

The Ghost in the **Darkness**

The Ghost Files Book Four

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The Ghost Files recommended reading order

The Haunted Highway
The Manor of Darkness
The Deathly Depths

Other titles by Holly Vane

Heaven vs. Hell (The Eternal War Series Book One)
Love vs. Lust (The Eternal War Series Book Two)
Life vs. Death (The Eternal War Series Book Three)
Reckoning (The Eternal War Series Book Four)
The Eternal War Box Set
The Devil's Bible

One

He was in hell. That was the only way to explain the pain ripping through every bit of him. His head felt as big as a melon and a colossal headache burned just behind his sensitive eyes.

A throaty groan escaped his dry mouth as he rolled onto his back. *That must have been one almighty bender*, he thought to himself. Above him a slight breeze rustled the canopy of leaves that masked the night sky.

Arching his stiff neck he took in his soiled appearance. Ripped jeans, torn shirt and his shoes were missing. Red and angry looking gashes covered his bare arms.

“What the...?” He asked out loud. Something rattled around his mouth and he spat teeth onto wet concrete. He was lying in an alley. Music boomed out of the door off to his right. Where was he?

As he fought to get vertical his vision swam. He fell back against the cool stone wall of the alleyway and gulped down some much needed air. He groped around for his wallet, keys, cellphone, all of which were missing. “Fuck.” He groaned with realization, *I’ve been mugged!*

When the world stopped spinning he stumbled through the door. Inside the music was even louder. The sports bar was packed to the rafters and every eye focused on him as he staggered past, still disorientated.

He thought about asking one of the patrons for help but thought better of it. Help was a thing of the past, his mugger were probably eye balling him right now with a smug smirk on their ugly face.

He made it outside not a clue where he was or how he was going to get back...wait a minute...where was home?

“You look like death warmed up.”

The voice cut through the man’s desperation and he turned his head. On the sidewalk, leaning against a car was a punk. The guy wasn’t dressed as a good-for-nothing-punk-ass-mugger but one never knew, did one? And besides he didn’t like the way this kid was looking at him.

The man staggered away wanting to get as far from this stink hole as he possibly could but the punk called his name.

“Sam.”

At least he could still remember his name, slowly Sam turned. “Have we met before...?” Was all he could muster, the ache splitting his head was making it hard to do anything.

The punk moved towards him. “No.” Opening the passenger side door he motioned to Sam. “Come on.”

Sam looked at the Mustang then at the driver, did he really expect him to just get in? Sam may have just woke up in a pool of his own vomit but he wasn’t naive. “Yeah, right.” He snorted.

“Star sent me.”

The mention of his sister made Sam reevaluate his position. The punk looked as serious as a mourner at a wake. Ash coloured hair cuddled pale cheeks. The kid looked haunted, looking in his blue eyes made Sam think of himself before he had en-listed.

The kid sighed and pulled out a cell. He dialed a number before throwing it to Sam. "Hello?" There was a pause on the other end.

"Hey." Sam physically relaxed at the sound of his sister's voice.

"What's going on? Whose the kid?" As he spoke a bad feeling formed in the pit of his stomach. Something just felt wrong.

"Just get in the car Sam." She hung up, leaving Sam to stare at the screen feeling like a lemon. Star sounded different, her voice had lost all its warmth.

"What the hell is happening..." he mumbled handing the cell back, with no where else to go Sam reluctantly got into the Mustang. The engine purred as the kid fired it up and glided it smoothly down the road.

Sam said nothing as dark shuttered stores rolled past. He glanced at the kid who had his eyes fixed on the road ahead. "How do you know my sister?"

"We went to school together." Came the measured reply. The kid's face gave nothing away as Sam studied it.

"I didn't catch your name."

"I didn't throw it." Sam's brows rose at the comment and the kid sighed. "My name's Thor."

Sam tried not to laugh. "Thor?"

Thor cringed, "my mother's a fan of Greek mythology."

"You have my sympathy. So are we gonna stop with the bullshit?" Sam added. Thor cast him a dumbfounded look. "My sister wasn't exactly popular at school. I knew all of her *three* friends, and with an unforgettable name like yours..." Sam let the accusation dangle silently between them.

The scenery out of the window had changed. Town gave way to countryside. Rolling dark fields bathed in moonlight spread out around them. "We're here." Thor said steering the car onto a dirt track.

Sam looked up at the old abandoned farmhouse that loomed over them in the darkness. It was falling to pieces. Bits of tile littered the overgrown yard. The window panes were broken and the frames rotting. From the downstairs window came a glimmer of light.

Thor killed the engine and his lean frame skipped up the porch steps. "Watch your step." He told Sam who followed close behind. Inside was as derelict as the exterior, broken floorboards poked out from masses of dead leaves, decaying wallpaper still cling to the walls in places and the stench of urine filled the air.

A woman looked up from a makeshift table in the parlour. Glasses perched on her slender nose emphasized intelligent brown eyes. "Thought you'd gotten lost." She smirked at Thor who crossed the room and opened a cooler sitting on the floor. He tossed Sam a Bud.

Sam glanced at it then at the woman. "Alright. I've been pretty patient up till now. What is going on? Where's my sister?"

“What’s the last thing you remember?”

“Thor!” The woman admonished giving him a stern glare.

The kid shrugged it off while opening the bud and took a swig. “He deserves to know mom.”

“Deserves to know what? Who are you people?” Sam demanded. “I swear if you’ve hurt...”

“Do you remember the lake?” Thor interrupted.

“What lake...” As he spoke memories came flooding back as did the cool, murky water of Sliver Lake. The pain in his head intensified as Sam felt the water all around him. He was choking, something was pulling him down...he was going to drown.

“Ryan...” He heard himself whisper right before the ground came up to meet him.

Two

“What happened?” Sam mumbled as his eyes opened.

“You fainted.” Thor smirked, “it was a pretty feminine swoon to...”

“Oh stop.” His mother came into view with a concerned look on her pretty face. “I told you he wasn’t ready.” Her hand on Sam’s forehead felt better than it should and Sam felt himself smile. The blinding pain in his head returning turned the smile into a frown.

“I want my sister...” he mumbled.

“I’m afraid you can’t see her...” The woman said, her voice full of anguish as she looked to her son.

Thor pulled on his arms and forced Sam into a sitting position. He pressed some pills into his palm. “Take these, they’ll help.” The kid practically forced the bottle of bud into Sam’s hand. Willing to do anything to get rid of the pounding in his temple Sam, without question, downed the pills. Within a few seconds heavy lids came down over his eyes.

Sam was going to die.

Water closed in on him, suffocating and cold. Sam tried to kick his legs but a weight dragged them down, beckoning him to the sandy bed that was to be his grave.

Sam thought of his sister and the promise he was breaking by dying here today. Since their parents had died, Sam was all Star had. She knew nothing of the world and how cruel it could be, not really. Sam swore to protect her, be the big brother she deserved instead of the one that had abandoned her all those years ago. Another thing he’d messed up, because of it, Star would be alone.

As his feet hit the bottom of the lake Sam found himself staring into the eyes of a boy. The image was more like a flickering flame of a candle, Ryan Small grinned at him then everything went dark.

Sam West jolted upright, upsetting the bowl of water in the woman’s hands. It banged across the loose floorboards as Sam struggled to remember where he was.

“Hey, it’s okay, it was just a dream.” She soothed picking up the bowl.

“What the hell did Thor give me?!” Sam demanded angrily. This woman didn’t deserve it but he was confused and, truth be told, scared.

“Some of my sleeping pills.” The woman confessed with a sheepish smile. “Your body needs rest after what it’s been through.”

Sam caught her wrist, “and just what is that exactly?” He probed.

“You’ve been missing for three months Sam.” Thor said entering the small and dingy bedroom of the farmhouse. Camping lanterns provided the only light but they might as well have been switched off. Sam’s world darkened at Thor’s words. That bad feeling dwelling in his stomach was starting to make sense. Something

really bad had happened. He could feel in his bones.

“What?” His voice came out as a whisper.

“Caspar the unfriendly ghost, the thing that’s been shadowing Star,” Thor started to explain, “it took you that night, once you reached shore.”

Sam swallowed hard. “Took me where? I thought it was Star it wanted..” he looked back and fourth, at Thor and his mother, with a dazed and confused expression. The thing in black had haunted Star West for years. Upon waking, after the car accident that had claimed their parents, and had nearly claimed them too, it had been there. A black devil showing his sister all sorts of sick and twisted things. Lately though it had upped its game. Back home, before Sam and Star had been forced to leave, it had came at Star. Sam knew it was the one thing he couldn’t save her from, unlike her, Sam couldn’t see it.

“..We don’t know where Sam.” Thor’s mother was saying, pulling him back to the present, “though I don’t think it was Hawaii.”

“Star was frantic.” Thor continued. “I’ve never seen her so...she tried everything to find you Sam. Nothing worked. It was like you’d vanished off the face of the earth.”

“So how did you find me tonight?”

Thor shared a look with his mum but it was her that answered. Thor seemed unable to talk all a sudden. “Star made a deal with it.” The room seemed to plummet into icy coldness.

“Your life for hers.”

Three

A blade plunged into his heart. That was what Sam felt right now. “She did what?”

“It was the only reason it took you in the first place.” Thor’s mother replied, “leverage Sam. I’m so sorry...”

“No!” Sam kicked off the covers and lurched out of bed. He slammed into the wall, his legs still wobbly and uncooperative. “We are going to get her back before...”

“Sam it’s too late.” Thor’s low voice said. It had been a while since he had spoke. His sad eyes glued to the floorboards. “Star didn’t die, death would have been a blessing in comparison to what that thing wanted,” he uttered bitterly before finally looking at Sam. “Star’s servitude for you. She’s its now.”

“How do you mean?” Sam asked wanting to get all the details so he could figure out how to get Star out of this. “What does it need her for?”

“Whatever this thing is,” Thor’s mother answered, “it predates the written word. There’s absolutely nothing anywhere about it.”

“So we know nothing!” Sam snapped angrily. The woman smiled patiently at him. Sam’s respect for her grew. “I’m sorry...”

“Don’t be.” She answered quickly, “I know what its like to lose a loved one.” Sadness invaded her bright eyes and the woman looked away.

Thor cleared his throat, “hate to break up this touching moment,” he said giving his mother a curious glance as she passed him, “but we do know something about it. I’m not just here for my good looks you know.” He mused.

“How do you mean?” Sam inquired.

Thor up-righted a crate and sat down. “From what we’ve gleamed from our sources this thing is called a Guardian.”

“Guardian of what exactly?”

“That we don’t know.” Thor grimaced leaning in, “apparently there used to be a whole race of them, that was thousands of years ago and its been e-eons since one has shown up.”

“Okay, what does it want with my sister?” Sam asked suddenly feeling drained.

“The Guardian is after souls.” Thor’s mother piped in from beside the door. “To be more precise, the souls of the dead.”

“Ghosts feed this thing.” Thor clarified.

“And that’s where Star comes in.” Sam finished as a light bulb went on in his head, “but surely something as powerful as this thing can get it’s own souls?” Nothing about this made much sense to him. Thor’s answers left him with only more questions.

“That’s all we know.” Thor sighed leaning away.

Sam West looked at the boy in front of him who rubbed at his puffy eyes and a stab of sympathy ripped through him. The boy’s messy hair and pale complexion made him look ill. With a snarl of frustration Sam started to pace the room. “I need

to see my sister. We need to stop beating around the bush and just ask her what's going on." The fact that she wasn't there to greet her brother, after spending three months of doing whatever to get him back, irked Sam.

Thor briefly closed his eyes, "I don't know where she is."

"But she called me at the bar, and I assume Star is where you've been getting this info from?" Who else could know anything about what they were up against. Thor was holding a lot back, Sam knew that much, and didn't like being left in the dark.

"Sam," the kid breathed tiredly, "I haven't seen her in weeks. She could be in flaming Malta for all I know."

"Then how...?"

"Star called me, told me where you'd be. That's all I know."

Sam gritted his teeth in annoyance. Why would Star rather confide in this messed up kid she barely knew then her own brother? "Fine." He barked, "give me your phone and I'll call her."

Without pause Thor retrieved the cell from his pocket and handed it to Sam. "You'll have to go outside, there's no reception inside."

Sam took the phone and stormed out the room. Outside the cool evening breeze whipped at his cheeks. He scrolled through Thor's contacts till he came to Star, which didn't take very long, the only other name in the kid's phone was his mother, and dialed. "Come on...pick up damn it!" He cursed as he was directed to her voice-mail for the seventh time.

"Not answering, huh?" Thor was hovering on the doorstep. "She does that a lot."

Sam handed the phone back. "I've been a saint up till now but if you don't spill what you're holding back, I'll paste your face all over this house."

To his credit Thor didn't try to deny it. "She's different from the girl you remember Sam." He finally admitted, "doing this, working for that...its changing her a piece at a time."

"How old are you kid?" Sam countered, "how are you mixed up in all this?"

"Not old enough." Thor replied bitterly, "you and Star aren't the only ones with...gifts. At least that's what my Mom calls it. I would say its more of a curse..."

"You can see the dead?" Sam demanded. He needed to trust these people but couldn't unless he knew their agenda and just what the hell dragged them into his and Star's fight.

"No." Thor leaned against the porch, "my father had a unique ability. He could see the future."

Sam regarded the kid a second before bringing his fist up, seconds before his knuckles collided with Thor's face, the kid shifted right and Sam stumbled, hitting nothing but air.

"You think that proves anything?" Thor scoffed, "you telegraphed it, man. Even a blind man could have ducked that."

"if you really can see the future, why would you need Star to tell you where I was?" Sam smiled slyly. He had come across his fair share of false clairvoyants, swindlers cashing in on people's pain. They were the lowest form of scum in his opinion

“Because the future isn't fixed in stone.” Thor explained, “it's a living, flowing energy that constantly changes with every breath you take. I can see a few minutes ahead, that's it.”

“And Star knows?”

Thor nodded. “We really did go to school together. In all my 24 years walking this earth, she's the only person I've ever told.”

“How'd it happen?” Sam inquired still on the fence. If Thor and Star was close enough for him to reveal a secret of this magnitude how come Sam had never heard his sister mention him?

“I wasn't in an accident like you and Star. I was born with it. Star turned to me when you disappeared because she thought I could help. She found me down in Ohio eight weeks ago,” a smile crossed his face, “I hadn't seen her in years.”

Sam took a deep breath, trying to process all this and figure their next step. “Okay, the thing wants ghosts and Star hunts them down for it, we work cases eventually we're bound to bump into her.”

Thor looked at him skeptically. “That could take months Sam, years even, but...” he trailed off, “I have an idea. The ghosts it's sending her after, the last one was from the 1800's or something...”

“So the older the better.” Sam finished picking up Thor's train of thought, “it narrows the field. The longer the ghost's been wandering around down here, the stronger it becomes. All that negative energy brewing, just waiting to explode...”

“It's time to get to work, kid.”

Four

“Gotcha!” Thor looked up from the big musty volume balancing in his lap at Sam’s exclamation.

“We have a winner.” He announced brightly. “Emily Brighton, died 1888. Get your coat.”

“Wait!” Thor called but Sam West was already down the porch steps, his wavy shoulder length hair bobbing around his broad shoulders.

“Where are you going?” Thor’s mother shuffling out onto the porch looking like she’d just woken up stopped the boys in their tracks. “Hold on till I get my coat...”

“No, mom.” Thor said quickly. He gave Sam a conspiratorial glance before continuing. “This could get dangerous. I want you to stay here.”

Thor’s mother gaped at her son. “I’ve had my share of danger Thor. I’m coming!”

“He’s right.” Sam jumped in, “we don’t don’t know what the hell we’re walking into, don’t worry about Thor, I’ll take good care of him Mrs...?” Thor glared at him but Sam chose to ignore it.

“Stevens,” Thor’s mother answered with a girly pitch, “but you can call me Hazel.”

“We’ll be back Hazel, I promise.” Sam flashed her his best smile and a disgusted noise escaped Thor’s throat.

“Just get in.”

Sam couldn’t stop the grin spreading across his face as the Mustang pulled away from the farmhouse.

“Where to?” Thor asked eager to steer the conversation away from his mother.

“Bakersfield.” Sam replied, “Emily Brighton was a sixteen year old maid. She worked at Ravens House until her untimely death.”

“And?” Thor prodded as the car lurched down the country roads.

“And she was raped and murdered by her boss. There’s hundreds of sightings of her ghost haunting the house, which was a hotel until a fire tore through the place.”

“So the plan is to...what? Talk to a ghost?”

Sam laughed despite himself. “You’ve never been around ghosts before, have you? They don’t really talk. More like reign down fiery vengeance on just about anyone that crosses their path.”

“We’re going to die.” Thor announced.

“Relax, its not my first rodeo. Hopefully Star will already be there when we show up.”

“How do you know she will?”

“Because this is the only ghost for miles that’s powerful enough to match her criteria, and I know my sister. I just have a feeling, trust me, she’ll show.”

It took three hours of Thor driving like a madman and Sam bitching about his borrowed clothes, before they reached the abandoned town of Bakersfield. “Thought the fire was in the hotel?” Thor murmured as the Mustang inched past the dark and gutted houses that loomed like silent sentinels.

The town consisted of a single street. Buildings that had long since been left hugged the pot-holed road. Black and charred wood and other debris littered the sidewalks. “What the hell happened here?” Sam wondered aloud, “all the book said was that a fire broke out in the hotel, nothing about the town burning as well.”

“Something bad happened here, that’s for sure.” Thor murmured. He urged the car faster. The atmosphere that hung over the town was dark and foreboding, like the devil itself had come to visit.

Sam pointed ahead. Dawn was breaking, bathing what looked to be a mansion in glorious orange flame. “That must be the hotel.”

The Mustang left the town and followed a winding slope of a road. Ravens House sat on a lonely hill, high above the town. Sam pushed open the gates that gave with a noise of fingernails down a blackboard. The Mustang purred up the drive and came to a stop outside the house.

Thor let out a low whistle. “Must have been impressive in its day.” He muttered. Ravens House was Victorian in style but most of the features that had made it beautiful had been marred by the fire. Retrieving a crowbar and two torches from the trunk, Thor forced the heavysset doors open with a splintering of wood. “Age before beauty.”

Sam threw an annoyed look his way before taking the offered torch and stepped over the threshold. As soon as he did a strong gust of wind, emanating from somewhere deep in the bowels of the house, nearly knocked him over.

“There must be a broken window or something.” Thor offered hopefully.

Sam, noting the kid’s reluctance to enter, gave him a sobering look, “there’s no wind.” He said simply. Head held high Sam walked into darkness.

Thor stood on the cracked stone steps looking after him. He had learned to trust the power he had inherited, and right now, it was screaming at him to get out of here.

“Well?” Sam’s voice beckoned from inside.

With a deep breath Thor Stevens entered Ravens House.

Five

The beams of the torches barely penetrated the gloom that lingered in the house. A thick layer of sooty dust clung to every surface. Sam forged the way ahead, out of the foyer with the scorched marble flooring, and along a narrow corridor with no windows.

Suddenly Thor grabbed his arm and yanked Sam back. "What are you...?" A tinkle of glass made him aim his torch up to the ceiling. Seconds later the chandelier crashed to the floor, glass shards flying everywhere. The sound deafening as it echoed around the dead mansion.

Sam stumbled backwards, gaping at the destruction and debris. "Thanks." He told Thor, staring at him with something like awe. "You would have been handy to have on the road." Sam added in a humorous tone to alleviate the tension that knotted Thor's body.

Thor gave him a tight smile and they continued down the abandoned corridor. Sam knew better than to try and put the kid at ease. Something felt different about this place. Sam had seen his fair share of things that went bump in the night, and the places they haunted, this was nothing like the rest. A shiver traveled down his spine as if to confirm his suspicions.

The corridor opened out into a square open space. Wooden stairs that were broken in the middle lay off to their right. But it was the doors in front of them that was calling to Sam. Going with his guts Sam tried to turn the handle but it held fast. "Thor, pass me the crowbar." The doors groaned as Sam tried brute force, yet still they remained sealed. Sam, breathing hard at the exhaustion, threw the crowbar down with frustration.

Thor eyed Sam as he gave in to a tantrum, kicking everything in sight. Choosing to let him get it out his system, Thor examined the doors. He might not have Sam and Star's abilities but he still felt the same pull as Sam did. The doors were wood like the last set and should have gave just as easily. "Do you hear that?" He asked Sam who didn't seem to hear him above the stomping and cursing. Thor pressed his ear to the door. "Sam! Knock it off!" He yelled then motioned to him. "There's music coming from inside."

"What?" Sam almost growled, "music?"

"Hear it for yourself."

Skeptically Sam pinned his ear to the door. Sure enough music drifted through the wood. "Impossible." He uttered. It sounded like a full blown orchestra was playing on the other side of the door. As they listened voices joined the music, like just beyond the door a party was in full sway. Glasses clinked together in toasts, high pitched giggles and heels against marble, all audio-able above the music.

"Is this normal for a ghost hunt?"

"No." Sam replied looking just as flabbergasted, "this is new. We need to get

in there.”

“How? Those doors aren’t going to open.”

“So this is how well you do without me.” Sam and Thor stared at each other, eyes widening at the feminine voice.

“Star.”

Six

It felt more than good to see Star West. She ran to Sam, wrapping her arms around his neck. Sam let relief untangle the anxious knot in his stomach. A slight smile parted Thor's lips over Star's shoulder.

Sam pulled back and felt the concern return. In the beam of his torch Sam could see all the changes his sister had gone through. Her usual raven hair now flowed red down her shoulders, Star's once youthful and pretty face was now graced with skin the colour of milk. His sister's once bright blue eyes were now dulled a deep rust and told the horrors of the past three months.

"Thor's told me everything." Sam's hard voice said accusingly. Star backed away, giving Thor a hard glance.

"This is why I stayed away." She admitted, "cause I knew you'd tare me a new one. I made a choice Sam."

"It was the wrong one."

"So I was supposed to let you rot?" Star asked heatedly.

"Yes!" Sam shouted back.

Star's face softened, "it was me it wanted Sam. I wasn't going to let you be collateral damage."

"So you made a deal with the devil."

"What did you expect me to do?"

"I expected you to save yourself. I made a promise Star..." his voice broke and ashamed, Sam looked away.

"To hell with your promise Sam." Star spat angrily to everyone's surprise. Fury flashed in her eyes. "I'm old enough to make my own decisions. I'm sick of living with all your baggage Sam! It was a car accident for God sake! There was nothing everyone could have done. Stop blaming yourself over it, you have nothing to feel guilty about." As she ranted a single tear fell down Sam's cheek. His father had been a proud policeman, and later on, a damn good private investigator. He had wanted to pass the company down to Sam, who had made his own plans. On his nineteenth birthday Sam ran away to join the army, and his father had never spoke to him since. He was compensating with Star, hoping that if he did right by her, his previous sins would be forgiven.

"You want to know the truth Sam?" Star asked unrelenting, "since mom and dad, its been all I could do to get up in the morning. I miss them so much..." now it was Star's cheek upon which tears fell, she slapped them away angrily, "and I've been walking on eggshells with you, never knowing when you're going to go off the reservation. I miss our home Sam, which we can never go back to since we're wanted fugitives. This life has brought us nothing but pain. Now, I feel nothing. He took all the pain and suffering away Sam."

"And what about the ghosts he has you hunt?"

"They've had their time Sam."

The siblings stared each other down and Thor cleared his throat, “maybe we should...”

“Shut up!” Sam barked.

“Don’t talk to him like that.” Star told her brother, “you wouldn’t be standing here if it wasn’t for him.”

“And that’s another thing you’ve been lying about.” Sam countered, “just who is he to you?” He studied his sister’s face as Star’s eyes met Thor’s, for a second something like tenderness mixed with fear spread on his sister’s face, and Sam had his answer.

“You never change.” Star muttered. She made to move past her brother but he blocked her way.

“I won’t let you do this Star. This inst who you are, you save the dead, not damn them.”

Star focused on Sam and Thor didn’t know whether to get in between them or try to lighten the situation. Star side stepped her brother, quick as a lightning bolt she moved past them and placed her palm on the unyielding doors.

They opened with a groan.

“You can’t stop me.” Star told Sam sadly. The ballroom was as vivid and alive as if the hotel was still open for business. Women in grand gowns gossiped around the cloth covered tables. Beyond, couples swooped over the dance floor. The huge elegant ballroom was a step into the past. An orchestra dominated the little stage at the far end of the room, blasting out a haunting waltz that commanded the dancers.

“What the...?” Thor breathed as the three took in the sight. At this slight interruption the music stopped, all eyes turned their way, malice glinted in their faces.

Malice that was directed at Star.

The beautiful ladies hissed like cats while the man continued to bore holes in her. The light started to fade, like a dream upon waking, the glistening marble columns returned to their burned state, one by one the party goers evaporated like soot on a breeze.

“That was crazy.” Thor said eyes wide, “what was that about?” He asked turning to Sam.

Star sprinted away from them, navigating through the debris. At first the boys stared after her, stunned, then Sam clocked the ghostly specter standing on the dance floor. “Emily.” Sam breathed. “Star, no!” He yelled taking off after her.

Bounding after, like a bull in a china shop, Sam gained on her. He tackled his sister to the ground but froze in his tracks when he saw her face. Star’s eyes were red and glowing with violence, her mouth formed an unpleasant snarl that sent ice down his spine.

This wasn’t his little sister anymore.

Sam’s hesitation gave Star an opening, bringing up a knee she catapulted Sam across the room. He hit the cracked marble with a whoop, as the air was knocked out of him. Star got to her feet and closed in on a spectating Emily.

Cold steel glinted in his sister's hand. Forcing himself up, Sam flung himself at Star. She ducked his failing arms and he rolled across the floor, getting to his feet. "Star, stop!" He pleaded but a clenched fist sent him sprawling. Sam spat blood onto the dirty floor of the ballroom, "a little help here Thor!"

Thor reached Star and grabbing her arms whirled her around so that his body was between Star and the ghost. "Stop this Star." he told her in a calm voice as Sam picked himself up. Sam expected his sister to clock Thor as she had with him, but to his surprise, Star seemed unwilling to raise a hand to Thor. She let Thor push her away, her murderous eyes still fixed on Emily. Sam picked up a bit of marble flooring and while Thor had Star distracted brought it down on his sister's skull.

Her body crumbled to the floor.

Seven

“That was uncalled for.” Thor told Sam sternly, his face full of shadow. Sam dropped the piece of marble and leaned over, gasping for breath.

“It was the only way to get her to stop.” Sam panted. “We have to restrain her before she wakes up.”

“I doubt anything could hold her.” Thor said still giving Sam the evil eyes.

“That I can help you with.” A party goer appeared before them. He was tall with unruly hair and slender features. “My name is Edgar Rollins and I am a Minister.”

Thor stumbled backwards unused to specters appearing out of the blue, to Sam it was the norm.

“Why would you help you us?” Sam asked the ghost cautiously.

“Because you saved Emily.” The Edgar replied. “This thing is most unholy.” He spat disgustedly at Star.

“That unholy thing is my sister.” Sam growled.

“Not anymore I’m afraid.” Corrected the Minister. He patted Sam’s shoulder but all Sam felt was cold air. “There’s a cell in the basement,” he continued, “it was used as a...” Edgar trailed off trying to pluck the right word out of the air.

“Torture chamber.” Emily said suddenly, joining the conversation. Sam studied the young ghost girl with a profound sadness. She had been a beauty, which undoubtedly had caught her master’s eye. Brown sleek hair was pushed into a ponytail, wisps of stray strands crowned her round and pleasant face. Emily was a slip of thing, barely five feet tall and a deep hole dominated her stomach. Sam had to nudge Thor who couldn’t seem to tare his eyes from the gaping wound.

“Yes, well...as I was saying.” Edgar fumbled on, “I could cleanse it. That would certainly do the job for a while.”

Sam nodded his head, “sounds like a plan.” He scooped up an unconscious Star and followed the two specters out the ballroom and down solid looking steps to the dark basement.

“Will a dead Minister’s blessing still hold its power?” Thor whispered to Sam.

“Let’s hope.” Sam mumbled back heaving Star onto his other shoulder, the trials of the past few months were catching up to him. The basement wasn’t as unpleasant as suggested. There was a small window in the stone wall that let in the morning sun. There was a bathroom cornered off by a moth-eaten curtain. It also contained a moldy sofa and an upturned wooden coffee table.

Taking up the wall beside the steps was a huge metal cell. A bed had been stuffed in the corner, dried blood stained the yellowing sheets. Sam caught Emily’s eye and sympathy for the girl grew. People were the worst monsters.

The Minster chanted the Lord’s prayer while holding onto the bars. Sam put Star down inside the cell and felt the lock click into place when he shut the door

behind him.

“The key is hanging on that hook.” Emily said pointing to a crude hole in the wall where an iron hook had been forced into the stone, a set of keys hung from it. “He took great delight in watching me trying to get to them.” She uttered softly.

“And nobody helped you?” Thor asked in disbelief.

Emily smiled at his naivety, “no one dared go against a man as rich and as powerful as my master, though everyone in the house knew what he did to the help, including his young wife. She couldn’t even bring herself to look at me, to her I was just a girl with no name.”

“There!” Edgar declared, “that should hold her.”

“Thank you.” Sam turned to Emily, “you know why we’re here, don’t you?”

Emily nodded, “you want to free your sister from *him*.”

“How do you know that?” Thor asked with a perplexed expression.

“We may be dead and damned but we’re not stupid.” Edgar replied with conviction, “we all know of the soul-eater. He hunts us like cattle.”

“What do you know of him?” Sam asked the Minister, desperation creeping into his voice.

“That he is the dark one that consumes our souls is all I need to know!” Edgar spat, his eyes full of fear.

“His race once governed the other side,” Emily added pushing Edgar out the way with an annoyed glare, “they were created to guide the newly departed souls to where they needed to go. Heaven, hell or purgatory. However their leader had other ideas. He knew how much energy was in a soul and wanted that power for his own. He turned rogue and pleaded with the others to join him, to free themselves of bondage. They did and a bloody battle ensued between them and their creator.”

“Which is who?” Sam asked.

“I do not know.” Emily answered simply. “The Guardians, as they were called, were defeated and disposed of except for the one who persuaded them to rebel in the first place, *him*, their leader.” The air in the room seemed to get heavier, weighing on their shoulders. Sam collapsed onto the sofa, his strength utterly spent.

“He’s been in hiding ever since, waiting in the shadows.” Emily continued.

“Sam, he’s been waiting for Star.”

Eight

“How do you know all this?” Thor asked breaking the long stretch of silence.

“The dead are a network of souls,” Edgar answered, “there were a few remaining from that time. Not anymore of course.” He turned to Sam, “your sister took them.

“What does this have to do with Star?” Sam asked Emily, ignoring Edgar’s bitter words.

“The Guardian was made to ferry souls, not to reap them.” Emily replied, “even he can’t change this. Guardians cannot hurt their charges. That’s why he needs Star. The Guardian has been waiting for the one that’s powerful enough to do this task for him.”

“Then why not me?” Sam argued. The guilt wouldn’t be denied. He was the reason Star was in this mess. He had bartered his own life for Star’s, and that simply would not do.

“That I can’t answer Sam.” Emily said sadly. “Star is his chosen one.”

“Then how do we kill this sucker?” Thor asked defiantly when Sam gave into his despair.

“You can’t.” Edgar chimed, “The only one with power to stop the darkness is its chosen one. Star won’t do it because with every soul she reaps for him, the closer she becomes to becoming *him*. I’m sorry Sam but your sister is lost.”

“Then why bother to help us?” Thor demanded angrily.

“Because you saved Emily.” Edgar sighed warily, “and because of the service Sam and Star has provided for the dead, these past years. Now we are even.” With every word the Minister’s voice faded till there was only Sam and Thor left in the basement.

“I don’t believe this!” Thor kicked the coffee table sending it crashing into the stone wall. “We can’t give up, not now when we are so close...”

“You heard them,” Sam said, “there’s nothing to be done.”

“Seriously?” Thor snapped, “your just going to give up? Star never gave up on you Sam, that’s the only reason you’re standing here.”

“And I wish I wasn’t, believe me. I would rather be burning in hell then endure this but maybe Star’s right. She made her choice, maybe we should respect it.”

“To hell with that.”

“Look,” Sam got to his feet, “we’ve done all we can do for Star. You heard what Edgar said, Star has to kill it and I’m not giving up on her, but right now there’s nothing I can do. What I can do is cut off this bloodsuckers’ soul supply. We help these ghosts find peace. We set them free and Star can’t touch them, that is what we can do right now.”

Thor looked at the cell where Star lay then back at Sam, he nodded. “What do we need to do first?”

“We do nothing, I work better alone and someone should stay with her. I’ll go find Emily and see just what the hell happened here. I’ll check in later.” Before Thor

could object Sam flew up the steps and disappeared from sight.

Nine

It was well past noon when Star West stirred. Slimy stone greeted her as she lay on the hard concrete floor, trying to remember the events that had led up to this. “Bastard!” Star muttered getting to her feet, her fingers touching the melon-sized lump that had formed on the back of her head.

Thor got off the couch and moved closer, “in Sam’s defense you did start it.” The comment earned him a killer glare. Star pushed the door but it held fast, she gave Thor a questioning look. “We’re just trying to help you.” He said answering her unspoken question.

“Help me?” She spat back, “by knocking me out and keeping me locked up like an animal, how is that helping me Thor?”

Thor pressed his face against the bars, “you’re not well Star..”

Star rolled her eyes, “I haven’t got time for this.” She brought her hands up, palms outward like she had done when the doors to the ballroom had yielded to her but the cell door didn’t open.

Thor saw surprise rip across her pretty face and stepped back, “it’s been blessed Star, it’s escape proof.”

Just like that the girl in front of him changed. An expression of pure rage transformed her features, made her resemble a snarling monster. Star ripped at his clothes screaming like a woman possessed. Thor pulled away and Star hurled herself at the bars, hissing at him. “You have no idea what you’re playing with.” She told him in a voice not her own, it was deeper like a man’s but was inhuman. “My master will come for me.”

“We’re counting on it.” Thor said sadly before resuming his Virgil on the couch.

Sam cursed and sat on the floor. He’d been yelling his self hoarse for a good three hours and still no Emily. He’d been blundering around this damned hotel hoping for something that would give a hint as to what happened, again, nothing.

The rooms that were still accessibly gave no clue as to what had befallen the citizens of this town. Perhaps he should look elsewhere, maybe Main street, yet Sam felt in his bones that the epicenter was the hotel. It had emanated from here.

“You’re wasting time Sam.” Emily said. She appeared beside him so suddenly he nearly had a heart attack.

“Jeez!” He breathed holding his thumping chest.

“Leave Sam, now, while you still can.”

“That thing is going to come here and take your souls Emily, tell what happened so I can put them to rest.”

“There’s no resolving what happened here Sam. It was...”

“You were there.”

Emily nodded, “when I died I was unable to go to the light. My murderer still walked the earth. Going on with his life after he had ruined mine. I was governed by revenge Sam, but not even watching my murderer die of cancer, saved me. I felt cheated, that the world owed me a death. I’ve been stuck here ever since. I saw what happened that night, and was powerless to stop it.”

“Then don’t let history repeat itself Emily. We can help them find peace, just tell me.”

Emily studied him for a long moment before letting out a sigh. “It was December 23rd, a Christmas ball was being held in the newly built ballroom.” She began, “I watched them all arrive, the women in their elegant ballgowns, laughing and talking. They looked so happy...” she trailed off, lost in pity and grief and Sam knew enough not to push.

Emily flashed him an embarrassed smile, “the music was the most beautiful thing I had ever heard, it wafted through the hotel like fresh lavender.” As if on cue music reached Sam’s ears. “It was a truly magical night...”

Sparks seemed to fly from Emily’s hand and Sam was transported back in time. He was in the ballroom but instead of it being dark and burnt it was alive with music, laughter, and people. Sam smiled despite himself as Edgar the Minister floated past, swirling with a young woman.

Sam found himself mesmerized by the grandeur of the domed ballroom, by the finery of the clothes, the shimmering of champagne as it was poured, it was all like something out of a movie.

As he turned a flash of lightning lit up the ballroom. The guests gasped with awe and stared up at the glass domed ceiling. “This was the moment magic turned to nightmare.” Emily’s somber voice in his ear made Sam jump. Around him time slowed to a stop. The party goes locked into place, frozen smiles on their lips. The music still played despite the musicians that had ceased to play and now resembled statues. Thunder rumbled blotting out the haunting melody.

Sam followed Emily’s eyes and saw a bell hop. He was young, unshaven and looked out of place among the revelers, his red uniform soiled and unloved. As he watched the young bell hop took out a small flask from his trouser pocket and slipped its contents into the champagne fountain. “He’s spiking the punch.” Sam gasped as the young man quickly made his exit.

“The guests were busy watching the weather to notice.” Emily said, “it was like the heavens themselves had conspired against them.”

“Why would he do it?” Sam pondered distractedly. Maybe it was a joke, or he had a falling out with his employers, maybe whatever he had poured in the champagne was just meant to upset stomachs?

Another bolt of lightning restarted time, only this time the room seemed to have grown darker and colder. The temperature plummeted faster than belief. Sam started to shiver and clouds of foggy breath floated from his mouth. “What

the...?” A man standing a few feet away from him dropped his champagne flute, blood burst from his mouth, spraying the woman closet with crimson. She screamed and suddenly the whole ballroom had turned into a nightmare.

The guests dropped like flies, writhing in agony on the bloody floor. Others stamped on the dying trying to get out of this god forsaken room, but the doors slammed closed, locking the party goers in with death.

Sam could only stare, transfixed at how quick things had changed. “What happened...?” He breathed at Emily as fear stricken man in a suit ran straight through him.

“The poison took half an hour to spread through the guests, I just sped it up given that time is of the essence.

“The bell hop killed all these people?” Sam uttered with horror, “why?”

A shadow hung over the huge room, it crept slowly but surely over the walls extinguishing the light as it went, soon the ballroom was plunged into darkness that was only alleviated by the storm raging outside.

The screaming increased until a ball of flame seemed to erupt out of the last candelabra. Sam felt the heat against his skin as the fire ball raged over the party goers heads. The flickering orange flames transformed into a face that howled at them before the flames spiraled outwards and started to devour the walls of the ballroom.

Sam ducked and tried to roll of harms way but the fire moved like water, it enveloped him before he could react.

“Bored.”

Thor sighed and rose to the bait. “As soon as Sam comes back...”

“Aw, who’s a good little soldier,” Star interrupted, I never knew you followed so well. I should have bought you a leash.”

Thor gritted his teeth. He knew what she was up to and promised himself not to engage, but after two hours of Star’s constant taunts Thor was finding it hard to ignore as well.

“It’s not going to work Star. You’re staying in there till Sam gets back and that’s that.”

Something flashed in her eyes and they both knew that she had him exactly where she wanted. “Since you two are so cozy with each other perhaps it’s Sam you should be fucking.”

The air went from the room.

“I’m sorry,” Star laughed on seeing his shocked expression, “I know such a thing shouldn’t be brought up in polite conversation but lets face it Thor, you’re as damaged as I am.” Pain so acute that it actually hurt to breathe flooded Thor because he knew she was right. Even in her messed up state, he still loved her, wanted her, needed her, how fucked up did that make him?

Throwing her a killer look Thor ascended the stone steps and slammed

the door the basement shut. Leaning against the burnt wall he could hear her laughing.

“I know what happened.” Sam came stumbling out the basement, “you okay?”

Thor nodded, “I just needed to stretch my legs.”

“That thing, the Guardian or whatever,” Sam hurriedly continued, “it hasn’t just been sitting on its behind waiting for Star. It’s been enslaving people to do its bidding.”

“How do you mean?”

“It got the bell hop here to poison the ballroom. That’s how they died.”

“How did he manage that?”

“Emily says it promised the bell hop wealth beyond his wildest dreams.”

“So it lures you with promises, gets you to kill for it then...what?”

“The bell hop died in the flames.” Sam clarified. “Emily showed me how it all went down. The fire spread through the town. The Guardian’s been mass murdering, creating his own source of food. Leaving it to mature like wine before reaping.” Sam explained with excitement, he frowned at Thor’s distant look. “What is it?”

“Move!” Thor tugged on his arm and Sam staggered forwards, narrowly missing the basement door as it exploded off its hinges. Star stood in its wake, eyes glowing like rubies.

Sam pushed Thor away and sprang at his sister. Star swatted him away before spreeing him into the far wall. It gave with a thud of plaster as the two siblings disappeared from view. Thor followed through the cloud of plaster to see brother and sister taring into each other. They had gone through the wall and into the hotel’s chapel. Thor thought it strange for a hotel to have its own private chapel but now wasn’t the time to dwell on it.

Sam was bleeding.

Thor grabbed Star from behind and pushed her away. In his mind he saw Star’s moves before she made them so managed to stay ahead of the curve and out of her reach. Sam gained his feet and charged at his sister. The two punched and kicked at each other.

The earth beneath the hotel started to shake and the remains of the hotel started to crumble around them. A feeling Thor had never experienced before gripped him and he understood why he had been so reluctant to enter the hotel. For the first time Thor saw beyond a few minutes and knew what he had to do, why fate had brought him here, had brought him back to Star.

He would like to say that in that clarifying moment he wasn’t scared, but he’d be lying. Thor was terrified. With a deep breath he shut his eyes and stepped forward.

Into the path of a dark hurricane.

Ten

Star beamed at the sight of her master. A joy that gave way to horror when the dark tendrils of wind grabbed Thor's body and right before her eyes tossed him around like a rag doll.

"Thor!" She heard herself call out. Sam let up against her windpipe and turned his head in time to see Thor's body tossed aside like it was a piece of garbage.

"No." Sam let go of his sister whom he pinned up against the altar and ran at the Guardian. Star couldn't move, the sight of Thor's still body cut off the flow of blood. Time seemed to stand still as his lifeless eyes found hers. Something broke inside and Star crumbled to the floor. She hadn't cried in a long time but now the tears came thick and fast.

Sam slammed off the wall above her head and skidded across the dusty floor. Blood erupting from his mouth like a volcano of molten crimson.

"Fool!" Her master hissed, "no one can stand against me."

Emotion that had been drained from Star returned with a fury. The waves of pain battered off her insides, making her raw. The numbness had faded. Getting to her feet she turned on her master.

Saw the eater of worlds in his black robe with a necklace of skulls draped around its neck. Star looked on her master and felt...pure and red hot fury burn her. Letting out a battle cry that could pierce ear lobes Star charged.

Star and the Guardian collided with a flurry of fists. Each blocking the others. A headbutt stunned the dark figure long enough for Star's fist to find its mark. A sickening crack rang out in the small chapel.

Sam found his way vertical again and charged, the figure pivoted and Sam felt a flash of blinding pain in his temple, his legs folded beneath him.

Star felt the power the Guardian had imbued her with crackle like electricity in her veins, with eyes the colour of blood Star threw out her arms and purple electricity sparked from her fingers. A tidal wave of purple hit the dark figure and he fell to his knees.

"Sam now!"

Scrambling to his feet Sam grabbed the bit of rusty pipe beside his feet and drove it through the dark figure's chest. The thing roared with pain. Taking out the dagger it had given her to claim its souls, Star forced the blade into the thing's temple. "Go back to hell you ugly bitch!" She screamed before bringing up her left booted foot and kicked the dagger deeper into its cranium.

The hotel trembled with the Guardian's cries before they subsided and all that remained of the dark was a empty robe.

Eleven

The dead residents of the Hotel bade them goodbye as the Mustang crunched the gravel. Star watched night descend as Sam drove back to the farmhouse.

Hazel was on the porch steps as the car drew up. Star watched the woman's smile die as Sam retrieved Thor's body from the backseat. She wanted to look away as the woman crumpled but found unable to do so. Star's own tears clouded her eyes and instead of running away like she wanted to, Star moved up the porch and held onto Hazel. The two united by their grief.

"So are you going to tell me what he meant to you?" Sam inquired. Dawn scorched the sky as the last embers from Thor's pyre burned. Hazel had taken Sam's advice and had gone for a lie down, aided by two of her sleeping pills.

"I loved him Sam." She answered simply. "Did from the very moment he walked in Biology class." She smiled at the memory. Catching Sam's irritated expression Star explained, "you had joined the army, Dad was pissed, Mom was crying all the time, he was my little slice of paradise. Father didn't approve on the account of Thor being an outsider and a "weirdo". He told me that I wasn't to see him again."

"That sounds like Dad." Sam sighed, "I take it you didn't listen?"

Star smiled, "you know me too well big brother. We dated for three years and Dad never knew a thing. Mom did, she was my accomplice." The siblings laughed at the notion.

"So what happened? Why did it end?"

Star's smile died. "We were going to elope after finals." Sam stared with shock. "I told you Sam, he was the one."

"He get cold feet?"

"We'd already bought our bus tickets, I was to meet him at the station..."

"Tell me already!" Sam burst not used to seeing this side of his sister.

"It was the night of the car crash Sam. I never got to the station."

Sam's face fell. He had replayed that night over and over for years. He'd come back to tell his parents that he was leaving the army. Sam had their father so happy. They'd all gone out for celebratory meal on the way home a deer had jumped out... "so he went without you?"

"No. He came to the hospital but everything had changed Sam. Mom and Dad were gone and we were...different. I couldn't bring Thor into all of that, he was better off without me. I told him to go that we were done."

"You broke his heart." Sam clarified.

"To save him from all of this, yes."

"And look how well it turned out." Sam pointed out earning a sharp glare from Star.

"Hindsight is a cruel thing Sam." She snapped.

"I didn't mean...I'm sorry Star, he was a good kid."

"Yeah, he was." a tense quiet settled over them.

"So, maybe we should hit the road? I think Hazel could do with some alone time..." Star raised her brows at him. "Hey, if you say you want to retire and live on a farm, milking cows everyday of the week then sign me up."

Star smiled despite herself, "and give up this glamorous lifestyle? You must be kidding." She teased. "I just need time Sam, I think we both do." Sam wrapped an arm around her shoulders and together they watched the sun rise.

The end.

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