Hey,”* he said, anguished, stepping out of character, “do you really think it's necessary to add dialogue to a ballet piece?”

“What do you prefer?” Viktor asked angrily, “Memorize lines or wave your feet in the air for an hour?”

“I understand the idea,” he replied, “but it feels a bit out of place, considering that dance and acting have different emphases. Also, why do we have to be barefoot?”

“Do you want to ruin the tarp? I need to return it to my cousing after we finish the play because he needs it to cover his pool.”

“Hey, I'm satisfied,” Joanna added. “They'll finally see my great acting talent live.”

“It's at most forty-five people,” Hautel replied. “I don't think your talents will be recognized on a large scale, and I don't think they will leave this community. I rather think they will forget about your performance after a few days.”

“Get out of my head, Hautel!” She screamed, “You haven't seen my full potential in action.”

“Leave him alone!” exclaimed Mari, making everyone turn to see her, “*His soul is protected by my great love, and even if I'm dead...*”

“Nevermind,” said Emilio listlessly, “I'd better go on rehearsing.”

“You'd better,” said Viktor. The play will start in five hours and Clyde is still not coming.”

“It's not as if his role is very important,” added Hautel. “We can easily do without him.”

“What are you talking about?” replied Joanna “He wrote the script. If he's unhappy with what we do, it'll be a headache.”

Behind that tree, concealed within bushes, Charlotte's demon mask was discreetly observing the behavior of each member of the group, making sure that there were no mistakes when it came time to act. Clyde seemed to be taking a break, but everyone else was there.

For better planning, Charlotte decided to study the play better. To do this, she had to go back to that library where the memory of the first abdomen pain she felt was still fresh.

The librarian was still there, reading small books at her desk, as usual. Charlotte noticed her as she entered. She noticed her arrival and welcomed her.

“Hello, little one,” she said excitedly as she saw Charlotte enter with that mask on. “Barely anyone comes here lately. What book are you looking for?”

“*Giselle*, do you have any book related to that play?” she asks without moving, looking her straight in the face.

“Do you want to know more about the play they're presenting today? What a joy! I'm sure you like theater.”

“I used to. Where do I find the information?”

“I'm sorry, there aren't any books related to ballet. If you like, I can recommend romance and tragedy books from the Middle Ages so you won't lose the thread.”

“Where are these books?”

“In the *Tragedies* section, look for a romantic sounding name.”

Charlotte heads there right away. She had a few hours to research the culture of love and death in medieval Europe.

On the shelves were various books such as: *My Personal Downfall*; *Paranormal Resentments*; *Albert, the Great Lover*; *My Wife's Curse*, etc. It looked like Charlotte was going to be there for quite a while. Even if she had a soul, she would not enjoy reading those books, as the writing of those old writers was too complex. If a book had a lot of abstract and confusing sentences, it meant one of two things: either it was a masterpiece that was difficult to understand, or it was pure pretension without creativity. Unfortunately, when it came to love, all concepts were abstract, and that would get Charlotte into trouble, because her instincts couldn't comprehend something as superficially extended as romance. For her, all that was simple carnal attraction to please hidden desires and procreate.

Hours passed. Charlotte had never yawned so much. She had barely finished reading the last few paragraphs of the 274-page first book, but it felt like 832. It was like two pounds of frosting on a cake five inches wide: unnecessarily cloying and useless.

With some anger, Charlotte decided to stop and go back to Steven's house to start executing her plan of attack. Since the latter and Danny went to the park, the door was closed, and she was already starting to get hungry. It wasn't a very nice situation, because she left her amulet with Steven and he left the house locked with the incantation book inside, which meant that Charlotte couldn't use her knowledge of magic, and even if she could, all that was in her head was a bunch of meaningless romantic phrases.

The only option was to look for him in the park. What would be the point of exposing himself like that? Why would he do that? Of course, he was wearing a disguise! If Charlotte actually knows Steven, she knows it won't be hard to identify his style of dressing, as his fashion sense is not very tasteful.

"How perceptive of me," she kept saying to herself as she ran into the park. Her ego was boosted for a moment without much reason, but this was no time to praise herself, for she had yet to find a wizard in the middle of the crowd. At first it occurred to her to get Danny's attention with some kind of bell or flashy noise for the infants, but then she realized that all the people were heading for the stage because the play was about to start. Her time was wasted researching, or maybe she got the information wrong, but the point is that all the seats were already taken and the only thing left to do was to look for the two of them quietly with a flashy mask on. Fortunately, she didn't have to walk that far, because Danny bumped into her while she wasn't looking.

"Charlotte?" asked Danny, surprised to see her, dropping his popcorn in shock.

"Danny, where's Steven?"

"Come on, let's go see the play," he said as he took her by the hand to lead her to where they both sat.

Charlotte and Danny sit in the front row, facing the stage, where a man in a blue suit and monocle is waiting for them.

“Hi, Charlie,” said the man in the monocle.

“Is that supposed to be your costume?” asked Charlotte a little angrily.

“Please,” Steven replied, “I modified my face. Danny helped me.”

“The mustache and the monocle make you stand out. All you need is a beige jacket to finish the *I'm in incognito* message,” said Charlotte cynically. “Plus, you have to hide your right hand.”

“What a spoilsport you are,” Steven replied. “Anyway, what's your plan to assassinate the group?”

“I'm still thinking about it. I don't even know what the play is about.”

“Have you really never seen the ballet *Giselle*” Steven asks incredulously.

“How does it end?” she asks desperately.

“Well, I don't remember well, but I know that the main character dies and her lover goes to look for her among the dead.”

“Does he dig up the body?”

“No. Rather, he is dragged into the world of dead brides who have been cheated on. After that, Giselle saves him from being condemned to dance for eternity.”

“Now that's a punishment.” Danny added.

“I guess that's all I need.” said Charlotte, looking at the stage curtains. “Give me the amulet.”

“Hey, I'm sorry, I can't take it off. If I do, my costume vanishes.”

“It can't be,” says Charlotte, wailing with her hands on her face.

“And why do you want to know the end of the play?” asked Steven.

“I want to make sure every member of the group gets out.”

“Jeez, give yourself a break. You're rushing your revenge. Why don't you enjoy the show a little?”

“I can't. If I don't kill them now I feel like I'm going to explode.”

“Really?” said Danny.

“I feel like you're consumed with an addiction.”

“Addiction? I thought that was for people with souls.”

“Actually, addictions are highly regarded in hell. You may not have feelings or values like everyone else, but you do retain a devilish spirit.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You know, human beings are evil by nature. Everything good a person can have is supposed to come from the soul. Without a soul, I guess you don't have any good inside you.”

Charlotte stared blankly into nothingness. She thought she had the values her parents instilled in her. After all, she never pondered her own sense of morality. She just followed their instructions and steps. But we all know how it turned out for her. However, look how far she got with her pure natural instinct and her great intellect. She beat death thanks to the evil that resided within her.

At the carousel accident, she was smiling.

Epiphany. Charlotte was already clear about what she was going to do. She stands up from the bleachers and puts on her mask.

“Where are you going?” asks Steven.

“I'm going to put on a good show.”

That afternoon in *Soufreville* was very dark. The clouds gave no room for the sun to show signs of life and the street

lamps were no longer off. On the other hand, the sugar factory was surrounded by police tape. Inside, Allard and Quickley inspected the bloodstains on the walls, and it was just as they imagined. Commissioner Tom Vane was leaning in the doorway smoking. He didn't care what happened. In fact, he just wanted to please the detectives so they would leave as soon as possible.

"This is unbelievable," Allard claimed. "They left nothing behind. How many victims did you say there were?"

"More than twenty," Quickley replied, rather uncomfortably.

"I told you. There's nothing left here," said Vane with disinterest.

"So the town will run out of sugar?" asked Quickley.

"Sadly. But production will resume next week, as soon as they remove these yellow ribbons and let us do our thing."

"You know what?" said Quickley, notably tired. "It's getting dark already, how about a bite to eat?"

"Really?" Allard exclaimed angrily. "Eat? The smell in here makes me nauseous. Our work has just begun."

"But we've already spent hours investigating and questioning all the civilians nearby," Quickley replied. "Everyone denies the existence of a wizard here."

"Don't you understand that means they are threatened?" She said very angrily. "We're too close!"

"You've been saying that since we started the case. Why don't we continue tomorrow?"

Allard snorts in despair. She can't believe things have come to a halt so quickly. Being in *Soufreville* was supposed to make the case easier, but it only made it more complicated.

"You two are just adorable," Tom exclaimed, catching both of their attention.

“What?” Allard asked.

“I mean, please,” he said haughtily. “You must relax a little. Your attitude of determined detectives seems unreal, as if you have no life outside of your work.”

The two of them, hearing that, start to reflect, as they have never thought about what to do with their lives outside of their work. They both get up early, work at the police station all day and come back at night. Neither has a romantic partner, close family or any hobbies outside of being the heroes of their community. You could say they are workaholics because they fear the hostility and fragility of the ordinary civilian world. Who knows, maybe it's the same reason for both of them, but with different context and perception?

“If what you're trying to say is that you want to go home now, just say so,” said Allard, her temper still very fragile. “Anyway, I think we'll think better rested.”

“Listen, this town may be a dump, but you know how to entertain yourself around here easily. In fact, there's going to be a play in the park today. We do something like that every year. Do you want to go? The candy's on me.”

“I hope the candy you're talking about is sugar candy and not something else” Quickley proclaimed, suspicious of the sheriff.

“Please,” Tom hesitated, “where do you think the most delectable products in this town come from? I'll give you a hint, detectives: It's where you're standing right now.”

Commissioner Vane walks out the door after crushing the cigarette he was smoking with his foot. He clearly thought it was a heartbreakingly epic exit, but Allard and Quickley were just watching a junkie abandon his responsibilities as he would have done before.

“What do you say,” Quickley asked his partner, “you want to clear your head on stage?”

Allard walked out of the factory without showing any positive expression. She didn't seem to be in the mood to be distracted in any way. Quickley, on the contrary, was already tired of everything that was going on. They were in a totally alien and uncontrolled terrain, and they know that the slightest mistake or the smallest intrusion into the system would cause big problems for them.

The mother and father of all their possible problems is *The Coffin*, and, speaking of them, it's about time to see what they are doing off-stage.



In the office of the boss, on the tea table, two subordinates dropped several weapons from a large bag. The boss, alias: Mr. Clement, was scheduled to check the effectiveness and veracity of those weapons purchased abroad. This time, without a cup of tea in his hand, he went to look at the 17 different pistols and submachine guns on the table, first placing them in order.

“Did Francella receive the money?” asked Mr. Clement, placing the guns in order of size.

“That's right,” answered a subordinate. “I don't think he will refuse to continue sending us merchandise.”

“We are lucky,” said Mr. Clement, “after the last attack, not even I would forgive us.”

“And what do you say,” asked the other subordinate, “he didn't falsify them?”

“Well,” said Mr. Clement, “they don't look bad, but answer me something.”

Suddenly, the boss raised one of the pistols and pointed it at the subordinate who asked and then pulled the trigger. Seeing that nothing came out of the barrel, the subordinate, with his heart beating a thousand per hour, let out a nervous sigh.

“Did it really cross your mind that this gun was real?” the boss asked angrily, “It has an orange piece of plastic in the muzzle!” he shouted angrily. “These things are sold in toy stores and you bought them at full price! What do you say we try the others?”

“I don't think that will be necessary,” he replied, frightened.

“Don't worry,” insisted the boss. “According to our request, they should all be loaded, but since there's a high chance that they're filled with plastic, I don't think it'll be a problem.”

“I'll get twice as many out of my own pocket, I promise,” the subordinate asked almost on his knees as the other stepped aside to avoid friction.

The boss pointed another of the pistols at him. Both expected different results, but either way, the subordinate was going to die. He pulled the trigger. Nothing happened. The atmosphere grew tense. “Next,” Mr. Clement said excitedly. He tossed the toy pistol back and picked up another. This time, as he pulled the trigger, a bullet went through the subordinate's shoulder. “Next!” the boss exclaimed as he grabbed another. The subordinate groaned in pain as he held his wounds, but it was no use to him, because the next gun was also real. Boom! Lead in the kidney. “That's acceptable for now, don't you think?” the boss said without pausing. The next gun was a water gun, which was not good for the subordinate. The more bullets he took, the less likely he would die in the end, ironic as it sounded. Those were all the pistols; now it was the turn of

the submachine guns. The first one that was exposed to the test released three bullets that ended up in the belly of the subordinate, who could no longer contain his screams. The next one, unfortunately, was a fake and could be easily broken. When the time came to test the other submachine gun, its bullets caused the victim to give up his lungs and die seconds later. This did not sit well with his partner, because he was the next victim, and if he came out alive, he was going to be severely tortured.

In the end he managed to pass the test, being left without the ability to walk, but it would be of little use to him, because soon after being healed he was going to lose the skin on his forearms.

Sometimes discipline can be hard to apply, but it will always give visible results, even if it leaves after-effects.

Mr. Clement was already satisfied; from his perspective, he did the right and just thing to resolve the situation. The interesting thing about perceptions is that there is no right one, and none will prevail over the other unless it has enough power. Charlotte also had her sense of justice, and her childish way of seeing the world prevented her from seeing the big picture from the beginning, mainly because she always lived in misery, but that did not stop her from making the toughest decisions. In Steven's case, justice is too alien to do anything about it. You have to be able to tell the difference between those who support *live and let live* and those who are more inclined to the philosophy of: *If it's not right it shouldn't happen*. In Charlotte's case, we must admit that she did not let many of those she met along the way live, and she is not going to do it now.



The show begins. Everyone applauds as the curtain opens. Danny is very excited. Steven is a little bit more suspenseful.

For the moment nothing much was happening: the old gramophone was playing the vinyl record that contained all the music of the ballet and the characters were on stage, without shoes or stockings, according to them to emphasize the historical context. Or maybe it was because they did not want to make a mess on the black tarp where they were standing.

“Good morning, fair damsel,” proclaimed the duke as he tried his best to move his legs to the rhythm. “Would you accept these flowers from me in exchange for a dance?”

“If you insist so much, I will dance with you, but you better have a good beat,” Giselle replied.

“They are massacring art,” a chuckling old art-loving curator in the front row complained.

The play went on and there was no sign of Charlotte.

“What a tragedy! Giselle is dead because of her beloved's hurtful betrayal!”

“Stay away from my daughter's corpse, you dirty liar!”

“I must stay away, and so I will. But let it be clear that my heart still beats for her!”

Emilio, who played *the Duke*, left the stage to continue in the second act. As he left the stage, the other characters stood in place comforting *Giselle* as she died in symbolic pain. Suddenly, the floor was covered with water; many thought it symbolized something somewhere and the others theorized that they installed a portable toilet wrong. In reality, all that water covering the stage tarp came from four buckets that were purposely dumped. When they realized it

was starting to bother, those on stage: dancers, actors and background people, stood paralyzed with tense muscles and tendons, burning inside. Naturally you can't see it with the naked eye, but they were seconds away from losing their lives by electrocution. The water conducted the electricity emanating from some power cables to the bare feet of those present. About twelve seconds was enough to turn the hearts of the victims to jelly.

How did this happen? The answer is easy: who else would throw four buckets of water to bring them into contact with direct power lines? One of several people who wanted those actors dead, none other than the one with a demon mask behind the curtains. She showed no mercy. She pulled the wires out of the water as soon as it began to smell like burning flesh.

The audience began to worry about the sudden change in the actors' hairstyles, and it wasn't long before they began to scream at the sight of the falling bodies. Emilio, seeing all this from the side of the stage, put on his shoes and went to check if they were alive. Indeed, they were not. It was such a quick thing that he did not give his brain time to process it as trauma.

“Steven, why are people yelling?” asked Danny, very confused.

“It seems to me that Charlotte did her job perfectly,” he replied with a smile. “I wonder how she did it.”

Emilio, trying to calm the nerves of the audience, decided to announce the following:

“Attention everyone!” he shouted, raising his arms and placing the microphone. “Don't panic! This is part of the play. They are fine, they only represented what life would be like before the eyes of the world of death.”

“Indeed,” was heard from behind. “The show is not over yet.”

Charlotte appears from the shadows, wearing her mask, approaching the microphone. Emilio lets her pass, as she seems to be the only person on stage who has an answer to what is happening.

“Isn't this what art is all about?” Charlotte enunciated into the microphone. “We love tragedies, stories that go from bad to worse, enjoying our position as spectators while the characters suffer a path of misfortune. Death is very common in this kind of stories; in fact, I have read the script of this play. After Giselle dies dramatically for being in the middle of a game played by two louts, she is condemned to suffer forever in a world of agony and darkness, where her lying lover is dragged away only to be forgiven by the power of love. Is that what this is all about? Is love such a powerful thing? They don't know anything about love!” she suddenly shouted “*Giselle* is a stupid, groundless crybaby. Did she commit suicide because her feelings were played with? *Oh, poor thing,*” she said sarcastically, “Love isn't just dancing with someone for half an hour, nor is it lying for your own benefit! That's called sexual attraction, and it's more blinding than any pepper spray! No one in this stupid play knows what love is. I, once knew, but now I know it was nothing more than a set of chains that I have yet to free myself from. Love is primarily responsible for the fact that everyone now under my feet is dead. On the other hand, love is also responsible for the fact that the *duke* here beside me is still alive. Thanks to him I am talking to you right now, so don't miss this opportunity to understand that every action has its consequence. I have killed ten people in twelve seconds thanks to poor maintenance of electrical wires and poor security on the streets. I have lived my whole life in the shadows of this damned town, and I know how to nip all this

misery in the bud. You dare to get in my way and you will end up like these innocent dancers resting in the cold water. Go back to your homes, go back to your wet cardboard boxes and get a good night's sleep, because justice has finally arrived... You have time until I count to ten to run for it. Ten... Nine..." she announced menacingly as she lit a lighter.

The audience began to flee with their eyes wide open as well as their mouths. Emilio joined them, and as unrational as it sounds, a girl in a demon mask over a pile of corpses on a dark stage is very scary. Charlotte stopped counting at number seven, dropped the microphone, turned off the lighter and walked calmly down the stairs. Steven was waiting for her, clapping with Danny in the bleachers.

"Wonderful!" he exclaimed. "That's what I call putting on a good show. How did you come up with all that?"

"I didn't," Charlotte replied. "I spoke honestly."

"Did it come straight from your soulless heart?"

"The heart only pumps blood. Please abstain from mentioning that metaphor again. I hate it too much."

"As you like, but we really have to hide now that you drew a lot of attention with that number. And what was the lighter for?"

"People usually run away when they see someone suspicious using fire, but in case they didn't run I was going to set the stage on fire when I got to zero. And as for hiding, don't worry, I'll take care of that now."

Charlotte takes the amulet from Steven, making him return to his original image and puts it on to perform the teleportation spell. The three disappear, leaving a trail of misfortune behind them.

Charlotte's well-rounded statement could have been perfect to close the *Gospel* case, but Detective Allard didn't

want to waste time on recreational activities. Sometimes you have to keep in mind that time is never wasted if you enjoy it. Actually, time is never wasted because no one owns it, but that's another matter.

“Are you feeling better now?” Quickley asked his partner as the two of them ate a sandwich at a street restaurant.

“A little. I'm sorry I ruined your week.”

“My week was ruined as soon as I met Ledger. Don't blame yourself for that. Besides, I think we're making pretty good progress.”

“Where do you think we should investigate tomorrow?”

“The wizard's house. We're going to find it even if we have to interrogate the mob.”

“Where did you get that courage?”

“Just kidding; if we have to investigate the mob I'd better go back to *Spoirtown*.”

“Hey, where are all those people running from?”

On the streets, a few civilians could be seen spreading the news of what they saw on the stage. Some in fear and others with a smile on their faces.

Logically, it wasn't long before the detectives learned that Charlie still exists and is very close.

XXIV

OMEGA

The objective was accomplished. Without the interference of third parties in the way, Charlotte can complete her mission without much trouble. Sure, if only she hadn't given that speech, she might have gotten away with it masterfully, but it didn't turn out to be. One thing that did turn out to be was the detectives' theory, and it was only a matter of time before it all collapsed.

“Are you still awake?” Steven asks when he sees Charlotte reading in the library at two in the morning.

“I can't afford to rest,” Charlotte replied, turning the page. “What are you doing up?”

“I have a bad feeling. Do you want to continue with your classes?”

“No. I learn better on my own.”

“Yes, but it's never enough just to have the theory. You also need the experience.”

“As soon as I'm done with the theory, I'll start with the experience.”

“... As you wish.”

Steven was about to make himself a coffee in the kitchen, but his anxiety was getting the better of him. He stood in the doorway for a while. With all he had experienced, he couldn't take any more risks.

He searched the shelves for a specific piece of paper, one that was rolled up on a rather old stick; he cut a normal sized piece and put it on the table. Charlotte stopped the reading and watched what Steven was doing in complete silence. He took a container of ink and poured it over the paper, covering a large portion. Then, with the amulet on, he closed his eyes and concentrated on whispering with perfect accuracy the idea he was constructing in his mind as he pressed his fingers into the ink.

Suddenly, he removed his hands from the canvas and then lifted it vertically to let the ink run off the paper. As the sheet was stripped, the dark ink fell on the table, but not all of it, because some of it remained on the paper, forming well-structured and understandable words in French, creating whole paragraphs with such perfect handwriting that it was scary. The fear was not unjustified, because this trick is very famous in the underworld, because it is used to create contracts, and if there is something that demons like, it is to make agreements on paper.

“What are you doing?” asked Charlotte curiously.

“Quiet and pay attention,” Steven answered seriously. “This is a contract, but not just any kind of contract; if what is written in these lines is in any way broken by either party, they will be condemned to death. What I have just done is to implement all the conditions of the agreement you are about to sign. Can you see it well?” he asked as he held the sheet of paper in his inked hand in front of Charlotte.

She could read perfectly what was written. Summarizing the fourteen lines of the contract, it read: *If in any way, Steven Gideon Ledger is killed by Charlie or Charlotte Gaspel, the person who released him from his sentence in Spoirtown, either by magic or any other intentional means, the latter will be condemned to burn in the depths of hell immediately after the death of Steven Gideon Ledger.*

Charlotte was perplexed. Any action that resulted in the death of her tutor intentionally would be her downfall, which meant she would have to bear with him for the rest of her life. It was a direct check. If she refused, Steven has every right to get rid of her, but if she accepts, he won't be able to get the town wizard out of her way ever. At that, Charlotte could only answer one thing.

“Is your middle name Gideon?” she asked with a frown.

“Do you understand or not?” Steven insisted with much more seriousness.

“I understand your concerns. I would do the same if I were you.”

“You must sign it in the dotted space.”

Charlotte could not show any sign of hesitation, if she did, she would definitely be exposed. So she took a pen and wrote her name on the paper, sealing the deal. Once signed, there is no way for the agreement to be cancelled unless it is in the presence of a superior being.

“Well, that's a big load off my mind,” said Steven, rolling up the sheet with sudden calmness and a smile on his face. “What would you like for breakfast later?”

Charlotte was silent. Steven interpreted it as indecision, so he just told her he'd see what he could come up with, but

the silence represented her utter defeat in the face of someone on his level.

The radiant morning sun did not make its presence known. Unfortunately, its light is not very common in *Soufreville* due to the excessive humidity and pollution. In any case, the pair of detectives opened their eyes in that dusty bed, and they couldn't have been more excited to move forward with the investigation. Allard, of course, was already ready twenty minutes before Quickley awoke. They both put on their coats and set out to give their 200% to find the girl behind the mask.

The first thing that came to their minds was to knock on all the doors near the park until they found any sign of murderous black-haired infants, but then they had a better idea: wait by the police station until Charlie approached. If you think about it, it's a great plan. If the witnesses were right and the intention of *The Manifestation of Satan* was to nip evil in the bud, a good place to start would be the home of pigs and rats.

"It looks like it's going to rain," said Quickley in the passenger seat after looking up at the cloudy sky.

"I'm not hungry," Allard said, looking out the window with noticeable disappointment.

"Are you feeling all right?"

"Not exactly."

"I know it's not a very hopeful situation, but really...."

"We were able to catch him," said Allard, interrupting him.

"What?"

"We could have gone to the park and arrested him in that moment. If only I had relaxed for a while and listened to you..."

“Elena, you made your decisions and you can't change them. It won't do you any good to regret the past. Besides, I didn't want to go either.”

“It doesn't matter. We could have gone and the case would have been solved by now.”

Without any warning, the ground began to shake. The two noticed the commotion, but they didn't have time to react, because in a matter of seconds, everything came to an abrupt halt and, in the middle of the conflict, a male deer fell on the hood of the car. This type of sudden situation is always a cause for concern, and rightly so, but under no circumstances should it be ignored. I will repeat it to confirm that it was clear: A deer, with antlers, hair and hooves like any other, suddenly fell from the sky to collide on the hood of the car where the two detectives were. That caused the two of them to let out a scream from the shock that only a deer falling on your car can cause.

They rushed outside to get a clearer look at what happened. Clearly the deer did not hit head-on and for obvious reasons did not come out of the clouds, but there were no other options to believe. The animal was not moving. It looked dead, but it was still in one piece, so its condition was uncertain.

“What just happened?” Allard asked, too puzzled.

“I have not the faintest idea,” Quickley replied with even greater bewilderment, “but we obviously didn't run it over.”

“And there's no such wildlife in this area either. This seems more like a paranormal situation.”

“Magic, perhaps? Do you think Ledger is nearby?”

“In that case, it would be better for us.”

“What?!” Quickley exclaimed.

“This is how we tie up all the loose ends. We have to take this as a sign.”

“If it's a sign, we have to run away from here. It probably means we're doomed now. What if it's a curse?!?”

“It would have been a little more subtle, don't you think?”

The deer wakes up from its trance, stands up on its four legs and starts making agonizing noises before running off, shattering the car's windshield. Something unusual, no doubt, but there was no time to reflect, because the sanest decision in that situation was to follow it, and that's what they did. The two ran after the animal, without much success because it disappeared in the fog, leaving a sea of questions.

“We have to report this to the authorities,” said Allard without batting an eyelid. Let's take this as another piece of the puzzle.”

“How can you even...?! You know what, I'm out of here,” Quickley argued, completely fed up. “I don't think I can take all this. I don't care if I find the Gospels or not.”

Elena doesn't say anything, she just watches her partner slowly walk away towards the car, but it wasn't necessary to stop him to change his mind, because he barely took a few steps and stayed still.

“Hey, it's okay if you want to retire,” Allard said. “After all, I dragged you in from the beginning. To tell you the truth, I don't even know what I'm trying to solve...”

“Actually,” said Quickley after having a small epiphany, “I do, and I know exactly where to start looking.”

To understand why a deer suddenly materialized, you have to go back a little in time, more precisely, to six o'clock in the morning, when Charlotte was pounding on the library walls out of anxiety and despair.

“Damn it!” she thought as she whipped the wood with her fists. That hurt, but it's quite de-stressing if you want to release pressure. “What will I do next?”, “What are the limits?” and “Is this how I'm going to end?” were the most recurring questions in her mind at the moment. Along with many other thoughts, Charlotte's ideas swam chaotically in the murky, restless ocean waters inside her gray matter.

Apparently, murdering Steven was on Charlotte's to-do list. It may be heartless, cruel and unfair, but the subject did not come up for discussion at any point. The best way to get away with it was to find somewhere a loophole to get out of the contract. All she needed was a small error in the specifications that would allow her to cheat. There was definitely no other way out. In desperation, Charlotte climbed up to the higher shelves where the more complex and far-fetched spells and incantations were located. She had never read anything that wasn't relatively basic as far as the dark arts were concerned. The most complicated thing she could accomplish based on what she read so far would be the *wildlife crowd control* spell, which consisted of being able to manipulate the minds of several animals at once to make them do something specific. Knowing that this could be done by princesses in animated movies, the potential ahead was terrifying.

She picked up one of the five books on the top shelf: *Black Magic for Advanced Practitioners*, a very large tome. Among its pages one could see the lack of drawings, which didn't help the reading. Anyone reading it could swear that there were more words in Latin than in French, but there was no other alternative, or at least it didn't seem to.

It was impressive. Reviving the dead, animating inanimate objects, spectral cloning, flying, telekinesis; it was all in the book. For a moment, Charlotte forgot what she was looking for and got lost among so much forbidden knowledge.

Between words, she found a spell that caught her attention: *Summon demons*. It was almost at the end, which meant it was already in the major leagues, and therefore, it was perfect, so much so that she set a new goal: Summon a demon before Christmas.

Someone knocks on the door, and that triggers Charlotte's instinct to hide the book, but her nerves are calmed when she hears Danny's voice. "*I'm the Phantom of the Opera, and I'm going to gouge your eyes out,*" he says in an attempt to do a creepy voice from behind the wood. Charlotte opens the door and arrogantly tells him:

"Phantom of the opera? Where did you get that from?"

"Steven told me about other ghost plays. I'm not afraid of them anymore."

"Well, you should be. Don't you remember what happened at the abandoned house?"

"I'm sure the angry pirate's gone by now. You should have seen how quiet it was when I went in last time."

"Whatever. What do you want?"

"We're having an early breakfast today. We're having pancakes!"

"What is that?"

"It's like sweet bread but soft!" he said with great enthusiasm. "You have to see it!"

Danny takes her by the hand and leads her down the stairs running until they reach the table, where Steven is serving the plates and cooking the remaining ones. The amulet was not around his neck, but on the table in Charlotte's view, proving that he is now untouchable and can feel safe in his own home.

“How are you doing?” Steven says with an apron over his light blue shirt. “It’s a nutritious breakfast, and I assure you, you won’t be able to resist eating more.”

“Is it sweet?” Charlotte asks suspiciously.

“It is, but there’s not a speck of sugar in it. It’s made with milk, flour, eggs and banana.”

“Banana?” Charlotte asks incredulously.

“If you don’t like it, I can use another fruit, but I’m not sure if it will taste good.”

“Do you have papaya?”

“It’s... a strange suggestion, but yes. I might have some. It will be ready in a few minutes.”

Steven returns to the kitchen to create the most unusual recipe he’s ever prepared. Danny asks, “What’s *papaya*?” to which Charlotte replies with two pats on the back without taking her eyes off the kitchen, because then she was going to run to the library with the amulet in hand to make a desperate move.

With her heart practically in her throat, she set out to look for any advanced spells in that book she found minutes before. *Summoning demons* might be too soon, but if you feel so cornered you’re not thinking straight. She began to read hurriedly, leaving no room for contemplation, because under her perspective, she only had a few minutes and it was only a matter of time before the wizard realized that his amulet is not where he left it.

The procedure was complicated. First of all, she had to draw a pentagram on the floor and place five candles around it. Space was tight, so she had to move the table to at least make the figure identifiable. The chalk, candles and fire were in sight, so it was no problem to organize the materials, but it was a bit complicated to write on that black and purple carpet. With matches she lit the candles, and with limited precision she drew the pentagram, but it was enough to make it work. The book indicated that you need to

concentrate on the type of demon you wanted to summon, its purpose and its time on Earth, so it was essential to be clear about your ideas, which Charlotte was not. She thought: “I want an agent of impeccable reasoning, knowledge in all kinds of agreements and great power, to free me from a curse. I need his stay to last twenty-four hours at the most,” as she closed her eyes and held the book tightly between her two hands. The next step was to read the long Latin stanza that followed the text. A very complicated challenge to do it in a hurry, but she did not stop even for a second to think twice.

Ab inferno invoco te. Servus meus eris, et exspectem te facere quod iubeo, quia merces tua ex eo pendet.

Veni ad me, abyssi creatura, paciscor, et te solum relinquam.

The amulet was rising, glowing and making the ground shake. Charlotte couldn't stand or concentrate on the spell, so she ended up hitting the carpet with her head as she fell. Loose leaves were flying all over the room, many objects were levitating and everything felt very chaotic. Not only inside the library, because Steven, Danny, and much of the town also felt the strange quake.

Seconds later it was over. Charlotte reacted, got up and, seeing that nothing happened, put away all the candles, the book, and tried to erase as much as possible the pentagram to cover what was left with the table. Steven, making sure Danny was okay, noticed that his amulet was not on the table, which could only mean one thing, and it wasn't exactly a good thing. He rushed up the stairs to open the library door to find Charlotte arranging all the messy pages.

“Are you all right?” Steven asked, looking into her eyes with concern.

“I'm sorry,” she replied in a noticeably guilty tone of voice, “I took your amulet without permission because I wanted to cast several simple spells at once before you noticed.”

Even she doesn't know how she could express so much guilt so convincingly, but it is known that the best way to lie is to use part of the truth.

“You scared me,” said Steven with a sigh, “I did something similar when I was just starting out and almost lost my scalp.”

“How did you do that?” asked Danny very surprised.

“Magic, I think,” Charlotte answered him with a dubious expression and a discomfort in her abdomen. “Excuse me, I have to go somewhere.”

Charlotte took off her amulet and hurried out the front door.

“Where are you going?” Steven says as he watches her put on her leather shoes, “Wait, remember that now people know you exist! It's too dangerous for you to go out!”

She ignores him and goes out anyway. She slowly closes the door and starts running towards the street. Her expression showed suffering, her eyes watered as she ran, but none of it made any sense. Nothing made sense. Why did she feel so unstable? What was going on? For some reason, Charlotte thought she would find the answers to those questions in that place where happiness sprouted like daisies in spring, her one true home: the house where she was raised.

The place was not well preserved, mainly because *The Coffin* took it upon itself to destroy it with acts of vandalism. The front door no longer existed; no items inside were in one

piece, and most belongings had been stolen. It was a shack of shattered dreams. Her attic bedroom was no exception; her bed became a pile of springs, cotton and wood; the walls bore offensive graffiti and the wooden floor was now home to used condoms and bottles of alcohol.

Tears wanted to flow from her eyes, they couldn't hold out any longer in captivity, but there was no way she was going to allow it. She wiped her tears, inhaled sharply through her nose and walked down towards what used to be the kitchen. She didn't dare go into her parents' old room; her tears couldn't take it and would leap from her cheeks in a desperate attempt to take their own life.

On her way out, she looked at the front of the house one last time, but when she turned back around she would not be pleasantly surprised.

“Charlie Gaspel; Sarah; *Manifestation of Satan...* You have a curious variety of nicknames, but we prefer to call you: *The Child Fugitive*,” said Detective Allard with relentless and justifiable arrogance as her partner, Detective Quickley, readied the handcuffs.

“Who sent them?” Charlotte asked with the stiffest defensive pose she had ever made in her life.

“Believe me we've been looking for you for weeks,” Quickley said, approaching quietly, “and you have no idea how pleased we are to say: You're under arrest.”

The fires finally crossed. Linking all the leads in the case to a single place of origin culminated in the total resolution of the mystery. Charlotte was helpless, she had no recyclable dumpster to hide in, no suitcase of clothes to escape with, no henchman to help her, no bucket of water next to some power lines. The only way out was to turn herself in.

She was taken to the police station, where the rusty bars restrained her from any escape attempt. She sat on the hard bed and looked at the floor with exorbitant disappointment and anger.

Quickley and Allard were ready to ask her all sorts of questions from across the cell, sitting on plastic chairs with their notebook at hand.

“Tell us your full name, please,” said Quickley, starting the conversation.

“... Charles Gaspel. No middle name,” she replied without complaint and without taking her eyes off the floor in a subdued tone.

“You know why we're arresting you today?”

“For causing panic in a public place?” she said without changing his tone of voice.

“Yes, but we don't know you for that.”

“Where do you know me from then?”

“Not long ago, you were reported missing at a hospital in *Spoirtown*. Do you know when that was?”

Memories come back.

“October 20th. I was a liver cancer patient.”

“Excellent. Thank you for cooperating. Now we need you to answer a few very important questions. Are you ready?”

Charlotte shows no response.

“Where are your parents?” Allard started.

Charlotte still no answer.

“Well... Do you know anyone named Steven Gideon Ledger?”

Nothing.

“What about Annie, a little blonde-haired girl?”

...

“Since you escaped from the hospital, have you been sleeping somewhere?”

“Yes,” she finally answered, “I stayed at your houses. I watched you sleep every night while you thought about me,” she said with a creepy spontaneity as she slowly looked up. “I listened to all your theories at your police station. I went into your subconscious to the point of giving you nightmares.” She began to raise her voice and show a very, very, very, VERY strange smile as she spoke more and more animatedly “I laughed at you for every false step you made, BECAUSE IT WAS SIMPLY COMIC TO SEE YOU DEFEATED IN FRONT OF A NINE-YEAR-OLD GIRL!”

Suddenly, she started laughing like a maniac, or like an infant of that age, which is the same thing. It was the first time she had laughed in too long, and it showed, because she kept laughing for two minutes while happily wiggling her legs and leaning backwards at the same time.

“Are we sure it's the boy we're looking for?” Allard asked with great concern. “He seems to be just having fun with us.”

“That's what he's been doing from the moment he disappeared,” Quickley answered her very determinedly. “Now he can't get away. Charlie!” he said, catching her attention, causing her to cut off her laughter abruptly, “Do you know Officer Greyson?”

Charlotte doesn't say a word, just looks at Quickley seriously and moves her hands in a way that can identify the gesture of squeezing a wet rag while making the sound with her mouth.

“Jesus...” expressed Allard with disgust and fear.

“What about Mincy from the orphanage? Did you have any conflict with her?”

Charlotte slowly brings her hands to her throat and makes the gesture of choking and then makes the gesture of vomiting, and when she finishes she looks seriously at the detective again.

“And... What about...?”

Quickley is interrupted by Charlotte playfully doing the frog onomatopoeia.

“Enough!” exclaimed Allard angrily. “Now I want you to tell us where your parents are.”

Charlotte turns her head vertically and squints her eyes, making it clear that she is either remembering, or she took the question personally.

If only she'd let go of the past...

“Honestly,” she replied in a normal tone, “I have no idea. Maybe they're underground, or maybe at the bottom of the sea. Maybe they are now food for scavenger animals, or maybe their organs are being trafficked, burned, or even eaten. To tell the truth, I don't care, because in my heart they are no longer there.”

“Did they abandon you?” Allard asked a little more sympathetically.

“More like I abandoned them. Because of me they are dead now. Now, because of them, the mafia has to die.”

“Did the mafia kill your parents?”

“They wouldn't have if it wasn't for Steven, that's why he has to die too.”

“Steven? Steven G. Ledger? So you are related to him.”

“It's not that hard to guess. I mean, I disappear after my parents without a trace, a wizard comes to town and disappears just like me after appearing on the radar again. Isn't it obvious?”

“Have you been reading our notes?” Quickley asks, impressed.

“No need, even a civilian with free time and daily newspapers can solve the case in less time.”

“You're... incredibly smart,” Quickley said dumbfounded. “How did you end up like this?”

“I think I told you the whole story. You're detectives, aren't you? Connect the dots.”

Charlotte lies down on the bed and turns her back to them.

“He's definitely our suspect,” Allard said.

“I think he's even clear about his own sexual identity. He always refers to himself as a girl. How high do you think her IQ is?”

“She must have at least an IQ of 180. What were you doing when you were nine years old?”

“I was a year ahead in school, but I could barely do math.”

“My biggest concern at that age was being as tall as possible so I wouldn't get rejected from the popular girls' club.”

“Whatever, since we got Charlie and confirmed that the Gaspels are dead, we can complete the case, right?”

“How's the whole story?”

“Let's see, write it down. Ledger was connected to the mob, and together they killed the Gaspels. Charlie somehow found out and because of that he escaped from the hospital. She took refuge in the orphanage and made friends, Steven showed up and took her away after escaping from the prisoner truck, perhaps with Charlie's help. They both came back here as it is their place of origin, which would explain why there is no record of either of them, but not before killing Greyson because he had Ledger's amulet.”

“Amulet?”

“I'll explain later. For all we know, Ledger may still be in town, and since he's Charlie's partner, it won't be long before he finds her. We can arrest them both if we can get the amulet from him. We return in triumph and get a commendation for our courage and determination.”

The two of them high-five in celebration. The only thing left to do was to use Charlotte as bait, capture Steven and escort them both to *Spoirtown*. For safety's sake, Allard stayed at the station to guard the prisoner while Quickley went out for alcohol to claim victory. If Steven doesn't hurry, it will be the end for our protagonist.



The atmosphere is now calmer. Allard watches the door from the desk as the commissioner and the others have taken the day off, and Charlotte is brooding and staring at the ceiling. Silence abounded, just as much as that night in the hospital. It is no small coincidence, for she begins to experience the same as before: The colors around her become dull and dark, the gravity felt stronger; everything hinted that this was going to be another paranormal situation.

Time felt slower as she got out of bed. She hadn't expected her old acquaintance Pitt, the four-winged demon, to speak to her again, which gave a sign that something very bad was going on. In the gloom, Charlotte stands up and in disbelief looks at him, confirming his presence by stepping out of the darkness.

“You?” said Charlotte in surprise, “What are you doing here? Didn't you say we'd never see each other again?”

“I don't have time for your nonsense,” he replied, slightly annoyed. “I'm here because it turns out that something is wrong with our agreement.”

“So I summoned you with my spell?”

“What? Of course you didn't. You summoned this demon,” he says as he makes the deer that crashed into the detectives' car appear with a snap. “Clearly a beginner's mistake.”

“Is that deer a demon?” she hesitated, frowning.

“What did you think they looked like? Agents of the underworld can take any form, especially animal. This one must be just a wretch pulled out of a cave or something.”

Suddenly, it sends him back to hell with a flame.

“So, what do we have pending?” Charlotte asked.

“It turns out that when you gave me your soul, you didn't give it to me in full.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Haven't you noticed certain contradictions in your behavior? Maybe some human feeling that has escaped you.”

“Now that I think about it..., I was wondering why I still felt alive at times.”

“That's because you didn't give me your soul in its entirety. You said you wanted to keep your conscience, and that cost me dearly. Your soul didn't turn out to be fully

functional, I think because when you kept a piece of it, it grew back into your body somehow.”

“My soul grew back?”

“More or less. Look, I’m just here to reclaim what’s mine, so say goodbye to what’s left of your humanity.”

“Hey! You can’t do that, we made a deal!”

“The deal was for you to give me your soul. Apparently, the conscience is part of it too, so now it’s mine.”

“That’s not fair!”

“...What did you say?”

“I said it’s not fair. The mistake wasn’t mine, and if you’re going to take away what’s left of my soul, at least grant me another favor.”

Pitt was silent for a moment and, frustrated, replied:

“Of all the possible arguments I could have evaded, you decided to use the one about justice. Damn your luck... Well, I’ll grant you another favor.”

“I thought that being fair didn’t matter to you.”

“On the contrary. Our creator, the light bearer: Lucifer, created us for the purpose of exercising his greatest motivation: Justice. From birth he dedicated himself only to that, and beasts like us have no choice but to follow his ideology. You are right, it would not be fair to punish you for a mistake on my part. I will grant you another favor in exchange for your entire soul.”

“I don’t understand. I’ve always interpreted The One Below as someone evil.”

“Morality does not affect deities. He is the one who brings balance to the filthy lives of mortals. Thanks to his benevolence, creatures like us can live with purpose. We can test humans and create order in the disgusting kingdom of heaven.”

“You’re the sensitive kind, aren’t you?”

“Shut up and make your wish.”

“Can I ask for anything?”

“It must be less than the magnitude of taking away a cancer.”

Charlotte started to think. What could be useful to her at that moment that wouldn't be on par with taking or saving someone's life? She needed to take advantage of that situation somehow. Know how to take advantage of a life without a conscience or identity of her own. No. Her identity was the only thing she had left, the only thing she lived for. She had to think outside the box.

“What do you think if instead of doing me a favor, we make an agreement?” she proposed, almost smiling.

“Another arrangement?” he asked in surprise.

“What if instead of giving you my soul, I give you someone else's?”

“No way.”

“What prevents that from being a good offer?”

“First of all, in order for you to give me a soul instead of your own, you have to kill a person taking into account that his fate must already be assured in hell. If I have no guarantee that his soul will not go to heaven, I will not be able to claim it as mine.”

“How secure in hell is the soul of a wizard of the dark arts?” she asks, looking into his four eyes.

“In theory, anyone who wields dark magic will go to the underworld when he dies, but I doubt very much that you will be able to kill someone so powerful.”

“Quite the contrary. In less than twenty-four hours I can do my part.”

“Oh, a twenty-four hour guarantee? Magnificent. That'll be your favor.”

“Wait. You must get me out of this cell first.”

“I get you out of the cell, you'll get two favors, and I won't make that mistake again.”

“Okay, what else can I give you?”

“All right, what else can I give you?”

“Since you bring up the subject of souls, another one would be perfect to seal the deal.”

“Another one? I don't know if I can find another person with their fate assured to hell.”

“In that case, don't worry. You'll only have to collect one, but you'll have to get out of this cage on your own.”

“No, wait a minute. I think I know how to make your day.”

“I'm listening.”

“How about the soul of a whole building full of mobsters?”

“Members of a mob? Of course they are. There must be at least four doomed to eternal suffering. Are you sure you can get all those souls in time?”

“If I can't, you can take mine. Do we have a deal?”

Pitt starts looking for any cracks in that proposition. It's no use, in any scenario, he would end up winning.

“Good. You've convinced me. You have until midnight to kill the sorcerer and at least one other person so you can keep your soul. I'll get you out of the cell and you'll have a few seconds head start before anyone realizes you're gone. Do you agree to the terms?”

“Don't hesitate for a second.”

Distant thunder rang out as the two shook hands for the second time, and in doing so, Charlotte confirmed the most ruthless and cruel action she had ever done, considering that several hours earlier she electrocuted ten partially innocent people in cold blood.



In the blink of an eye, Pitt disappears, making time stand still in Charlotte's eyes. She could feel it. The chair where Detective Allard was leaning froze as did she. The cell door was no longer locked, and with a simple push, Charlotte was able to open it and escape effectively. As soon as she was out of the police station, time returned to normal. Her reprieve was over; now, every second counted, because her fate would be sealed in just over twelve hours.

When you're at the top of the wheel of fortune, you're the most powerful and vulnerable person at the fair.

XXV

I KNOW YOUR WORKS

Steven Gideon Ledger looks at his red phone on the wall. Sitting in his armchair, he shuffles his foot nervously with his legs crossed wondering why Charlotte still hasn't shown up. Danny is chewing on a pencil he was supposed to draw with, but the eraser on the end is already in his stomach from stress. From inside they hear the sound of rain crashing against the roof, but it is interrupted by the sounds of knocking emanating from the door, and they both know that worry can be postponed.

Steven opens the door cautiously and sees her, soaking wet and with a crack of thunder behind her announcing her arrival.

“Are you all right? What did you do?” Steven asks uneasily.

Charlotte looks at him with the coldest face she has ever made in her entire existence.

“I went for a walk,” she said as she walked into the kitchen. “I feel better now, but I need you to answer me two things.”

“Tell me.”

“Do you have any ink for painting fabric?” Charlotte asked as she opened drawers in the kitchen.

“The question offends,” he replied haughtily. “What color do you need?”

“Red. I want to change the color of my sweater. Orange is too bright and childish.”

“In the cupboard there is a metal box with all kinds of things I use for clothes. Do you want me to show you?”

“No need,” she told him, climbing up on a bench, taking the little bottles, “I used to dye old clothes to sell them as new when my parents needed money. Ah, yes. The next question is: Have you ever made one of those magic contracts before?” she asked without stopping what she was doing.

“Oh!” exclaimed Steven, as he remembered something. “I’m glad you asked. Magical, unbreakable contracts have always appealed to me. I made one for a girl one day to see if it worked. The contract said that if she didn’t sleep with me that night the skin on her hands would peel off like rotten fruit. In the end I was able to prove that it did work, because I stayed at the bar all night watching her until she was taken to the hospital. But that’s not the important thing. The important thing is that I made *The Coffin* sign a contract too.”

“What?!” Charlotte reacted, completely intrigued.

“The idea was that I would have full security from him in exchange for my services. I know you don’t need a contract for that, but I wanted to make sure I wouldn’t get stabbed in the back.”

“Is that all?” she asked impatiently.

“No. If you're thinking of taking them down, I should warn you that the boss, Mr. Clement, asked me to make him completely immune to black magic.”

“And that can't be reversed?”

“No. And I was lucky to fulfill that whim, because I had to give him another amulet that I had for some time that acted as a shield against the attacks of the dark arts. It was a gift from a friend in Germany who was also in that world.”

“What kind of amulet is it?”

“It's like a metal brooch in the shape of an armadillo. Don't even try to take it off. As perfectionist as he is, I think he put it inside his skin.”

“Does it have any other advantages?”

“He also demanded that I summon a demon to make a deal with him, but he wouldn't let me know what he asked for.”

“Did you summon a demon?” she asked in surprise.

“Yes. I've been working on that spell for years. It is by far the most powerful. You know, any creation of satan is capable of fulfilling any material wish to anyone on the condition that they surrender to them. Without souls, demons cannot live. It is like their food.”

“Did you make a deal with one of them?”

“Yes, I traded my soul for this amulet,” he says as he points to it around his neck. “I mean, I didn't sell it right away as in your case, but I secured it in hell so that when I die, that demon can have it in his possession. But that's enough of demons. Danny, Charlotte; I'm going to show you something.”

Steven takes them to the library, where he is going to explain his plan for his next spell and opens a locked desk drawer containing a large number of jars with various substances: powders, minerals, animal parts, acidic liquids, among others.

“This is my life's work.”

“Do you collect rocks?” asks Danny.

“No. All these things are ingredients for a recipe: the recipe of resurrection.”

“So these are all the materials for the potion?” Charlotte asks.

“Yes. All that's missing is the sugar, and we can resurrect anyone.”

“My parents, right?” Charlotte asks, looking Steven in the eyes.

“Yes... Your parents,” Steven replied uncertainly. “Well, are you up for pouring all this into the cauldron?” he asked enthusiastically.

“Yes!” Danny obviously exclaimed.

“I'd better go downstairs to dye my sweater,” Charlotte argued.

“Don't you want to join us in this precious moment?” implored Steven making dog eyes.

“No. Go on without me, I'm going to make coffee.”

Charlotte went downstairs. She knew that the idea of making coffee was perfect to execute her murder plan, she just needed something to poison his cup. That's when she remembered the contract she signed. How was she supposed to kill him if any attempt she made would doom her forever?

Quickly, she looked around her surroundings, thinking of so many things that it was hard to come up with a resolution. But miraculously, as she saw the fish tank in the living room, the best idea she could ever come up with took hold of her mind like a European conqueror in virgin lands. The poison lay before her eyes, and the plan was beginning to take shape.

She went to the kitchen to look for the coffee beans. In the drawers she found many messy things, such as spoons, cleaning utensils, scissors, syringes, containers, pencils,

grains of all kinds, nuts and candles, but only one of those tools was enough to complete what she had in mind.

She took out the coffee, prepared the pot, added water, pressure and a surprise ingredient... But for that she was going to need Danny. After a good while making the mixture, she calmly went up to where he was and asked him to help her as an assistant. He accepted, as the job was quick, and in fact, very easy.

“Take this syringe, I want you to inject what is in it into this milk carton,” she said as she handed him the syringe with a transparent liquid.”

“Wait a minute... Why, what's in it, and why don't you do it?”

“It's okay; what's in that syringe is water; I've tried the milk and I noticed that it lacked that ingredient, that's why you need to add it, and an injection would be more effective; and I don't want to do it myself because I'm afraid of needles.”

“Oh, yes. That's true. I was afraid of needles too,” he said while injecting the liquid, “but I got over it after accepting that blood is not so bad.”

“Well,” she said, watching the syringe empty, “you can go back now. You helped me a lot with the cleaning, tell that to Steven when you go upstairs.”

Danny ran back, completely unaware of the consequences of his actions to help Steven with his other plan.

After an hour and seven minutes, they both finished putting all the ingredients into the cauldron. It didn't look like in the witch movies, but like a pot full of garbage and liquids mixed with a lot of water. Like a very bad smelling soup. They didn't light the fire or cast any spells yet, so there was no effect at the moment, because the idea was to have everything ready for when they get the sugar. They put a

metal lid on the cauldron and consider the job semi-completed.

The two go downstairs to receive their victory coffee. Charlotte is patiently waiting for them at the table.

“We're about to finish,” announces Steven. “Tonight we're going to make fun of death.”

“That was fun!” Danny added. “We followed the recipe to the letter and managed to create a magic soup!”

“How's your sweater coming?” asked Steven, seeing her wearing only her white shirt.

“It's turning color,” she replied calmly. “In half an hour it will be completely crimson.”

“Nice color,” added Steven. “Is that the coffee you made?”

“That's right. I made it with a special ingredient. I'm sure you'll notice it's different.”

“Really?” Steven said excitedly, “I'm so ready. What's that ingredient?”

“It's a secret.”

“Well, it's time to find out.”

Steven poured two cups. Whatever it contained, he was going to share it with its creator.

“I want to try it too,” said Danny.

“You're still too little, Dannyel,” Steven replied.

“But Charlotte can drink. Why can't I?”

“Because it would be a shame for her not to try her own elixir, wouldn't it?” he said, looking her in the eyes.

“That's right, Danny,” Charlotte added, sharing eye contact. “I've had coffee before. It would taste awful to you.”

“Whatever!” Danny replied. “I'm going to make my own elixir and I'm not giving it to anyone!” he said as he ran to

the kitchen to pour water into a glass and pour whatever he could find into it.

The two are left alone at the table, sharing glances and a cup of what might be their last drink. Steven looks at her, suggesting she take the first sip. She doesn't look away and drinks with total arrogance. After the sip, she lets out a cool exhale, as if she is unaware that what she had just taken was a hot drink. Steven looks convinced. He brings his lips to the cup and the liquid begins to run down his throat. The atmosphere was too tense, almost like the inside of a submarine in the depths of the Mariana Trench.

Suddenly he reacts to the taste. It was considerably pleasant.

“It tastes strange. What did you put in it?” he asked curiously.

“Cinnamon.”

“Cinnamon? Damn!” He exclaimed. “That explains how strangely bitter it is.”

In an attempt to soften the flavor, Steven reached into the refrigerator for the carton of milk to add to the mix...

“The best ingredient for coffee is milk, without a doubt,” said the wizard in his ignorance. “You have some too,” he said as he poured milk into his cup.

After drinking the mixture again, Steven noticed an even stranger taste.

“Wow,” he said in disgust. “I remembered cinnamon with milk tasting better.”

“Yeah. Sometimes it's tricky,” Charlotte argued as she took her cup to the dishwasher to pour the liquid down the drain.

“Hey, have you come up with anything yet to destroy *The Coffin*?”

“I’m on it. You say you’ve been in the boss’s office before?”

“Yes, several times. It’s amazing the amount of tea he has stored in his display cases. I’m sure he’s got tons of sugar somewhere.”

“And how are you supposed to get it?”

“Maybe someday they’ll forgive me for what I did.”

“That’s your hope?”

“Plan B was to have you look for it yourself, but that would be too risky.”

“You know, it’s not such a crazy idea. After I burn down the building I can get some sugar back.”

“Of course.” He laughs sympathetically. “When the clouds get lighter we’ll go look for sugar somewhere else.”

It’s getting close to noon and it would be a shame not to take advantage of those moments of shelter in the rain.



At the police station, Allard still doesn’t notice the slightest change until Quickley arrives with a bag of sweet breads. Along with him were the commissioner and the other local officers, eating the aforementioned sweet breads.

“How’d it go with the detainee?” Quickley asked, taking out some of the bread to share with his partner.

“She hasn’t made a sound,” Allard replied. “I think she’s asleep.”

“Let me see the famous *manifestation of Satan* they talk so much about,” said Sheriff Tom Vane.

Tom approaches the cell to take a look, but as we know, he found no one.

“I knew you were lying,” he said, looking at the detectives haughtily.

“Why?” Quickley asked as he went over to check.

His blood ran cold as he contemplated Charlotte's absence. In his chilling ignorance, he asked his partner:

“Allard, did you let the prisoner out of the cell?”

“No. Everything was closed except my eyes. Why?”

“Come here, please,” he said almost stuttering.

The detective manages to be in the same state of shock as her partner, and in a moment of desperation, opens the door to make sure every corner was empty, which was unnecessary considering the cage was tiny.

Allard screams in terror, making it clear that she has no hope left. Quickley tries to calm her down by grabbing her shoulders and shaking her to reason.

“React, Elena!” he exclaimed just as frightened. Maybe Ledger has released her without you realizing it. In that case, we have to ask for his location. It's not that complicated. Besides, we have the information we need to return home with evidence.”

“Of course not!” she exclaimed, holding Quickley in the same manner. “I'm not leaving here until I see those two behind bars.”

“Allard, this is bigger than us. Let's drop this case and go somewhere else. We can get out of this alive.”

“Not a chance. I was born for this moment. If you're afraid of death you can walk away, but I'm not giving up until I win.”

“Hey, hey, hey, hey,” said the sheriff, trying to calm the waters. “You’re looking for Ledger, aren’t you? The wizard? I know where he lives.”

“You do?” Allard asked with a twinkle in his eye.

“Of course, but if you get close you’ll be right on *The Coffin’s* radar.”

“The what?” Quickley asked.

“It’s the village bank. They get paid every month for protection and they borrow money from us.”

“*The Coffin* sounds pretty funereal for a bank,” Allard argued. “It’s probably the mafia I’ve been warned so much about.”

“If we go down that road, I’m sorry to say I won’t be backing you this time,” Quickley told her.

“Will you give up again?”

“Knowing when to retreat is not giving up. We’ve already solved the riddle. We already have evidence and witnesses. The way I see it, the case is solved. If we get backup...”

“If we get backup, the suspects are going to get away again and this time we won’t find them!”

“It’s a risk I’d rather take. Looking at it coldly, it’s the perfect time for us to go back and put all this behind us.”

Elena looks away. She thinks for a moment what she is going to say before making the decision that will determine her life or death.

“I can’t go back,” she said in a calmer voice.

“Of course you can,” Quickley replied.

“No. I can’t. If I go back, I’ll never forgive myself. Take all the documents with you. I’m going to put those damn witches away.”

“Elena, you’re not thinking clearly,” Quickley said, trying to talk her out of doing something crazy as he watched her put on her coat to leave.”

“On the contrary, Leonard. I've never been more sure of where I want to be.”

In a flash, Detective Elena Allard reaches over to Detective Leonard Quickley to hold his head gently and kiss him on the lips in a sudden way.

The other police officers at that moment made a howling sound in unison, but for Leonard, the whole outside world disappeared. After the kiss, every perception he had of reality changed completely. His mind for the first time went blank and he couldn't have been more confused.

“I don't want to convince you to do something you don't want to do,” Elena said warmly to Quickley. “Go, remove the evidence of all this and do what you think is right. I'll be back. I promise.”

She then left the station with the sheriff, prepared to give her best effort or die trying.

What is Quickley supposed to do in that situation? What would a romantic movie star do in his place? Forget it. He's not going to show up later in the story to save Elena from some compromising situation. Actually, he drove back to *Spoirtown* in his car, just like he said.

The rain continued, and it didn't look like it was going to let up anytime soon.

Danny was trying to drink his handmade coffee, but even his teeth wouldn't let him.

The clock was ticking.

Charlotte sees Steven somewhat restlessly reading in the library while he was wagging his tongue strangely, so she decides to open a conversation.

“Who is the spell for?” Charlotte asked.

“Huh?” he answered distractedly.

“Who are you really going to revive?”

“Your parents. I already told you.”

“Don't lie. You said this was your life's work. You haven't known my parents that long.”

“You got me,” he admitted with open arms. “I told you that to get you on my side. But while we're on the subject, let me tell you a story.”

Charlotte looks at the clock and agrees, holding back slight enthusiasm.

“When I was young, I was a little smart-ass, almost like you. And even though I didn't go to school, I knew a lot about life, because where I grew up there was a lot of social class distinction. My father always beat me like a pack donkey and always made me pick up all the adult magazines he threw on the floor. It was terrible, because I could never have a mother to regulate his behaviors, at least not since my sister was born. After I had her, my mother died of blood loss. She was always very ill, and when she died all the blame fell on my sister. Dad hated her, he never let her out of her room even to eat. I had to feed her secretly, because to my father she was just a pet. A few years later, the two of us ran away from home, facing fate and its cruelties. I got a job at the age of fourteen as a waiter in a restaurant where I'm sure they used rat meat for their hamburgers. I was not strong; on the contrary, I was very, very weak for my age, so I couldn't do forced labor because I ran out of air, but it was all worth it in the end, because with the money I got I was able to buy books and a uniform for my sister to attend school so she could have a future. Unfortunately, that hurt her forever. Whenever she spoke she was always ridiculed by everyone because she couldn't read. Wasn't that what school was

supposed to be for? She always failed and her classmates abused her for always being too weak in front of everyone. If only I had taught her to confront her father earlier everything would have been different... But it was too late. She always cried. She cried a lot. It was normal at her age, you know? Why wouldn't she cry? That didn't apply with the teachers, because they always punished her for interrupting the class with her crying. I tried to defend her when I could, but those damn kids were stronger than me. The embarrassment I was going through was unforgivable. A fourteen year old being beaten by ten year olds. I was too useless for her, but she always flashed a smile when she was around me. One day..." Steven pauses to squirm in pain, as his stomach began to burn, but he continued, "One day the kids went too far. Their abuse never went that far. Apparently, burying her little face in the ground, throwing her poor body into a well, and pulling hairs from her head wasn't enough for them. One day, they decided to throw her down a steep hill to watch her roll across the grass. It seemed like innocent child's play, but the laughter stopped when a rock stopped her fall by hitting her in the forehead."

Steven closes his eyes in pain. It was partly emotional pain, but also physical pain. He felt his muscles tighten.

"She died," he continued without complaining, "She died because of those bastards. What could I do? Who do I complain to? No one was there for me. No one except a strange peddler who did magic tricks to entertain. On one occasion I found him alone on a bench and decided to tell him what had happened. By that point I had already stolen countless purses and rarely succeeded in my escapes from the police. He taught me something very valuable, he taught me how to use weapons; not firearms, but weapons of intellect. He took a handkerchief out of his pocket and out of it came a frog with goat's teeth. He told me that if I met those

children again, to throw that animal in their faces and wait for it to devour their bones. It was the kindest and most loving gesture I have ever experienced in my life. It was not in vain. Even though it had been almost a year, I decided to do it; I decided to do justice and put an end to those bastards and everyone in that bloody classroom. I locked them up with that animal from hell and it increased in size to chew up all those present. From that day on I kept running away, but it felt so good that I wanted more. Several years later, I found a way to bring my little sister back. I dedicated the rest of my life to finding what I needed to create this spell, hoping that someday I would get to see her again. Today is that day. With you here, my sister will have the best friends she's ever had, and everything will be perfect," he says with a sweet smile on her face.

Charlotte looks at him without making any expression after he has told her the story of his life.

"What was his name?" she asked approaching him.

Steven squirms again unable to answer her, in such agony that he falls to the floor.

"I think the cinnamon didn't agree with me," he says with difficulty. "Will you bring me the green bottle on the chest of drawers over there, please?"

"Sure."

She calmly goes to the place where Steven pointed out and opens the drawer previously indicated where there were several bottles with liquids of different colors.

"What kind of green?"

"Lime," he answers with difficulty, "lime green."

Charlotte takes it in her left hand and proceeds to show it to him. He confirms it is the right one with a nod of his head. She looks at the bottle cautiously and throws it to the side, smashing it against the wall.

“What are you doing?” Steven shouted, “That was going to cure me!”

“That’s the point,” she said, slowly approaching.

“What?” What the hell did you put in the coffee?!

“I didn’t put anything in it. Cinnamon, maybe, but other than that, it was perfectly normal coffee.”

“If I die, you die, don’t you remember?”

“Wrong. You stipulated in your contract that I would die if I murdered you directly and willingly. You knew that poisoning coffee counts as attempted murder, so I made you focus on that while you were drinking it. When you let your guard down, on your own you decided to drink the milk that was in the refrigerator.”

“You poisoned the milk?! How?”

“Remember your precious puffer fish? Surely you didn’t notice it was missing from the fish tank.”

“*Conquete*? What did you do with him?!”

“There are many books on marine biology in the town library, and from a brief reading I learned that those pufferfish have a poison inside their body capable of killing someone in a matter of hours, or in your case, a few minutes. I did not at any time suggest that you drink that milk; moreover, I did not even inject the poison into the box, I just left it in the refrigerator. In any case, the only one responsible for your murder is no one else but you, and also your dear *Dannyel*.”

Steven let out a small laugh, closing his eyes, accepting his defeat.

“You managed to beat the system,” he said with difficulty. “I guess that's how it ends... You weren't able to forgive me, were you?”

“I know what you've done in the past. It doesn't matter what you do for me afterwards. The only payment there is for people like you is death. It's been a pleasure living under your roof,” she said as she took the amulet from his neck to put it on, “but your story ends here.”

Steven laughs quietly. Charlotte thought he was doing it out of fear of death, but in reality, he was just proud of his apprentice.

“One more thing, Steven,” she added as she bent down, showing superiority to her future ex-tutor. “Some time ago you told me in a jovial tone of voice that my future was going to be difficult, but in the end I would enjoy a great fortune. I must admit, maybe you were right after all. I have everything I want in the palm of my hand.”

“Don't trust yourself, Charlie... Sooner or later you will become me. If you do, please... take good care of Danny.”

Charlotte looks directly into his dying eyes and decides to ask him one last question to say goodbye.

“What was your sister's name?”

Steven, with his last breath, shows a small laugh and answers her:

“... *Deffi*... Her name was *Deffi*... She was a wonderful girl.”

Those were his last words.

His eyes closed and his soul went straight to hell.

Charlotte stood up and took one last look at her warm body lying on the dark carpet. “The student surpassed the master,” some will say. I won't say it; instead, I'm going to say that Danny is not going to react very well to the events presented.

The library door closes. Now, Charlotte must hide what she just did from him for the rest of her life, which won't be difficult, because she doesn't usually talk much.

She comes downstairs to see Danny watching the now three fish. He seems to enjoy it.

“Hey,” said Danny, “is your sweater ready yet?”

“Maybe,” she answered without looking at him, “I'm going to check.”

She left the amulet on the table to avoid staining it, and indeed, the sweater was ready to be taken out to dry.

With a wooden spoon, she stirred the garment in the water to give it the final touch. Then he took it out to hang it on a hanger.

“It is very red,” Danny added as he looked at it.

“Yeah. It's going to get darker eventually.”

“What did you say the color was called?”

“Crimson. It's like red, but darker.”

“Is that your favorite color?”

“You can say yes. I'm starting to like it.”

They both look at the sweater in silence for a while.

“I'm going to tell Steven,” said Danny, and quickly went up the stairs.

Charlotte tried to stop him, but he was much faster than her.

When she reached the library, he was already paralyzed. The color of his body on the floor was not normal. His brain assimilated fast what was happening, but he couldn't accept it. So much death around him finally comes to affect him directly. His eyes are not quite open, his position is neutral, his mouth closed with its corners drooping, and his frown is sadly furrowed. It's as if he somehow knew that something like this would happen sooner or later.

“What did he do to you?” Danny asked in a muted voice.

“He had a heart attack and collapsed on the floor.”

“I'm not stupid, Charlotte. I know you killed him. You were here with him and you came down with his amulet.”

“It's something I should have done before.”

“He didn't do anything wrong. He was the father I never had. Why did you do it?”

“Because he killed the father I did have.”

“And your solution was to kill the father you have?”

“... He and I have history from before. What matters now is that we're back to being you and me against the world. Now help me get him out of here.”

Danny didn't answer. He just watched as Charlotte set about trying to unscrupulously lift the body of his late friend.

“Come on, Danny. Help me with the head,” she told him as she held his legs.

He didn't pay any attention. He walked downstairs to seek solace in the fish tank that once overflowed with wonder, but now showed only sorrow and sadness. Charlotte

understood his condition, so she concentrated on pushing the corpse towards the stairs.

A while later, the body managed to tumble down the steps to the floor below, where Danny was looking for something to eat in the refrigerator.

“Don't drink the milk,” she told him as she saw him rummaging through the liquids.

He didn't say anything back. He didn't want to drink, just eat. He wanted to drown his thoughts with solids.

“Danny,” Charlotte insisted, trying to encourage him, “did you know that a dead body weighs more than a living body?”

He wouldn't turn to look. That wasn't a big problem for Charlotte, so she continued to push the body with difficulty until she reached the back garden where she was going to cremate it later.

Danny was sitting in a fetal position on a seat while Charlotte looked for his amulet on the table.

It was gone.

“Danny,” said Charlotte in a raised tone, “where is my amulet?”

He still didn't answer.

“Where did you put it? I left it right there. What did you do with it?” she asked more angrily.

“I don't know...” he answered, looking at his knees.

“Don't bother, I can feel where it is.”

She closed her eyes and concentrated on feeling his presence. It was not far away; however, she wished she had never known its location.

It was located in Danny's stomach.

He, out of stress, put the pointed amulet in his mouth and swallowed it. Maybe he didn't know it, but he had made the biggest mistake of his existence.

“Did you eat it?!” exclaimed Charlotte in exultation.

“Aaah!” shouted Danny, getting up from his seat to run to his room.

“Where are you going?! You must get it out right now!”

He locked the door. She screamed in rage from the other side.

Everything was going so well! What is she supposed to do now to get it back? She can't summon a demon to ask for another one; with her little experience and outstanding debts she couldn't even if she wanted to. The time lapse ends in twelve hours, and Danny's body probably won't expel the amulet until at least tomorrow. Either way, there would not be enough time left to complete her plan. In a few seconds it was all messed up and there was nothing that could be done about it.

Unless...

Charlotte refused to think about that option, but the more she thought about it, the fewer options appeared.

It was time. If Danny didn't eject the amulet, Charlotte would have to take it on her own. And that was what she was going to do.

She headed to the kitchen for an unobtrusive knife, something sharp that could cut meat; she walked almost

trembling to the upstairs bedroom, knocked on the door and was polite.

“Hey, it's okay. Come on out of there. Let's talk,” she said in a calm voice.

“No,” he replied with teary eyes. You're going to be mad.

“I'm not mad. I just want to apologize for everything I've done.”

“Really?”

“Yes. I've been a horrible friend. I didn't help you at any point and I didn't even thank you properly when you saved my life. Forgive me, please.”

“I'll let you in if you promise not to kill anyone else.

“I... I promise.”

“You don't mean it.”

“I'll tell you what. If I kill one more person, you can stop talking to me forever.”

Danny thought about it for a moment.

Unfortunately, his heart of gold allowed him to forgive her and open the door for her. She saw him with an expression of remarkable regret, so he didn't hesitate twice before letting her in. She approached him and with difficulty hugged him. It was a beautiful moment, the last moment Danny would ever witness. Both of their eyes released tears as he held Charlotte tightly.

It was too late to pull back. She pulled out the knife she carried hidden behind her skirt and slit his throat hurriedly. Danny began to moan in pain as he tried to stop his blood flow to no avail. Charlotte had no choice but to watch his face of fright and disappointment with which he bled to death.

He fell to the ground on his back, with the absence of any kind of hope. Charlotte, her shirt and face covered in

blood, leaned her head back, closing her eyes and breathing deeply. She murdered the life that had been offered to her in order not to pay the consequences of her evil deeds.

The remorse was too much. There was no one on his side anymore, so she decided to write one last entry in her notebook.

Dear Steven, I find it hard to admit I was wrong about your prediction, but I must break a lance in your favor. Yes you are many things: a liar, a freeloader, a greedy lout, a mediocre wizard, a good brother and an admirable father figure, but you are certainly not a prophet.



She may have gotten things out of hand, but Charlotte was right about one thing:

Dead bodies do weigh heavier than living ones, not in the literal way, but under the perspective of those who are in charge of transporting them. It is believed that this is because once unconscious, there is no will present to facilitate their transport. There is also the belief that a dead body weighs 21 grams less. Some think it is because of the loss of fluids and gases, but others think it is because they no longer have a soul.

XXVI

BUST YOUR KNEECAPS

The end of the road is near. The sweater had dried completely. The rain finally stopped and Charlotte was looking in the mirror at her new crimson appearance.

Moments before, her hands were digging through Danny's guts for a metal triangle on a string. She narrowed his eyes for reassurance that he wasn't watching her stoop so low. It was very unsettling, but it felt better to mess with his insides like this.

The gloves she wore were too big on her and that made it difficult to touch, but she managed to find her amulet. The string it was connected to had not been disintegrated by the stomach acid, which was good news, but all the same, everything needed to be thoroughly disinfected.

She laid her ex-friend's body on top of her ex-guardian's in the back garden to wrap them in a very red fire to turn them to ashes. She sat contemplating the bonfire,

thinking about what she would do after she accomplished her task, but the future only looked dark.

Fortunately, she wouldn't be alone at that moment, because the door was ringing again, and they were not pleasant visitors. They are never pleasant visitors. Allard and Vane arrived and secured all the exits through the front of the house, ready to break down the door if necessary. Charlotte went to the window to see who they were, and didn't panic when she found out; on the contrary, she went to the door to listen to them talk.

“Don't you think he will kill us as soon as he opens the door?” Allard asked.

“Nah,” Vane answered without concern, “he's not like that. He only kills snitches and those who bother him, and he doesn't even need to open the door to do it.”

“Well, he doesn't answer. It needs to be taken down.”

“Calm down. He'll see us. It's not so bad when you know him.”

“I know you've lived here and have the experience, but I'm an honors graduate officer, and in *Spoirtown* we deal with situations like this all the time. If the suspect doesn't respond in thirty seconds, we must force entry before he escapes.”

“Look, just give me one more minute, okay? I don't want to get in trouble with him.”

There's another knock on the door, making it clear it's the police. Charlotte continues to listen.

“He shows no sign of him being home. We should investigate the property,” Allard says.

“Okay. Step back, miss,” he warns as he prepares to kick in the door.

A dozen kicks were enough to break the lock. When they entered, all the lights were off, but they clearly saw all the blood scattered on the floor and stairs. The trail led to the back, where the garden was. Following the marks, little by little they discovered the origin of the strange smoke that could be seen from the other block.

There was not much left on the earth and mud, only two skeletons almost turned into ashes.

“Damn,” said Allard with disgust.

“It smells awful. Do you think it's some kind of sexual fetish?”

“Of all the theories I could have come up with, that was the least relevant,” she said, somewhat annoyed, approaching the remains. “It's still smoking and you can feel the heat. Ledger can't be far away.”

“Hey, there's a girl here.”

Before Allard could react, Commissioner Tom Vane's head was blown into several pieces. The detective could barely process the event, because she had to turn around to locate Charlotte and point her gun at her before she became the next victim.

She could sight her, but not for long, because all she could see were the girl's lips uttering, “Sleep.”

Allard had been knocked unconscious for a long time by a sleep spell. She opened her eyes some time later to realize that she was in the guest room tied to the bed, seeing two wooden rods positioned on either side of her head holding a metal jug above her.

Charlotte watched as she tried in vain to free herself as soon as she woke up and said to her:

“Surely you know why it is useless to try to escape.”

“What is this, a guillotine?” Allard asked, almost shouting.

“If I wanted to kill you, I would have done it like I did your other partner.”

“So what are you going to do with me?”

“I can't make you suddenly disappear. There are people who bear witness to your existence in *Spoirtown*. You must come back.”

“I won't go back while you're still free,” she said determinedly.

“You're stubborn. Even in a disadvantaged position, you can't give up.”

“Where's Ledger?”

“You've seen his ashes. I'm the only one left, and I doubt they'll let you bring a girl to a prison. If you take me to *Spoirtown*, I'd have no choice but to kill civilians there to escape and make your quest more complicated. Do you want all that guilt on your shoulders?”

“If I can't put you behind bars, I'll have to kill you.”

“And how do you justify your expedition to this remote place? You bring no suspects, no new evidence, and besides, several deaths are discovered just as you come. It's not very smart to insist. Besides, I doubt you can kill me in your present state.”

“You damn monster!” She shouted in irritation, “Let me out to smash your face in!”

“If you do, you'll be charged with child abuse too. I am untouchable.”

Allard began to think, snorting with despair, for it was all she had left.

“Maybe, but so am I,” Elena replied a little more controlled. “You can't kill me either because my partner would send backups.”

“Really? And where is he now?”

“Waiting to come to my rescue.”

“And how much longer is he going to wait? It's been forty minutes and he still hasn't shown up.”

“He's taking his time.”

“Is he afraid? He didn't come with you. I can even assume that he abandoned you.”

“It's not true. He'll change his mind at any moment.”

“Change his mind? Then he did leave you.”

“He didn't!”

“So you're alone. Poor you.”

“What do you want from me?!”

“I'm going to offer you something very difficult to refuse: I'll let you live if you decide to go back and declare that you didn't see anything. You'll completely forget about everything related to my family or magic and go on with your life.”

“Do you think I'm that easy to convince?”

“At least I tried. Like you said, I can't kill you, so I'm going to subject you to a classic Chinese torture until you change your mind.”

“Torture? I remind you that I can't show up at the police station with visible wounds on my body.”

“Don't worry about that,” she said as she picked up the metal jug on top of the two rods.

Next to the bed was another larger jug containing cold water with ice. She filled the metal jug with that water and put it back on top of the two rods.

“What are you doing?” Allard asked, somewhat confused.

“This metal container I put on top of you has a very small leak at the bottom that causes any liquid inside it to slowly trickle out in small drops every so often. The torture is about getting that little drop of cold water on your forehead every four seconds. After a long time has passed, the small impact on your head will stop being a small annoyance and

become intolerable. The constant wet touches will not let you sleep and will make you endlessly thirsty. The cold and helplessness will drive you crazy in less than a day. Of course, we can skip all that if you decide to keep your mouth shut.”

“And how do you know I won't die first?”

“I'll make sure to feed and hydrate you as much as necessary with a serum I stole from the hospital. I know very well how they work, don't worry.”

“Why do you care so much about not getting caught if you can escape so easily?”

“There are two reasons: One is that I need someone to be a guinea pig in case something happens.”

“What's the second one?”

“I can't tell you. Anyway, I'm running late. I've got things to do. It's your last chance. Misery or silence?”

“Misery,” she said, determined. “All my life I'll choose misery.”

“As you wish.”

Charlotte cast a spell to paralyze the detective's muscles to ensure she couldn't move her head. Droplets of cold water fell directly between eyebrow and eyebrow without ceasing. She could do nothing but blink and expel noises from her throat. Charlotte left the room, locking the door behind her.

Unfortunately, she was right; Quickley was back in *Spoirtown*, and questioning her decision every minute he was on the road.

At the dining room table, Charlotte began to formulate her plan to kill *The Coffin*, which wasn't exactly safe. The amulet had already been in the building, and that would allow her to teleport to the boss's office without much trouble, but finishing him off isn't enough. She must burn everything, from the second floor down to the last stolen art painting. Ideally, she would start from the floor, placing a

fire generator at the door, but she would have to wait until it was dark. She had plenty of time, and she was going to make the most of it by covering any holes her operation might have.

It would be a somewhat boring process, so we'd better see the other side of the coin in the meantime.

At the mafia establishment, they were preparing drug and sugar shipments for export. Mr. Clement supervised his subordinates with his hands behind his back, walking around the factory replacement, which was one of the recreation rooms. Suddenly, an annoyed subordinate appeared.

"My dearest boss," exclaimed the sturdy subordinate walking in his direction, "do you have the slightest idea what you're doing?"

"What do you want, Jon?" Mr. Clement replied calmly.

"What do I want? I want a little respect for the *sacred billiards*."

"*Sacred billiards*, you say?"

"This place, my lord," he said insolently. "Ever since you installed these metal tables and fouled it with these drugs, this place has been obsolete. It's our favorite resting place, boss. We all come here every Tuesday and Thursday to drink, chat, watch TV and above all, play pool. That pool table they moved into the laundry room is our heritage. You can't take this away from us just because they disrupted the drug business! They're polluting us!"

"Listen, Jon," Mr. Clement said patiently. "We can't risk going back to the factory. Not only because it's still inoperable, but because the cops came in from outside and we could lose everything we have! If you want to play pool, do it in the laundry room with the rest of the laundry."

"You never listen to us," Jon replied, "You never listen to us about anything! I have been one of your most loyal subjects and advisors, but this is as far as my limit went. My

only escape was this place and you ruined it again. You know what? I'm not going to put up with any more of your lousy decisions," he said as he pulled out his gun ready to shoot him.

It was too fast. No one had time to stop Jon. The bullet came out of the gun and went through Mr. Clement's head.

Everyone stopped what they were doing to see the boss fall to the floor after the shot. Jon let out a smile of victory as the others were perplexed, but it didn't last long, because as soon as he turned to leave, he felt Mr. Clement's body rise up. He thought it was just a feeling of insecurity, but it ceased to be when he felt a hand touch his shoulder. He slowly turned around and sure enough, he had not died. Mr. Clement's forehead had no wound, as if the gunshot had disappeared. And Jon, unfortunately, was in the same room as his resurrected boss.

"I feel sorry for you," Mr. Clement said intimidatingly, "that you decided to die this way."

"H-how did you do it?" Jon stammered, his blood running cold.

"I'll explain later."

Mr. Clement then punched his subordinate hard in the stomach, then in the face, and finally in the neck, breaking his larynx and leaving him breathless. He fell to the ground with the pressure of his boss's foot on his throat. He died slowly.

Clement was not at all upset and continued to supervise, forcing the others to continue working with the assurance that his boss is now immortal.

The blood resting on the ground next to the bullet began to disintegrate like a leaf burning, leaving a strange feeling of danger around it.

Groans of anguish could be heard within the walls of the guest room in the Ledger house. Allard felt the cold water run through her hair and back, wetting the bed and bothering her skin. She could do nothing but barely think about what was best for her, as the general ethics become a blur after two hours.

Another thing that was blurry was the room, as it was starting to lose its colors, all paired with a very heavy atmosphere, and you and I know what that means. Pitt's silhouette could be seen emerging from the darkness, ready to capture a new prey.

"I see you're in a rather awkward situation, aren't you?" said the demon.

Allard froze, and not only because of the spell. Her mind tried to process everything that was happening.

"Please, allow me," he said as he turned her muscles back into motion with a snap.

"What's going on?" Allard shouted with watery eyes.

"Don't be alarmed, I am a demon from what is known as *hell*. I'm here to make you a deal."

"What are you talking about, a demon? What am I supposed to do now?" she asked worriedly.

"Haven't you heard any stories? Creatures like us occasionally wander this plane to collect vulnerable souls by agreement. And if you ask me, I'm on a roll."

"You come for my soul?"

"I can't take it if you won't let me. It wouldn't be fair. But you can trade it for any material good you want."

"So, you're like a genie with a lamp, are you?"

"If it helps you to understand, yes. But you can only have one wish, and there are no rules other than what you ask for is always for your own benefit. You can't ask for anyone else, or decide anyone else's fate besides your own."

“Can you kill the person who has me captured? That would be to my benefit.”

“I just told you. It is not possible to change the fate of others.”

“Good. So, can you release me?”

“Indeed. Do we have a deal?”

“No, no. Wait. I can't have unlimited power and just ask to be released from four ropes. Let me think.”

“As you wish. I have all the time in the world.”

She began to reflect on any detail that would give her an advantage in that situation. How to stop Charlotte and at the same time be invulnerable? It wasn't too difficult to assimilate the answer.

“I've got it,” said Allard. “But first, I need to know what I'm going to lose and what it means to me.”

“You will lose your soul, which will make you practically a living dead. You will have no personality, no emotions, no purpose. You will have the same existential value as an earthworm or a wooden chair. You will still be alive, but you will no longer be a person. You will theoretically be an insect with opposable thumbs and the ability to solve complex problems by identifying patterns. A leaf in the wind, with no fate outside of its inevitable decay.”

“That doesn't sound very convincing. I thought it would be more like ensuring that I would go to hell when I die.”

“Yes, there's that option too, but I like the first one better because I don't have to wait for you to pass away.”

“Good thing I asked.”

“So what's your deal?”

“I want you to give me the ability to have great stamina and strength when needed, that I can camouflage my abilities and thus go unnoticed. I want to be humanly invincible so that I can escape from here and manage to wipe out my enemies.”

“It sounds like a good idea. I’ll give you what you ask for, and in return, when it’s your time to die, your soul will be transferred to me. Do you agree?”

“We have a deal.”

Pitt closed his eyes and nodded his head. He raised his four arms and lifted Allard into the air, twisting her arteries and preparing her for her transformation. She screamed in pain and watched as her torso, arms and legs elongated and took on strange shapes. Suddenly, the process ended, Pitt disappeared and Allard fell back onto the bed. His body did not change, but it soon would.

She looked at her limbs, breathing frantically, because from one moment to the next, they would experience a horrifying metamorphosis. Her fingers began to transform her nails into sharp claws, changing her white skin to a dark, grayish hue. She began to grow hair all over; her muscles took on a large size, managing to break ropes; her face began to lose its human form and take on a more canine one; her eyes changed and her pupils became those of a predator. Finally, she grew a wolf’s tail, for, indeed, she had transformed into an anthropomorphic wolf, a *werewolf*: like a common wolf, but of colossal size and with human properties, such as the ability to stand on her hind legs. Her monstrous form, as told by popular culture, clouded her rational thinking and turned her into a savage beast.

Charlotte, hearing all that clattering, ran up the stairs, but stopped halfway up, because the monster had broken down the door to get out. The girl couldn’t afford to panic; she had to escape from there somehow or other. The teleportation spell would take too long. The best thing to do was to run into the garden and grab some weapon. The beast looked at its escaping target, and, thirsting for her blood, set out to catch up to her on all four legs at full speed.

Charlotte, her heart beating wildly, managed to locate the dummy she used to practice her attack spells in the back garden and held it up as a shield. The creature appeared in a matter of seconds, ready to chew Charlotte's bones. She, defending herself, threw the doll she was holding to give it a temporary distraction. Great was her surprise to see that the wooden object did not last more than three seconds in one piece. The teeth of the changed Allard were now those of a shredding machine. With no other option, she quickly activated a defense spell that triggered a personal shield around her body. The beast was hitting it hard, and you could tell that protection wasn't going to last that long. Charlotte took advantage of those seconds to teleport away from it, and so she did. The monstrous creature was left alone in that garden and was still furious, so it looked for a way out of town to return home.

Charlotte opened her eyes. She appeared in the *Spoirtown* hospital, sitting next to the gurney where she had once been slowly dying. She barely realized where she had decided to end up out of desperation. It was the only place the amulet had been where she felt safe, or at least, the only one that came to mind.

Unfortunately, she was not alone. The door to that room opened and a doctor managed to see her. He quickly identified her as the missing boy, and at first glance, because of her gothic appearance, he thought she was a ghost that manifested out of nowhere. His first instinct was to run away and warn the others. Comically, none of them will believe him, because Charlotte was going to vanish before the other employees arrived.

She teleported again, this time to the motel room where her parents were staying.

Inconveniently, she wasn't alone either. A couple was using it for their intimate activities just as she appeared.

Screams abounded, so it wasn't long before she vanished again.

In desperation, she returned to the library in Steven's house. Fortunately, the monster was gone, so she took the opportunity to breathe a little on the floor.

About an hour passed. Charlotte decided to open the door and check if she was really safe. The guest room was a mess, the dining room was upside down, there were claw marks on the floor, but the beast was gone. Finally, Charlotte drew the conclusion that her prisoner had either made a deal with a demon or had a hidden talent of transforming into animals. The current situation did not allow her to stay around town, so as soon as she was done with her revenge, she had to escape to a quieter place.

She went to the kitchen to prepare herself something to eat. There wasn't much, just half a loaf of bread and some pork. There was no argument; she set about frying the pork in the pan, taking advantage of her few moments of calm, and put it inside the bread.

She sat down to eat and her mind couldn't help but reiterate her most recent memories of the last time she ate that dish. Inevitable not to compare the pleasant family dinner with the dark lonely lunch.

"The world changes all the time, but there are times when we can't change with it," she thought.



It began to get dark. Everything was serene. Charlotte could not have been more prepared. She already considered plan A, B, C, D, D, E, F, G, H, I, J and K. There was no way she would fail to defeat an entire criminal organization with black magic on her side. It was time to end it all.

Her black boots stomped on the stones that made up the streets, advancing towards that building with a large tank of gasoline strapped to her back. The night air felt perfect to fill it with embers and smoke, and after the explosion, Charlotte will be ready to rise from the ashes.

The security guards by the door saw her approach, and they were not going to be gentle with her. They warned her to move away from the site, but as she did not pay attention, they drew their weapons and warned her again, but she kept walking. Without further ado, the four subordinates guarding the entrance began to fire, but the bullets ricocheted over their force field and ended up in the bodies of the senders, for as she walked and was shot, she uttered the words, "*Clypeus meus robur suum servet, et in audiendo vocem meam regenerans custodiat*" repeatedly and calmly.

At the end, there was no one left at the entrance, which meant it was time to take out the gasoline container. She opened the door, and, with her force field active, latched the lock and lifted the tank with one hand, provoking many confused looks from more subordinates pointing their weapons. Charlotte took a look at the first floor, made up of several tables and a few bags and boxes on the ground, and after a few seconds, decided to give the mobsters a taste of fear by pulling out a lighter. The natural response to that action is to receive a lot of shots, the same ones that opened holes in the container, allowing Charlotte to spread the flammable liquid using the technique of spinning around throwing flaming gasoline all over the room. The subordinates began to panic as they noticed the fire growing in their surroundings, in turn caused by an infant with immunity to bullets that kept spinning. They stopped firing and considered the idea of running upstairs and jumping out the windows, which allowed Charlotte to finish decorating the room with the burning justice.

Seeing the *inferno* she had caused, she made sure to seal all the exits to ensure the death of most. The job was done, only the main course was missing: the boss's office.

Mr. Clement was alone, having a cup of tea as he usually does in the highest room when he heard the disturbance. As soon as he got up to open his office door to see what was going on, a voice appeared from behind his back.

“Did you miss me?” says Charlotte sitting on the table with a kitchen knife in her hand.

“Do I know you?” Clement replied, turning around.

“Of course you do. I'm your most recurring ghost. You doubted my existence years ago. You expected my death months later. I am the most lethal of your inner voices, and I come here to make you pay.”

“What exactly do I owe you?”

“It's not what you owe me, but what you owe the world. And the world calls for blood.”

Quickly, she threw the knife into Mr. Clement's stomach. He didn't react at all. His belly was spurting blood, but he remained unfazed by it. Afterwards, he began to laugh and then stated:

“I think I've got you now,” he said, removing the knife from his torso and placing his teacup on his cup table. You're the Gaspel's son, aren't you, turned gay now that your daddies are gone?”

“Why don't you agonize in pain?” she asked with a frown, watching the wound in his chest regenerate.

“It was my former assistant Gideon Ledger. He presented me with an opportunity to trade my soul for any material desire,” he said, approaching her. “I already have everything I want, but one of the main problems with being

someone so important is that I can be killed easily, so I asked that demon to make me immortal, that it doesn't matter how my body is, as long as it returns to its optimal state. I can't die in any physical way. I can't feel any pain either. I'm practically untouchable!"

"Yes," Charlotte says, walking back slowly, "I also know you're immune to magic, but if you can't die, how are you going to exchange your soul?"

"That's the trick. I can't die until December 8, 1982. When that day comes, I'll pay my debt and be gone from this world, but it's worth a short and sweet life."

Charlotte didn't think her opponent held that card. How do you kill someone who can't die? There was no time to consider it, because Clement pulled out a golf club and tried to hit her with it. The force field managed to resist the strike, but not hit back, so it broke. Charlotte had to think of plan *L*. She ran around the room until she found some weapon that would render him immobile. There were only tea tables, boxes, drawers and tools to build a miniature golf course. She approached the fireplace to see if she could find anything, but Clement reached out and grabbed her by the sweater.

"So you use Ledger's amulet? I see. The one who brought your parents to me is also your friend. How ironic!"

"Shut up!" she shouted angrily.

Clement took the amulet from her and threw it under a piece of furniture. Then, he punched Charlotte in the nose and left her bleeding on the floor. "I'm going to enjoy making you suffer for hours," he said smirking.

As Clement laughed at his own wickedness, she took ashes from the fireplace and threw them into his eyes, eliminating his field of vision for a while. He, with zero

visibility, was saying, "Are you going to escape? I'm warning you, the door is locked, so you're stuck with me!"

Charlotte wasn't looking to escape, but to get more time to think. She hid behind a couch and set her mind to it. How to make him suffer for eternity without adding magic to the equation? The options were few, and Clement began to search for his victim with complete calm after regaining his vision. Charlotte already had something in mind, but she had to improvise, something that, without much of her soul is very complicated.

As soon as she felt Mr. Clement approach the couch, she ran crouched down to get the knife and a golf club. Clement rumbled his feet theatrically heading in her direction, and Charlotte responded by running in his direction with her weapons in hand. He reached out his arms to catch her, and she dodged him by sliding to her knees and stabbing wildly at his right kneecap. She took that as an opportunity to partially immobilize him, but when he got up again, she hit him in the other knee with the stick and sliced his tendons, sending him falling on his face. She took advantage of that to continue hitting him in the elbows, breaking the club. As Clement lay on his back to try to counterattack, Charlotte stabbed him in the heart, buying her considerable time. Quickly, she reached for the metal rod from the fireplace and kept hitting his knees, elbows, pelvis and foot bones with all her might with it. She did everything she could to make sure he had no chance to get up. He stopped hitting and saw how long it took for his legs to bend normally.

"Very clever," said Mr. Clement on the floor after waking up, "I can't wait to see you try that forever."

Charlotte noticed that it took eight seconds for his bones to return to their original position. He tried to get up and she drove the rod through his chest to push him off, but

it had no effect, because he grabbed her arm hard and threw her against the wall. It almost knocked her unconscious, but only caused a great discomfort in her head that would make it difficult for her to move fluidly. Frightened and dazed, she ran to hide under one of the tea tables, hoping that he would take long enough to pull the rod out of his chest.

Breathing frantically and with her heart beating a *thousand per hour*, she did nothing but cry inside, partly because of the pain in her head, but mostly because she was not sure if she would get out of that situation alive. At that, she could hear her opponent looking for her, trying to provoke her to leave in the most arrogant and dominant tone that an adversary can have, having the absolute advantage.

“It's fun to play with you, *Charlie*. Especially when I know you're trying your best. I wonder why you made it this far, even though you know it's such a pointless and dangerous thing to do. Do you care that much about your dead parents? No, your face is not the face of someone seeking justice. You want to win. Yes, I could see the greed in your eyes, and I highly doubt the Gaspels raised a psychopath.” He takes a pause to raise his voice a little “You might think you're the good one here, and I mean, I'm an unscrupulous mob boss, but you're not too far from being like me. The only thing that sets us apart is that I let you live until your parents stole from me. Your whole family is a plague of rats, and they deserve what they got, an eternity of suffering in hell.”

Charlotte held back her tears under that table, listening to what she has been ignoring since she sold her soul, and in fact she does not deserve the slightest happiness... but her sadness was overshadowed by a more powerful feeling, more destructive and macabre: The anger that welled up in her soulless eyes, the engine that kept her alive, because to be honest, she will not answer for her actions, since *Charlie*

died in that hospital, and *Charlotte* was the direct answer, ready to attack with fierceness the life that killed him. In hell he was born and in hell she will end.

Charlotte Gaspel came out of that table with great determination, took the iron rod and ran towards the leader of *The Coffin*. Clement turned around and Charlotte, with all her fury, again smashed his kneecaps, hands and spine to leave him on the floor one more time. To keep him from getting up, she first hit him in the elbows and then in the skull several times so he had a little extra time to reach for the knife. She breathed frantically to regulate her heart rate and ran to her weapon. She went back to the regenerating body of the boss and began to slice his neck with all her might, as if she were slicing a large walnut.

Luckily, he managed to cut through all the flesh and separate his skull from his spine. She lifted his head and put it away from the rest of his body. She looked at which of the two parts regenerated and which didn't, and, fortunately, found that the head was starting to create cartilage and bone while the other part was starting to rot like an apple in fast motion, and watching the process, Charlotte noticed a piece of metal sticking out of the side of his stinky torso. It was the blocking amulet Steven had given him! He had inserted it into his kidney so that no one could remove it. Without it, the magic could hurt him again.

Wasting no time, Charlotte reached under the couch for her amulet before Clement's head started talking again. With it, she teleported to Steven's house and, a few seconds later, returned with the instant camera. She put Clement's head facing up and took a picture of him. With the clothes left over from his decomposed body, she made a voodoo doll of the kind Ledger showed her and there she pasted the image that was slowly taking shape. One of the best ideas she ever had. Clement started to become conscious again, and the first thing he said was, "Did you really think it would be that

easy? Look at me, I already have more than half of my body in its original state.”

The fire had already reached the room and it would be a short time before the boss would be complete again; however, the dummy was ready.

“What is your full name?” Charlotte asked, still gasping for breath and hiding the dummy.

“What good will that do you?” Clement asked, getting up.

“I want to die knowing the name of my killer. Maybe then I won't become a wandering soul.”

“I'll take it as a last request. My full name is Hector Elliot Clement,” he said, intoxicated with power, walking towards her with his fleshy feet.

That same name was pronounced by Charlotte. She said it with great concentration and holding his miniature figure. Just as he was about to get his hands on her, Charlotte squeezed the doll's head and threw it to the floor. Mr. Clement returned to the ground abruptly following the movements of his replica resulting in a lot of blood all around him. It was the perfect moment to conclude the show. With her black leather boot she crushed the dummy, stomped on it, squeezed and crushed to no end, but kept its skin intact, because the idea was to make its insides take as long as possible to regenerate trying to get back to its original position, which was somewhat difficult, because all his shredded insides kept coming out of all his holes.

Now that she had her enemy literally in the palm of her hand, Charlotte could do whatever she wanted without limits. For now, she decided to neutralize him in a place where he couldn't escape: She spotted a three-foot box of export tea bags and pleasant music started playing in her head. She emptied the box and manipulated the doll in such a way that the body ended up inside it. To finish, she put a

bag of sugar on top and used the leftover blood to draw a circle around the box and teleported it to the garden of Steven's house, where it would stay for a while.

Soon he was going to make it disappear; for now, she had to savor her victory. The office was still filling with fire, so Charlotte conjured the protection spell to keep out the heat and, with her body all smeared with the blood of her enemies and her own, decided to celebrate in the most glorious way she could think of:

She gently closed her eyes, raised her arms and, gracefully, began to walk towards the exit moving her legs with elegance.

With the rhythm left in her early growing soul, she moved through the flaming corridors with ecstasy, seeing all the corpses and the fiery flames creating smoke through the ceiling, remembering the times she saw the building from the library window, and reminiscing about all the times she danced alone in her room. That hot spectacle was the greatest feeling of happiness she could ever have, and she spread it all around until she reached the exit, where, with great pride, she saw her most important work illuminating all *Soufreville*.



Finally, it was all over; her part of the deal was settled, her revenge concluded, her nemeses sleeping with the fishes, and everything that held back her happiness was gone. Only Charlotte, the fire of victory, and the music she heard in his head remained.

This is the end of her odyssey, and a new one was ready to be born.

XXVII

EPILOGUE

How does the horizon look like after all the actions committed by our protagonist? I know.

Detective Allard was not doomed forever in that monstrous, hairy form, because she woke up in the early morning in her original skin, covered in junk food wrappers and a bunch of other products in a gas station in the middle of the road. When she opened her eyes, it took her a long time to locate where she was and why she was without clothes among so much junk. The doubts gradually dissipated, because, after covering herself with a towel from a counter, she began to get a good look at the place, and observed all the wreckage her wolf form had caused. Then she remembered the deal she made, and felt a strange pain in his stomach, as if she had spent the whole night putting strange things in her mouth. Unfortunately, the feeling of disgust was only going to get worse, because she immediately

noticed traces of blood across the floor originating from the cash register.

She approached it slowly, with as much fear as a person could have in that situation, and finally saw it. The employee who worked the night hours was spread all over the floor and wall, or at least what was left of him, because, as you could guess, he couldn't survive the attack of the hungry beast.

Allard recoiled back in dread. She could not assimilate the fact that her life was now going to change radically to a fugitive from the law that she respected so much. The future was a complete mystery to her condition, and the only help she could count on was her partner.

Leonard Quickley, who had made it safely to the police station, was able to give all the necessary information to the captain. Everything to do with magic was replaced by complex ruses of the local mob; it sunk in that *Charlie*, the missing boy, had been found dead under a bridge next to his parents; the wizard Steven G. Ledger had been left as a phony street magician who died of dehydration after escaping from the truck transporting him to the maximum security prison; and Greyson was left as a crazed war hero who ended up committing suicide.

He burned the *Gospel* file in his fireplace. His gaze could not have been more vacant. Clearly what he was doing was the best thing for future questioning and, it turned out to be the right thing to do at the end of the day, but he couldn't help but feel bad, not out of helplessness, but because his partner might never come back.

The purpose of his journey was to overcome his inferiority complex, and he succeeded. He made his own decisions and, at the end of the day, made everyone believe the story he put up as a plot patch. In theory, he is now no one's slave. All that's left is to go on with his life hoping for the best.

Danny and Steven are still ashes in the wind.

Everything went their way in some form or another, including Charlotte. She spent all morning digging a five-foot hole in the garden. Clement's body, fortunately, did not escape from its box.

Charlotte's arms grew tired and she considered the depth to be enough, so she pushed the tea box into it. It was funny to think that he would be conscious the whole time he was going to be in that horrible position underground, literally his own personal hell. As she refilled it, she could feel all her troubles disappear to return to a normal life on her own terms. Her mind was at last at ease, and she could take advantage of the peace to think...

Maybe it was time to move on to greener pastures, maybe to another country. America sounds interesting, that's where Steven lived... Steven... How did it all start? If only he hadn't shown up at that hospital on her birthday... Oh, that's right! There was something Charlotte had completely forgotten. As soon as she remembered, she ran to Steven's room and searched through all the drawers for something that belonged to her. Finally, she found it inside the closet hidden among piles of clothes: Her birthday present, of course. It came in a festive bag, and the tag read:

“From Mom and Dad, for our morning star, our beloved ray of light. We trust you'll get well soon.”

Those simple words were all Charlie's dusty heart needed to break into tears. Maybe it's chance, or maybe a divine revelation, but as soon as the first tear splashed on the ground, in sync it began to rain outside the house, something she hadn't seen happen in a long time.

In the bag was a small notebook with a pencil, and considering her fascination with learning and reading at such times, it was the perfect gift. Taking the notebook in her hands, she hugged it with teary eyes and intended to use it a lot in the future. But why wait? Perhaps it would be appropriate to release it at that time.

October 27, 1966.

I completed my goal. I may have left a few nails unnailed, like those troglodytes at the orphanage that hung me upside down, but it's nothing that can't be solved with a few more animal corpses. I plan to start using curses, as I could use some discretion from time to time.

Steven left the cauldron in the library full of all those materials. If the instructions don't lie, with the sugar I managed to salvage from the mob I can execute the spell with no problem. Should I bring back his late sister? I think, after all I did, I owe the wizard a favor.



The story will continue, because when the sun sets, the moon is always present.

The End.

*1 - *Quickley* is a real last name, and I did not intended to write *quickly*. Sorry for all those Quickleys in the world who were confused for the adverb.

Charlotte Gaspel



Danny

Steven G. Ledger



“A goth-looking devilish girl with knowledge of black magic may not be out of the ordinary in fiction, but she’s a type of character that never goes out of style, like blue jeans or chicken eggs.

This book is the culmination of many months of dark ideas and exotic situations running through my head while watching thrillers and comics about human cruelty in a society corrupted by darkness, so don’t expect a self-improvement story. This is a tragedy about a transgender girl with an exorbitant IQ, whose past forced her to sell her soul to end up in the endless cold vortex, also known as the world of the dark arts.

If you like wholesome dark humor and gothic novels, maybe you’ll also like the Charlotte Gaspel story.”

CRAMIRO

