
What the Dead Fear



a novella by
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"The boundaries which divide Life from Death are at best shadowy and vague. Who shall say where one ends, and where the other begins?"
--Edgar Allan Poe --

Part 1

Juniper Townsend died of carbon monoxide poisoning at the ripe, old age of twenty two. She went to bed one night after a dinner of wine and pizza and never woke up.

The first night, her spirit stood on the pond behind her mother's house. She was dressed in the University of South Carolina t-shirt and shorts she wore to bed, her black hair secured in a ponytail.

"Hello?" She called into thick fog and cattails around her. There came no reply.

Bitter cold was her only companion in that loneliest of lonely. It pervaded her being until it was the only sensation she felt, apart from the numbing dread that held her in place.

"Is anyone there?"

And she couldn't for the life of her figure out why or how she stood on the surface of water. Shadows of what might have been fish swam and slithered beneath shimmering ripples.

She thought, *This must be a dream.*

Afraid to move, Juniper pondered how much colder she could get if submerged in the murky depths below her feet. She tried to will herself awake. When that didn't work, she chanced a step, and then another.

The spring air was heavy with the smell of leaves and blooming flowers. Toads and crickets sang in tune with the gentle lap of pond water at the bank.

Juniper walked onto grass. She remembered sleeping in the carriage house behind her mother's house, so she headed in that direction.

No stars dotted the sky. No moon lit the way. The lawn up to the carriage house lay open in darkness. To her left, to her right, no lamps lit the windows, as if the world had shut her out in the gloom.

So much alone, inexplicable sadness filled her. The closer she came to the last place she remembered being, the more she feared what she

might find. Something was oh so very wrong.

She came to the door, which opened with the slightest push. She moved quietly through dark rooms to stand over her lifeless body in the bed.

Juniper appeared to be sleeping; that was all. There was no visible trauma, only ashen skin and perhaps some darkness around her eyes.

"Wake up." She commanded her mortal shell and concentrated as though she might control it from outside. She recalled reading about out of body experiences. Maybe that was the explanation.

She held on to denial for a while, contemplating the various possibilities for the cause of her predicament. Denial is a shade of hope, in a way.

"You're dead, you know." A voice like a small child said from the shadows behind her.

Juniper wheeled around.

"Who's there?"

A blond cherubic girl in jeans, a pink sweater and matching knitted hat stepped into the muted light streaming from the window.

"It's okay. We all die."

Those words, spoken with such ease from the rosebud lips of a child, shattered the final fragment of hope. Juniper's dread gave way to bottomless despair.

From the first flutter of perception at the center of the pond, she had already known, deep down. Spirits always know.

There would be no return to college, no more dates, no more jogging wooded trails or afternoons spent in the library or the coffee shop. Normal had become a far away dream. Reality was a harsher place in which she had nothing, no heartbeat and no future.

She touched her face, her physical face, on the pillow.

"Gas from the furnace poisoned you."

"How?" Juniper asked, but the girl had vanished.

The rising sun flooded the room through the windows.

Fog seeped in through cracks and seals. A mass of it enveloped Juniper, pressed against her with a gauzy touch. She shut her eyes as it carried her from dawn.

Where do spirits hide during the day?

She found a barren wilderness shrouded in haze. Leafless limbs of

charred trees pushed into a low hanging barrier of gray overhead. Tangled grass mottled with shadows covered the ground. Wide trenches split the earth in jagged lines. Everything smelled burnt and somehow wet at the same time.

Death is lonely. Death is dark.

Juniper moved along a path with no idea as to where she would go. She knew only that she desired company. Surely other souls existed in the hereafter. She didn't have far to go before she found what she was looking for.

"Hi." The cherub child stepped into her path to grin up at her.

This was the company she needed.

Juniper bent down, put her hands on her knees, "What's your name?"

"Cricket."

"Well, that's sort of a dumb name. That can't be your real name."

"What's yours?"

"Juniper."

She scrunched up her face, "That's sort of a dumb name, too. At least I'm not named after a bush."

Juniper didn't argue.

"Alright, Cricket."

An icy wind gusted through the trees, bringing with it a faint sound like a pack of howling wolves. Branches around them creaked and groaned. The grass whispered.

"We should hide before the jackals come." Cricket took her by the hand and led her to a wildly twisted black oak. They climbed gnarled roots to branches well above the ground. The girl settled with her back against the trunk and hugged her knees to her chest.

"What jackals?" Juniper finally asked after several moments of searching the ground below.

The howling merged with the wind to become screams of anger, and the sound tore through the forest like a raging storm.

"The jackals are Gareth's minions. Be quiet or they'll find us."

Jackals came. Black, smoking shadows flew swiftly over the grass.

Juniper saw them first through the fog, a pack weaving around trees and rocks and leaping over the trenches in the ground. They didn't look solid until they were almost at the base of the tree in which the girls hid.

The pack sniffed the ground. They carved grooves into the dirt with their claws, and they paced among roots. They knew Juniper and Cricket were nearby but couldn't quite get a handle on exactly where.

Juniper turned to the mist again, perhaps to see if any more jackals were heading their direction, and found a man sitting next to her on the branch. She gasped.

"Where did you come from?" Juniper held the fear from her voice.

"Everywhere and nowhere." He looked around forty years old and had a sweep of unkempt, dark hair and an eight o'clock shadow. His eyes were palest grey, the same shade as the fog around them. He wore a midnight blue trench coat with a hood.

The jackals on the ground heard the voices above them and raised howls into the sky. Then the pack settled among the thick roots. Some sat at attention. Some lay down.

She glanced at Cricket. The girl was no longer there.

There was something fearsome about the stranger – those eyes – so full of intelligence and devoid of compassion. The way he looked at her, as though reading her mind, brought a terrible unease.

"Those are your dogs?" She asked him.

"Jackals." He corrected her. "They are mine. They find things for me, people I mean, but sometimes they do take measures to enforce the rules. They're good boys and girls."

"Are you a ghost too?"

He laughed.

Juniper liked his smile, even if there was something a bit off-kilter about it.

"My name is Gareth." He put his hand out for her to shake it.

That's when she saw the claws. He had overgrown fingernails, the color of which matched his eyes. They had dirt jammed underneath.

Juniper swallowed at the sight of them, but shook his hand nonetheless.

"I'm Juniper." She tried to ignore the clamminess of his skin against hers and held her gaze to his face. He was nice enough looking (apart from the soulless quality of his eyes) that she could get past his hands.

"Nice to meet you, Juniper." Gareth released the handshake. "I'm sorry to inform you that my visit is more business than pleasure."

She worried the strange man would cause her harm, though she

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wasn't sure what harm could befall a person who had already died. He wasn't an angel, obviously. And Cricket, she was scared enough to take flight when he appeared.

Juniper scooted away from him, closer to the trunk of the tree.

"Do you know where you are right now?"

She shook her head no.

"This is Limbo, specifically we are in Day Limbo. This is where wandering spirits come during sunny hours. Night Limbo is where you stood on the pond and saw your mortal remains."

"You were watching me?"

"I don't need to watch to know." He tapped on his forehead with a claw. "Limbo may look wild, but let me assure you that order is present."

"I don't see much of anything with the exception of you and the dogs."

"Jackals," he corrected, "as in relatives of Anubis, the Egyptian god of the dead."

"Sorry. I knew they were jackals. Calling them dogs is just so much easier, don't you think? Less intimidating?"

"No." Gareth did not look amused. "They are keepers of order in Limbo, as am I." He paused, "The state of Night Limbo is so very close to the world of the living. You'll be able to see everything. You may even be able to touch it. But never affect anything on that mortal plane of existence. If you must haunt, please do so in the stealthiest of manners. Only observation is permitted."

"What can the dead do to the living?"

"Nothing. That is the point. You've seen ghost stories, films about poltergeists and such, I trust?"

"Yes."

"Good. Don't cause any trouble like that. No slamming cabinets, no light flickers or broken picture frames, and certainly do not ever possess a mortal body...for any reason."

"What if I do? Are you going to hunt me down?" Juniper smirked.

Gareth did not.

"Yes." He turned gravely serious. "My jackals and I hunt offenders. I condemn their souls to eternity in Limbo's prison."

She asked, "Is that what Hell is?"

"Some people might say so, but no, Voldrin Prison is not officially

Hell. However, much like Hell, it is a place from which no one is paroled. There is there, and that is that. There are bars and chains and misery. There is penance, as well, in the form of pain I am tasked with inflicting. I couldn't bear to see anyone as beautiful as you there, Juniper. Please heed my warning. You should cross to the other side as soon as you have the opportunity. Limbo is no place for anyone." Gareth gave a pained smile.

She blinked, and he and the jackals were gone. She was alone in the tree.

Apparently abrupt exits were the norm in the spirit realm.

She waited for her companion to return.

"Cricket?" Her voice echoed.

No response came.

Juniper climbed down. A dirt path took her through a grove of yet more of the black and bare trees. She heard nothing from the wilds surrounding her. No birds called. No breeze stirred.

The path crossed into rocky terrain. Pebbles, rocks and boulders lined the sides of the trail. Those turned into larger mounds, which led to hills. When she grew tired, she took a seat on a low, flat slice of rock. She lay on her back to stare into the endless gray on gray above her. The place had no sky, she was sure.

This is what the dead do. She thought. They lie around being worthless and feeling sorry for themselves. Fantastic.

Minutes passed. Hours marched.

She imagined a future with no purpose. What good is an eternal soul with no meaningful way to pass the time? Forever can be an empty place when spent on nothing more than roaming a desolate borderland.

Gareth advised her to cross over - to some place better, she assumed, but she had no idea how to do so.

Juniper closed her eyes and tried to sleep. She eventually gave up with an exasperated huff and rolled onto her belly.

She noticed a bit of pink among the grayscale - Cricket's hat in the middle of the trail.

Juniper called out for the girl. She hopped to her feet and hurried to the hat, picked it up. She searched the rocks around her.

"Are you here?"

She discovered Cricket behind her.

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In life, Juniper was never one to hug people she didn't know well, but in the forlorn mist of Limbo, she took the strange child into her arms without hesitation. Cricket hugged her back and then withdrew.

"Where did you go off to?"

"Gareth is a very dangerous person. If you see him, you should run." Cricket took Juniper's hands into her own. "You must be careful."

"I will."

"Good. Are you ready to head into Night Limbo?"

"I think so."

The child held onto Juniper as the rocks around them darkened to fade from view. Then mortal night, illuminated by electric lamps, appeared around them.

Part 2

"This is Mom's kitchen." Juniper recognized the dark cabinets and counters. She recognized the feeling of the ceramic tile floor under her feet. She recognized her mother at the kitchen table.

Francine Townsend sat at the round table with her back to the shaded bay windows. Head down, she traced her finger along the label on the bottle of wine next to her.

Of course her face was flushed red and streaked with drying tears.

Her only child had died. Francine's heart was broken. The bottle was nearly empty, much like the rest of the house.

Juniper lived with three roommates at an apartment near school most of the time, but there was always the expectation that she would come home to visit. Not anymore. If only she had stayed in the house like her mother wanted her to.

Juniper said, "I should have woken up or smelled gas or something. No. I should have stayed in my old room. I just wanted some time alone."

"She'll be happy again some day. She has memories of you."

"I want her to know I'm here. I want her to know that I still exist."

Cricket rested her chin on the table and her hands at her cheeks.

"We aren't allowed. You'll have to wait until you meet her in the afterlife."

"That doesn't make me feel any better."

"Watching her grieve won't make you feel any better either. This is a private moment for her. We should move on."

Juniper reached down to touch her mother's hair but stopped herself. She sighed, then left the kitchen and the house.

In the front yard, she looked down and realized she still wore the clothes she died in.

"Am I stuck wearing pajamas forever?"

Cricket giggled, "Of course not. You look how you want to look. You can change whenever you choose. Just think of what you want to wear and it should manifest."

"Finally something I'm allowed to do." She closed her eyes. She shook out her dark hair so it fell loose over her shoulders.

Red t-shirt with the black spray-painted star logo of a local indie record label, black jeans, black boots.

"Much better." she said.

Cricket approved, "Very hip."

"Hip?"

"Um, cool?"

"You aren't really a kid, are you?"

"Nope. Where do you want to go?"

Juniper walked down to the street. The pavement, parked cars and grass were wet from evening rain. The full moon shone between patchy clouds.

"What are we supposed to do - just hang out and walk around?"

"You're in Limbo. What did you expect? You'll have to cross over if you want a more fulfilling existence."

"I don't recall anyone offering me an option."

Cricket frowned.

"A portal usually opens just after you die. Most people walk right in. Damaged souls or people with unfinished business are the ones who don't enter. There wasn't any portal?"

"No portal."

"I've never met anyone who ends up in Limbo against their will."

The pair strolled together to and beyond the subdivision entrance. People out for walks or jogs passed without noticing the spirits. On the other sides of windows, the living tended to the needs of loved ones or performed mundane tasks like cooking or cleaning. The more Juniper

saw, the greater she ached to join them. Her time had ended, and there was nothing she could do about it. She was lost to anyone who loved or needed her.

She and Cricket wandered until they came to a two-story brick apartment building with beat-up cars in the parking lot.

"My friend Nikki lives here. I haven't seen her since Mom's Christmas party. I want to go in."

Seeing her best friend would make her feel more connected. Seeing Nikki, someone so close to her own age, might allow her to experience life vicariously.

She passed through the closed door, ascended two flights of stairs. She crossed the threshold and found a mess.

A pizza box, cans, and other garbage littered the floor and furniture in the living room. A couple of holes were punched through the dining room wall. The sink overflowed with dishes in the kitchen. Farther in, she found clothes carpeting the floor in the hallway and the bedroom.

She and Nikki played together. Juniper remembered her honey-haired friend on playgrounds, in the shade of clubhouses too. They shared dolls when they were smaller. In their teen years, they debated which boys were cute. They curled each other's hair for proms. Both were only children serving as sister to the other. Only when Juniper left for college, Nikki stayed behind.

This cramped, cluttered life wasn't what Juniper envisioned for her friend.

Nikki's parents had the means to offer her a strong start to adulthood. She had a full-time job at a bank. The last Juniper heard, she was training to become a loan counselor. She was independent. Somehow she'd ended up immersed in dysfunction.

Nikki lay in bed awake with her back to a man in a chair in the corner by the door.

He was a burly creature - shirtless and hairy, fat, much older than Nikki and Juniper. His eyelids drooped under a trucker style hat with a barbecue restaurant's happy pig logo on it. An empty pint of gin hung from the end of one of his sun-baked arms.

He muttered to himself.

"Stupid bitch, can't clean, don't work, worthless sack of..." His voice trailed as he nodded off.

Was he talking about Nikki? She told Juniper at Christmas that she had a boyfriend and that she was pregnant. She seemed happy. Surely this wasn't the father of her child.

Nikki, with her delicate features and outgoing personality, could have any boy she wanted in high school. She wouldn't have settled for this life. She wouldn't have to.

This couldn't be the man.

Juniper noticed cuts across the knuckles on his left hand.

No.

Visions of him yelling at Nikki, throwing her into walls and furniture flooded Juniper's mind. She saw liquor bottles in the sink, a broken lamp, dishes smashed on a wall when dinner wasn't good enough, cigarette burns when his woman spoke out of turn in front of his clique of equally scummy comrades. His face turned red, veins bulging in his forehead when he screamed at her.

Juniper went to Nikki's bedside to check her face for injury.

A swipe of ruddy purple bruise marred her friend's left cheek. Her arms were scratched in places and showed circular burn scars up to her elbows. A blanket covered her body from the chest down, which spared Juniper from seeing any further injury this less-than-man may have caused.

Juniper felt gutted. To think this beast had put his hands on Nikki (especially while she carried his child) sickened her. She left the room behind. She couldn't handle the sight of either of them.

She stopped at the bathroom door. The mirror lay shattered, shards everywhere, some over the counter and sink, some on the rug, some speckled with blood.

Cricket told her, "This won't end well."

"She's pregnant." Juniper said.

"How far?"

"I can't remember. I should have paid more attention."

The night of the Christmas party, friends and family crowded the Townsend house. Nikki had come alone. Juniper, who shared the hosting duties with her mother, spoke to her friend only briefly.

"Seven months? Eight months?" She guessed. "He's going to hurt them."

Cricket nodded solemnly.

"Man is too often the downfall of woman."

"That's an awfully feminist view for someone who chooses to reside in the body of a eight year old girl."

"Never underestimate the power of adorable."

"I have to do something. I can't just let him hurt her or the baby."

"I won't try to convince you to let this course run naturally. Just remember the consequences. Gareth may look like a man, but he isn't human. He has centuries of experience hunting offenders. He will find you."

Death was more than the loss of the physical.

If Juniper were alive, she would have swept into that apartment like the devil, ripping through the mess, tearing through the man to rescue mother and child. She would have brought a sheriff and Nikki's parents.

Limbo's rules handicapped her.

Anger at the situation – both Nikki's and her own – simmered in her throughout the night. She paced the bedroom while Cricket watched from the corner with wide eyes.

Gareth told her she could observe, so that is precisely what she did. But she longed to do more. She longed to hurt the man, so content in his drunken stupor.

The smug bastard wielded his control violently and had the nerve to sleep. He deserved fitful nights of remorse. He deserved to burn with guilt in his subconscious.

Part 3

The two spirits watched over Nikki until the empty liquor bottle slipped from the man's fingers. Nikki fell asleep shortly thereafter.

Juniper and Cricket were whisked back to the other side at sunrise.

Day Limbo meant another hunt by Gareth and his jackals. They came into view first as darkness moving through mist, then morphed into solid shapes as they approached.

Cricket took her leave before they arrived and begged Juniper to come with her.

Juniper declined. She couldn't explain why, but she wasn't scared of Gareth. Perhaps it was the smoothness in his voice or the way he looked at her.

The jackals arrived first. They surrounded the large rock on which she sat. Instead of attacking, they circled, grumbling the way real dogs sometimes do when they don't get their way.

They were all charcoal with eyes and teeth to match the color of their fur. They had tall, spear-shaped ears, narrow muzzles, lean tails. When Gareth arrived, they all sat like good doggies.

He emerged from the fog, moving along the trail between the rocks, with his hands in his pockets. He took a seat next to Juniper on her rock.

"People typically flee when they know I'm approaching, just so you know."

"Innocent people don't flee. Only offenders are punished, correct?"

Gareth smiled, reached up and petted one of his clawed hands down her long hair.

"You don't fear me, do you?"

"I don't."

He clenched his jaw. His pale eyes narrowed.

"See, that just won't do. Give me your hand."

She hesitated, "Why?"

"Because I want to show you something."

Juniper offered her hand, palm up.

Gareth gently grasped her wrist to pull it closer.

She thought, at first, that he might attempt to read her palm.

He appeared to inspect it, and then he traced a line with the sharp fingernail on his right index finger from the inside of her elbow down her forearm. He pulled back when he reached her wrist.

Searing pain shot from the line into her arm and fingers, up to her shoulder, back, legs and neck.

Juniper screamed into the sky, tried to fall away from Gareth's cruelty.

He held onto her, all the while intently observing her reaction to the agony he inflicted.

The burn waned.

Voice shaking, she managed to demand that he release her.

He bent forward.

"I may not be allowed to destroy your soul, but I can cause enough pain to make you beg for the end of your existence. That was a taste. Are you afraid?"

She nodded.

"Good." He patted her hand.

That time, she recoiled from his touch.

"I know you want to intervene in the situation with...Nikki, that is her name? I can sense intent to break the rules from miles away. You cannot change her course. Such things..." He shook his head and looked down. "Voldrin is no place for pretty birds like you."

"I would sacrifice for the right cause."

He scowled.

Her arm blazed again, that blinding, mind-numbing assault.

"It's my choice." She recovered more quickly from the second attack to stare him down. "You can't stop me from sacrificing myself, can you?"

The jackals around them shifted. They let throaty growls in a chorus of canine angst.

"I can't stop you." He rose. "I wish I could."

Juniper watched him and his pack of dogs disappear into the fog. Then, she took the opposite direction on the trail. She needed to form a plan before night fell. She needed to decide how far she would go.

Part 4

"A lot of help you are." Juniper said to Cricket later.

"I told you to run. It's not my fault you didn't listen." She came out from behind a tree.

The two of them held hands as they passed into Night Limbo.

"We're going to Nikki's house again, but there's something I have to do first."

They manifested in Francine Townsend's kitchen once more. Juniper's mother, under a solitary light in an otherwise dark kitchen, washed dishes in the sink. Her hair was tied in a rough ponytail and her clothes, a rumpled t-shirt and a pair of jeans, were the same as the night before.

Juniper watched her from the shadows for a few moments.

"What are you going to do?" Cricket asked.

"I'm here to kiss her goodbye."

"Touching her is against the rules. You can't -"

"I'm not worried about the rules."

"You'll risk condemnation for a kiss?"

"I'm going to risk condemnation for something more important. Like I said, this is just goodbye."

"You can't help your friend. I know this helplessness is frustrating, but order exists for a reason. There is a natural progression in which mortal events occur. Destiny is real."

"Destiny is crap."

Juniper stepped toward her mother. An odd sensation came over her. Air around her seemed to thin. Her body became more corporeal. She carried her own physical weight, and she knew that if she touched an object, it would move. She had awakened her ability to manipulate the living world.

"Touching her is your turning point. Once you make contact with the living, you have officially broken the rules. There will be no going back."

"I know, Cricket. Stop nagging. Give me some peace so I can make the most of this. Leave if you're that scared."

The girl sulked.

Juniper touched her mother's cheek.

Francine put her hand to her face where her daughter's fingers left a cold feeling. She turned from the sink and scanned the kitchen for the source of what she probably assumed was a draft.

Then, Juniper the wandering spirit embraced her mother. She hugged her as tight as she could. She kissed her.

"I love you, Mom. I'm sorry."

Francine leaned back against the sink. She went pale.

"Juniper? Baby?" She looked right through her daughter, but she knew.

"I'm here."

"She can't hear your voice." Cricket told her.

Juniper grabbed a cookbook from the kitchen island to hold it in the air.

Her mother's face lit with happiness.

"You're still alive! I mean, not alive, but your soul, oh baby doll. I never should have allowed you to stay in that damn carriage house."

Juniper went to the writing board on the wall over the desk in the corner. She uncapped a marker and wrote: *Can't stay. Luv u always.*

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Howls came from somewhere outside.

"Now you've done it." Cricket said. "Gareth is coming."

"We aren't in Day Limbo. He can cross into the mortal world?"

"I didn't know he could."

They rushed to the front window to find the night sky aflame with angry light from down the street.

Gareth's voice echoed, "Juuuuniper."

"Shit." She shut the curtains. To Cricket, she said, "I thought we'd have more time than this." She went back to the kitchen.

Her mother searched the room calling her name, oblivious to the malicious presence outside.

"We can go out the back."

"They will still catch us." Cricket wrung her hand.

"We have to try. We can make it to Nikki's apartment. Leave if you want to."

"I'll stay with you for now. You know the area. He doesn't. It might be enough to slow him down."

There came a second howl, a closer one.

"Out the back door." Juniper commanded.

They dashed through yards, by wooden swing sets and gas grills, past decks and torches, and a couple enjoying a glass of wine on their patio. They hurdled fences with the grace of supernatural beings. They left the howls behind, but only temporarily. Gareth would catch them. Juniper knew she couldn't think about that.

She pushed all notion of consequence aside. Whatever happened to her didn't matter. The short amount of time she had before Gareth would likely capture her meant the difference between life and death. She refused to waste those precious moments worrying about herself.

Then the wandering spirits were through a door, a hallway. Did she hear the raised voice of the boyfriend? Through the apartment door. Same mess. Same sad life.

Shouts came from the bedroom.

Juniper found him standing over Nikki with a belt. The pregnant girl shielded her face with one arm and cradled her swollen abdomen with the other. There were welts on her arm.

Juniper couldn't believe the size of her.

The jackal howls closed in again. They moved quickly. Were they

flying?

Cricket knelt beside Nikki.

Juniper made a stand between the yet again drunken beast of a man. His unbuttoned work shirt had a nametag sewn on. The devil's name was Greg.

She waved her hands in front of his face.

"Leave her alone! See me?"

Greg didn't see.

She ripped the belt from his hand.

He looked at his empty hand stupidly, "What the -?"

Juniper threw it at the wall.

"You want to pick on someone? Pick on me!" She screamed in his face, channeled her rage down her arms and shoved his chest.

He staggered.

"You did it." Cricket said in amazement. "Do it again."

Juniper wasn't listening, but she did shove him again. She punched him in the face, and his head flew back.

The jackals scratched the window ledge outside and the glass.

The man swung his thick arms through his ghostly assailant's body.

"What is this?" He looked to the left to the mirror on the dresser, saw the reflection of a very dead and pissed off girl, and let a surprised yelp.

Juniper opened her mouth to release an unearthly scream. Her voice climbed higher until it vibrated the walls.

Greg covered his ears. He fell, hitting his head on his way to the floor.

Still, she kept on until the sound shattered the mirror and the window.

Jackals flooded the room.

Juniper felt a tiny hand around hers.

Cricket led her over to the largest shard of mirror on the floor. They dove in together.

Part 5

Water. It felt like diving into a pool of warm water.

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Juniper and Cricket passed through the mirror, back to Day Limbo, only it wasn't daytime. They landed roughly on ground that felt like gravel. Before Juniper could scramble to her feet, Cricket pulled her by the hand.

The sky was darker, the fog was darker. A vicious red light seemed to come from behind everything - trees, hills, the horizon.

Again, they ran.

As the two of them reached the edge of a wide trench in the ground, a sound like a sonic boom shot through the sky. Gareth had arrived.

Cricket told her, "I know a place we can hide, for a while, at least." She dragged Juniper over the side of the trench.

They slid down the earthen wall to land on a ledge.

Juniper opened her eyes, looked down, and cried out at the sight of an abyss below. The only thing keeping them from plummeting into the darkness was the six-inch deep ledge on which they stood. She flattened her body against the wall in front of her.

"We're going to fall."

Cricket shook her head and shushed Juniper with a finger to her lips. She pointed to the red sky.

"No speaking." She whispered. "He might not find us."

How long could they stand on a ledge? It's not like Gareth would give up.

An army of jackals pounded across the land above them. He had summoned more of the beasties or brought them into existence or did whatever increased his number of minions.

Juniper watched as they passed overhead to block out the sky like a shadowy swarm. There were hundreds, maybe a thousand canine bodies, where he previously had used twenty.

Gareth called her name, sounding almost playful, "Juuuniper. Come now. You can't hide from me. We knew our relationship would develop into this. You're my property, darling." His words echoed, "We'll be together."

Chains rattled. He planned to restrain her.

Gareth made a long leap over the trench, the tail of his coat flying behind him like a cape.

Once he was gone, Cricket scooted sideways along the ledge.

Juniper whispered, "Where are you going?"

"Juuuniper." Gareth's voice but farther away.

"I told you. I have a place to hide. Did you think this was it?"

She followed Cricket down the ledge, which slanted deeper and deeper. She wondered if escape from such a place was possible. No ladders hung over the wall. She didn't expect to find stairs. How much better than prison could an eternity in desolate blackness be?

The swarm plus Gareth made several passes overhead. He could sense her presence but apparently couldn't pinpoint an exact location. Always with chains in hand, he alternated between expressions of affection and threats. He laughed occasionally too. Life in Limbo had affected him with this multi-faceted madness. Limbo was no place for anyone. Of that he had been quite correct.

The more progress the girls made, the quieter the sounds from the surface became. The rattle of chains was lost to distance, as were the howls of jackals.

Cricket informed her, "There is a man who lives at the bottom of the trench. He will help us because he is Gareth's enemy. He's jealous of him."

"How could he possibly be jealous?"

Gareth of the claws, palest eyes, and responsibilities that included torture was not a creature to be envied. He was sad, certainly lonely. He lived a miserable existence.

"Mordecai was a guardian once, centuries ago. He had the same duties as Gareth. He lost his role because he interfered. He lives as a refugee."

A golden glow like lamplight penetrated the dark ahead of them.

Cricket continued, "Mordecai became attached to a living boy named Josh, an orphan. Josh lost his parents at age four. Mordecai watched him transfer to home after home. Other kids picked on him, as did some of the foster parents. Mordecai empathized with the child's loneliness."

"He saved him." Juniper finished.

"He foresaw the boy's death and intervened. Mordecai crossed over during the day to push the boy from the path of an oncoming delivery truck."

Cricket stepped off the side of the ledge.

Loose, grey soil covered the floor of the trench. The source of the

lamplight pushed back the dark haze.

There was a cottage with a gable roof.

The home was rather pleasant in spite of its less than ideal location. The shutters and trim were a friendly garden green. The grid windows and cherry-coated gingerbread trim could have belonged in any Midwestern town.

There should be flowers out front, Juniper thought, but the front yard lay as barren as the rest of the trench.

The front door opened.

Part 6

Mordecai was a giant, not a fee-fi-fo-fum giant, but definitely over seven feet tall. His hair was a halo of stringy, sickly yellow. His face was gaunt, long nose like a bird. He had pale eyes like Gareth, a long coat like Gareth, but Mordecai's outerwear appeared more beaten. His back humped so badly his body looked broken.

He looked down on the two girls.

"Whaddyou want?"

"Mordecai, please let us hide. Gareth is hunting us."

He grunted at Cricket, "Gareth is a twit. He's not hunting you."

He looked at Juniper. Then Cricket looked at her too.

"What did you do, girl?"

"My friend, she's pregnant -", Juniper began.

He stopped her with a raised hand.

"I've heard enough." He grunted. "Come in. Touch nothing."

Juniper was astounded by the hominess of the cottage. Judging by the shabby appearance of its occupant, she expected to be greeted by an equally shabby interior. She expected emptiness, grayness, little or no furniture.

Rather, they were greeted by décor that would have befit a kindly, old granny's house - olive green easy chairs with knitted afghans folded over the back, a flower-patterned couch, warm wooden coffee tables complete with coasters, shelves laden with thick volumes and topped with taxidermy animals staring with marble eyes.

"Mordecai, what have you done?" Cricket asked. "Did you take these things from the living?"

Juniper picked up a cellular phone lying on a table next to the door. She flipped it open, pressed the button. No power. The numbers on the keypad were backward.

"Don't judge me, imp." Mordecai settled his large frame into a recliner. "Don't tell Gareth unless you want to make an enemy of me."

"How did you even do it?"

"Wouldn't you like to know."

Juniper put the phone back on the table and said, "You can do whatever you want."

He harrumphed.

"Hiding is not whatever I want."

"Can I travel to the mortal plane from here? I left my friend with someone who wants to hurt her and her baby. I have to go back."

Mordecai shook his head. "You have to be on the surface to cross." He rested his elbow on the arm of the too small chair and rested his forehead in the palm of his enormous hand.

"That's not true. You're lying." Juniper accused.

"What? Young lady, you may take your leave if - "

She interrupted him, "How did you get all this stuff? You have a way. Tell us."

He stared at Juniper.

"They're just reflections. I didn't steal anything."

Cricket gasped, "You still have the mirror. Where is it?"

The frown on his face deepened.

"You can't take it. The mirror is mine."

"Just let us use it for a few minutes so she can see her friend. We won't take it, I promise."

"Impossible."

"If you don't let us use it, I will bring Gareth into this pit and show him what you've done, this place."

"Insolence!" Mordecai slapped his big hands to the arms of the chair to steady himself as he stood. "You've forgotten the hierarchy, little one. I was a guardian." He bellowed down at the seemingly eight year old girl from his full height.

"Well you aren't a guardian any longer. Stop arguing, old man. Get the mirror. There are two young lives at stake."

Mordecai, grumbling and cursing, lumbered through a doorway.

What the Dead Fear

Juniper waited until he was out of the room before she spoke.

"What does the mirror do exactly?"

"Mordecai used it to observe the activities of the dead on the mortal plane."

"Does Gareth have a mirror?"

"Gareth doesn't need one. He's a generation younger and psychic. It's like evolution, only much faster."

"I guess I should be thankful I don't have to deal with Gareth's successor."

"The problem with Mordecai began when he took up watching the living instead of the dead."

Juniper was about to ask Cricket how she knew so much about Mordecai when he returned.

Gilded, ancient looking figures like pharaohs, servants and livestock framed the reflective surface. At the top, a shining falcon spread its wings wide.

Mordecai opened the hinged arm attached to the back of the large mirror to stand it upright on the coffee table. Juniper sat on the couch.

"How do I do it?"

"Touch the mirror. Say her name."

Juniper did as she was told.

The reflection of the cottage interior rippled and gave way to an image of the cluttered living room. It was daytime on the mortal plane. Sunlight streamed through the sliding glass balcony door to illuminate clusters of garbage, cans, half-eaten food hardening on plates and bowls.

Nikki sat on the couch, rubbing a fresh welt on her jaw.

The brute, Greg, menaced over her, threatening her with a shaking fist.

"Do it again. Bring back the devil."

"I can't. I swear I don't know where she came from." Tears dripped from her face and she begged, "Please don't. You'll hurt the baby."

She angled her stomach away from him and shielded it with one arm.

Juniper had made the situation worse.

Why wouldn't Nikki leave? Anywhere that Greg wasn't had to be better.

He grabbed her collar, pulled her up.

"You're so lucky to have me." Then he kissed her hard on the lips, too hard.

Nikki grimaced but didn't pull away.

"Nobody else would put up with your worthless ass." He released her. He tousled her hair as though she were a child, then sauntered into the kitchen.

"That man is crazy on crazy." Juniper mumbled.

"You see? The girl is fine. Time to put the mirror away." Mordecai reached for it.

Something white flew from behind the kitchen wall and bounced across the table in the dining room.

"Wait." She stopped him.

Another dish, a plate, broke against the wall.

"Shit." Juniper said to herself.

Then came a glass and the voice of the brute, "Sick of wallowing in mess like a pig."

He stalked back into the living room.

"Clean this filth. This is what you should be doing for me. You respect me."

On command, Nikki fell to her knees on the floor.

Greg's face darkened to a malevolent purple. And the grin. He enjoyed the domination; he relished the control.

"Clean, clean, clean!" Greg roared over her as she scrambled to gather the mess in her arms.

Rage surged through Juniper. She clenched her fists, harder each time the man came closer to kicking Nikki. She could see in his eyes, he was contemplating it, the way he looked at her down on the floor, the way his eyes keep shifting to her stomach.

A kick would end the pregnancy for sure, maybe even kill the baby, possibly Nikki too.

The mirror was more than a window; it was a portal. Cricket had used the mirror in the mortal world to cross over.

Juniper launched from her seat on the grandma couch.

Greg pulled back his work boot clad foot.

Juniper shut her eyes and dove headlong through the mirror as Cricket had done before.

She passed through ice-cold darkness into daytime where the dead

aren't permitted to travel. She swooped in from above on a gale. Greg felt her too.

Her gust of wind threw back his hair. Shock replaced anger, and he stumbled backward against a chair at the table.

"Get out!" she shouted.

Juniper channeled her rage and shouldered into him as hard as she could.

The brute landed on the table to bring the flimsy dining set crashing down.

Sunlight in the room deepened to crimson.

Gareth.

This is how he would find her. Violations set off the psychic radar.

A hand on the back of her collar yanked her back through the icy void, back to the living room which had also fallen under Gareth's red glow.

"You! In my house!" Mordecai threw her to the floor.

He looked bigger than ever.

Cricket appeared next to her.

"We have to leave."

Mordecai went on the rampage, knocking over everything his hands found - a lamp, a vase, a stack of books.

"You led that bastard to my house."

"He isn't here yet. We're going." Cricket hoisted Juniper to her feet.

Mordecai stepped in front of them to bar the exit.

"You will take her to Gareth." He told the little girl.

"I will not."

He bent over to grab her by the shoulders, breaking her hold on Juniper.

"No!" She squirmed. "I won't. Let me go."

"You have exposed my house. You will take her to him now." His eyes flared orange and locked onto hers. "As your guardian, I command you."

Cricket stopped struggling. Her arms dropped to her sides.

Mordecai released her.

"What did you do?" Juniper swung the girl around.

Her eyes were orange like the guardian's.

"Now you'll see what she truly is." Mordecai bared his teeth.

Cricket transformed. A thin, black arm with segmented fingers punched through the child arm from inside. The other arm did the same, and flakes of pale skin dissolved.

Cricket's expression never deviated. She didn't wince when long legs sprouted beneath her, when the cherub head burst to let out the wide head of the thing inside.

The monster grew, taller than Juniper, the furniture, even Mordecai himself. She was all black with antennae and bug eyes like a cricket. She stood on two legs.

"Take her to Gareth now." He repeated.

Monster that was Cricket lunged forward. It snatched Juniper's arm and before she could draw enough breath to scream, they were bounding off into the night.

Mordecai called after them, "Seek me here no more. I must move my home because of you. Better, seek me nowhere."

Part 7

Cricket carried Juniper under her arm like a football. The once-child, now-creature trotted to the wall of the trench.

With a tremendous leap, Cricket was on the wall, climbing with her free hand and clawed feet.

Juniper, for fear of tumbling into the trench below, didn't struggle or demand release. She held onto the creature's arm and stared at the fiery sky above and tried not to think about the tortures awaiting her in Gareth's prison.

Even worse, she had failed to save Nikki and the baby. Or did she? Maybe her attack was enough to scare the abusive pig or distract him long enough for him to reconsider his intentions. Regardless, she would never know if her effort was worth the punishment she would receive.

Cricket hit ground level.

Ash rained from the angry sky.

Gareth waited a few yards away, holding the manacles and chains.

The monster lurched forward to drop Juniper on the ground.

"Good girl, Cricket."

She threw back her head and let an otherworldly, forlorn cry. Then

she turned around to hop back into the trench.

Juniper considered running, but the ring of jackals constricted around her. She rose from the ground.

"Taking you to Voldrin gives me no joy."

"Liar."

Gareth looked into her brown eyes with his gray ones.

"I know inevitability. Some people possess a certain quality of spirit which makes them more likely to break the laws of Limbo. Hold out your wrists please. This process will be far less painful if you don't struggle."

"For whom?" She stepped away. "Why would I go with you willingly? You said you would punish me."

Several jackals behind her growled.

"I wanted you to fear me so that you would follow the rules. I don't want to hurt you, but I do have to enforce order." He moved toward her.

He eyed her with a hungry look. A grin crept up one side of his mouth, exposing a sharp canine. He kept company with jackals because he was practically one of them. Regrettably, her lack of trust in him was irrelevant. At that particular point in time, escape was not an option.

She reluctantly offered her wrists.

Gareth clamped manacles to them.

Each manacle connected to a short chain, which connected to a longer chain. Gareth held the end like a leash.

They made an odd procession – guardian, prisoner, and the pack bringing up the rear.

Down a trail, they entered a grove of trees with dagger-sharp branches. They crossed trenches, sometimes on rickety bridges that groaned and threatened to drop them into chasms. Juniper couldn't deny the relative appeal that darkness held now.

Her imagination conjured visions of medieval torture devices. She pictured knives, racks, spikes filed to hideously thin points. She didn't dare ask her captor what he planned to do exactly.

Gareth didn't speak to her during their journey either. He didn't make threats. He didn't attempt to offer an illusion of comfort. Perhaps he was deciding what to do with her.

Limbo had dimmed to night when they came to a field covered in brittle, wheat-blond grass. A breeze carrying mortal souls to the mortal world brushed her hair from her shoulders. Her freedom slipped farther

away. Life did too. She couldn't watch the living. She couldn't even get close. Juniper felt more alone than she ever thought she could.

The number of jackals dwindled as they reached the entrance to a cave in the middle of the field. One by one they dissolved into the fog like nightmares at dawn. By the time they reached the cave, only five remained.

Their entrance into the cave crashed any remaining hope for a quick escape. The rock walls shut out the expanse of the field and the overhead gray. Amid golden light, stalagmites stood guard at increasingly close proximity, crowding in a way that only added to her confinement.

"This is the tunnel. The prison is inside a mountain, but don't worry. We aren't descending. We aren't beneath ground level."

She thought it absurd that he believed such a detail made any difference.

"Should I take comfort in that notion?"

Gareth glared over his shoulder, his pale eyes glimmering in the cave light.

"Some people associate a descent with an entrance to Hell. You would do well to appreciate the small things just as you would do well to respect me in my house."

Voldrin Prison was situated inside a hollow portion of earth the size of a mountain. The structure was a fifteen tier step pyramid, the top levels of which hung forward as if the building were caught in the midst of toppling over.

Harpies circled above like vultures. They were bald women with leathery bat-wings for arms and hawk-like talons for feet. They charged one another and beat against barred windows. A couple of them dove low to get a good look at the new prisoner, and Juniper saw a keen hunger in their shining eyes.

Always claws that catch. Every creature in Limbo seemed to come equipped with them.

The prison walls bled molten fire from the many cracks in the stone. Liquid embers dripped from rough-cut corners to land on each next floor down until they hit the ground. There, the fire pooled and let off puffs of smog that clogged the air. If the prison truly wasn't Hell, it did a fair impression.

Ghostly, hollow-eyed faces of prisoners peered out the many

windows.

So many.

When they saw Gareth approach, a cry went up among them, a melancholy wail that weighed heavy on Juniper's soul.

These were the people who couldn't leave the destiny be. They couldn't let go of the living world. They would suffer eternally because of it.

She was one of them.

A massive set of wooden double doors groaned as they opened for the master.

Juniper and Gareth wound down a narrow corridor of dark stone.

"Stay close to me when we reach the dungeon. Stay clear of the bars unless you want them to grab you."

After the initial labyrinth, they came to the main hall of the prison.

The center of the building was open, all the way to the highest level, Juniper suspected.

Thousands of cells were stacked as far up as she could see.

Again the souls cried out, wordless, discordant moaning and shrieking.

Their faces were wrong. Eyes were shaded sockets. Mouths hung open to bare more blackness inside. Arms were gray skin stretched over bone frames. Hair and clothes were sparse or gone completely.

Cricket told her that souls looked how they wanted to look.

These people had lost all hope, all willingness to do anything but continue to exist. Sorrow had diminished them to a state of inhumanity. They knew death beyond death.

"What did you do to them?" Juniper asked, horrified. "What's wrong with them?"

"The same thing that's wrong with you." Gareth snapped.

"I don't look like that. Where are their eyes?"

"The souls are lost."

Gareth didn't put Juniper in a cell like the others. He escorted her to a cage at the middle of the hall. It had bars on four sides and a ratty cot against one wall.

He removed the manacles using a skeleton key he wore on a long chain around his neck, then urged her inside with a hand on her arm.

The door let a raucous clang as he closed it.

"I have to go back out on patrol for a while. I wouldn't try to talk to the others if I were you. They're...damaged." He pulled the hood on his coat onto his head and turned to leave. His canine entourage accompanied him.

A white spotlight far above glared brilliance onto her and the cage. She felt vulnerable and exposed under the stark illumination. She couldn't make out the faces beyond the bars.

Juniper would have rather occupied a cell along the wall. Not only did the cage make her the center of unwanted attention, it caused her to wonder why Gareth placed her on such a stage. If all the prisoners began their sentences in the center cage, he made the others watch him strip the humanity from the new captives. Watching someone endure the same torment meant reliving their own.

She felt multitudes of hollow eyes boring into her from around and above.

With Gareth gone, the din of misery died away. The lost souls still called out, but as individuals and not as a constant stream of racket. There were no words, no prayers or questions or declarations of any kind. Instead they released bursts of emotion, most often in the form of wails or moans.

They were the heartbroken. Each of them had once been passionate, loving enough to sacrifice themselves. For that, Gareth took almost everything they had left.

She couldn't let the so-called guardian do the same to her, not without a fight.

She tugged on the door, which was locked, of course. She tried to squeeze between the bars - also a failure. The only way she could leave the cage was with Gareth's key.

Juniper then flopped onto the cot.

Nikki might be hurt or in danger, and there was nothing Juniper could do.

She regretted not caring more while she was alive. She kept recalling her memory of the Christmas party, that flurry of relatives, friends and neighbors. Were there signs of abuse then? She couldn't remember for certain and that was the worst thing. Almost.

Not knowing, never knowing if her sacrifice made any difference, that would erode her sanity. She would be one of the lost souls soon

enough.

Juniper lay on the cot and curled into a ball and cried.

Part 8

Gareth trudged into his prison, looking as exhausted as any mortal man who worked a physically taxing job. His jackals were on his heels, as always.

The lost souls raised their voices once more.

"Shut up! Be silent a while, for the love of God."

Gareth disappeared into a shadow and reappeared with a table and chair, which he dragged over to the side of Juniper's cage. He set the chair to face her and seated himself.

She moved the cot over so she could sit on the edge to face him from across the table.

"You told me that you tortured people."

He chuckled, "Are you placing a request?"

"No. I just hadn't seen you do any torturing. I thought maybe..."

"I was a liar?"

Juniper shrugged.

Gareth rose from his seat and approached the nearest cell.

"Wait! I didn't intend for you to hurt anyone. Please."

He unlocked the door, threw it open so hard the sound of it striking the wall echoed, and he went inside.

The prisoners around them fell silent.

The woman in the cell screamed something bordering on an intelligible, "No!"

Juniper couldn't see them. She curled her fingers around the bars and tried to discern their forms in the dark beyond her spotlight.

They struggled, giving glimpses of pale skin and overcoat shadows.

"Hold still."

Flesh thumped against the floor and the wall and there was a sickening smack as he struck her.

The lost soul unleashed a vehement, pained screech that was cut off by a sound like choking.

"Please stop!" Juniper pleaded.

Gareth emerged. He wiped his hands on his hips and slid the door

closed.

He returned to his side of the table. He removed his long coat and hung it on the back of his chair. His shirt was a fisherman's crewneck sweater of a dingy oyster color.

"Don't look at me like that. This is my duty. People must respect the boundaries."

"What good is punishment if the lessons can never be put into practice? You're a sadist."

"I am necessary." He sighed. "Do you know how to play checkers?"
What in the world?

"Checkers?"

He nodded, ever so solemnly.

Her pregnant best friend might be hurt, dying or dead, and her warden wanted to play checkers.

"Sure. Why not?"

He took the game, a cloth game board and a burlap bag with the pieces inside, from a pocket in his coat. He rolled out the cloth.

"Would you like to play red or black?"

"You carry the game around with you?"

He responded calmly, "If you plan to mock me, I can put the game away and go torture someone else. I can assure you that listening to them scream is far more unpleasant than a game of checkers with me."

Juniper glanced at the cells nearby.

"I'm not mocking you. Red, please."

He opened the bag to spill the game pieces onto the cloth. They were pebbles. The red half of them appeared to be painted.

"How did you color the pebbles? That isn't blood, is it?"

Gareth smiled, baring his pointed canine teeth.

"Now where would I find blood in Limbo?"

"Where would you find paint?"

He waved away her inquiry as he set up the game, "Let's not worry about such things. It's not blood. Leave it at that. Go first. Make a move."

She moved a pebble from her front line. He did the same.

They played for a few minutes before Juniper asked, "Can you see into the mortal plane?"

"I'm not checking on your friend for you."

"Why not?"

What the Dead Fear

Gareth cleared his throat and smoothed the front of his sweater. "If she is still in distress, you might try to escape to make another attempt to save her. If you did indeed save her life, others may be encouraged to imitate your behavior."

"Who? The only other human souls I've seen in Limbo are your prisoners. Is there anyone else or did you lock them all up?"

"Doesn't matter." He growled. "I refuse to justify your actions by offering you conclusion."

Juniper put her attention back to their game.

Then Gareth asked, "How did you manage to break the law during the day? You accessed the living world during a time in which you shouldn't have been able. How did you cross?"

"I want to know if Nikki and her baby are alright first."

He slammed his hands on the table.

"Tell me."

"Why should I?"

He snatched her hand and pulled it close to him. He pressed the palm of his free hand against hers.

Pain, first icy, then sharp, stabbed up her forearm into her shoulder, down the left side of her back.

She screamed.

The imprisoned souls around her screamed too.

"Tell me." He snarled.

"Stop."

He released her.

She fell back onto the cot, head spinning.

"There was a man with a mirror. It looked Egyptian or something. It was a window."

Gareth's eyes widened, "Mordecai? Where is he?"

"He had a house at the bottom of the trench where Cricket brought me to you."

The jackals lying on the floor stood in unison.

With a gust of wind, Gareth and his entourage vanished.

"Asshole."

The cacophony of screams around her subsided.

She lay on her side and faced a shadowy corner and tried to think of ways to escape.

After a few minutes of blessed silence, she heard the tick of claws across the stone prison floor. A shadow appeared near the cot, on the other side of the bars.

"Juniper." A voice whispered.

She looked over to see Cricket in a smaller version of her insect form. Her eyes were no longer glowing.

"Glad to see you." Juniper snapped. "Hope you don't plan to attack me."

Cricket hung her head, "I'm sorry, Jun. I didn't have a choice. Please forgive me."

She remembered the way Cricket resisted Mordecai's order.

"What are you?"

The insect put her hands on the bars.

"When Mordecai was guardian, I served him."

"Like Gareth's jackals."

The insect nodded.

"I wish you'd told me."

"I should have...I just wanted a friend." She looked at the floor, "I came to you on the night you died because you hadn't yet traveled to Limbo. You didn't know what I was. If you knew I was a monster, you would have run."

"Probably. Can you break me out of here?"

"Only Gareth can open the cage."

Juniper groaned in frustration, "Have you seen Nikki? Is she safe? Can you at least give me some information?"

"She isn't safe. The man is afraid of her, but he still won't let her leave. He slept on the couch with a loaded gun under his pillow."

"I have to get out of here."

"No one escapes. It's impossible."

"You got in."

"I'm a minion, like the harpies outside. They can tell I'm one of them so they leave me alone. They'll attack you."

"Oh," She frowned, "Gareth is out looking for Mordecai. I told him about the house in the trench."

"He already moved it."

"Good. The fact that he's still out running around seems to piss off Gareth."

A plan began to form in Juniper's mind. She wondered if the capture of Mordecai exceeded the value of her own captivity.

"Mordecai's freedom is Gareth's humiliation." Cricket confirmed.

Juniper couldn't ask her to trade her guardian for someone she just met, could she? No. But there was one question she would ask.

"Do you think Gareth would bargain for my freedom?"

"What kind of bargain?"

"Maybe we can offer him the mirror."

That was a reasonable suggestion, not a soul for a soul. A mirror was simply an object.

Cricket's black eyes narrowed.

"I don't think either of them will go for that."

"I'm going to offer it to Gareth as a trade so he'll take me outside. I don't stand a chance in here."

The insect girl nodded, "I'll watch for you. I have to go."

She put a slim, insect arm and three-fingered claw through the bars.

Juniper took the strange hand in her own.

Cricket said, "Be careful."

"You too."

Juniper watched her back away and blend into the shadows.

Part 9

Gareth returned with no Mordecai, hours later, Juniper guessed. She had lost all track of time.

In a huff, he stormed into the prison and dropped into the chair at his table. He glared at the floor with his hands in his coat pockets.

"No luck?"

He grimaced, "No."

"Too bad. You seemed eager to catch him."

He looked at her, "Mordecai is the worst kind of offender. He's a hypocrite. He captured more of these souls than I did. I'm a failure because he is free."

"What would happen if you released them?"

"Who?"

"The souls, the prisoners - what if you let them go?"

"Then I would be replaced and hunted by my successor."

"Like Mordecai."

"This line of conversation is trouble I won't have. I won't release anyone." He shuffled his feet on the floor. "I should've been smarter. When Cricket brought you, I should have known he was nearby. I was so focused on you..."

"Yeah, I'm a total distraction." Juniper decided to spring her idea on him. "What if I could get Cricket to lead you to Mordecai?" She would convince him to settle for the mirror later if she had to. The initial offer had to be irresistible to him.

"Are you asking me to trade? Let you go?"

Gareth rested his elbow on the table and his chin in his hand. He studied her for a few moments.

"Would you interfere on the mortal plane again?"

"Probably. I need to see if Nikki is okay."

"So, even if I let you go, you would probably just end up here again."

"It's entirely possible." Juniper nodded. Regardless of whether the trade idea worked out, she would make a run for it. Any time outside the prison walls held the possibility for an escape.

Gareth, warden of lost souls, opened the cage door. He held up the manacles.

She grumbled inwardly. She wouldn't be able to flee at the end of a leash.

"Is there any way we could skip the manacles this time? Mordecai attacked me before."

His eyes narrowed, "If you try to trick me, I will no longer exempt you from the torture. You will receive the same treatment they receive." Gareth stroked the side of her face and hair. "Part of me would enjoy undoing your beauty."

"The manacles can stay off then?"

"Yes."

The lost souls raised a cacophony of cheers and sobs and animalistic roars of anger. Some slammed against the bars. They wanted out as badly as she did.

Juniper gave them a last look as she left with Gareth and his jackals. She never wanted to come back, and she certainly didn't want to become a lost soul.

Back through the open interior of the hollow mountain, beneath

patrolling harpies, through the cave tunnel and its golden light, they traveled together again. Day Limbo was in full effect with its light gray sky and haze all around. Being outside made her feel like part of the world again.

At the cave entrance, Gareth asked, "Where should we go?"

"Cricket usually finds me. She might appear more quickly if we put some distance between us and the prison." Juniper wasn't sure the girl would show herself at all with Gareth close by.

"Walk then, out in front where I can keep an eye on you."

They doubled back to the trench in which Mordecai's house previously rested. Juniper kept walking, the more distance, the better, onto a lowland where a forest of those bare, black trees stood.

"Stop." Gareth ordered. "Do you have a destination or did you just want to take a pleasure stroll?"

"I thought she would have found me by now." Juniper cupped her hands around her mouth and yelled, "Cricket! Come out!"

"This isn't going to work."

His jackals paced, sniffing the ground and the air.

As Gareth ran low on patience, Juniper ran low on time. She only had a few minutes until the guardian would give up and turn back.

She looked longingly into the trees. If only she could run fast enough...

"Cricket!" She called out again, desperation cracking her voice.

"Enough. This is a waste of -" Gareth stopped.

Juniper looked down the path into the trees to see the shape of a little girl in a knitted hat come out of the fog.

Part 10

Cricket, in human girl form, ran to Juniper and threw her arms around her waist in a hug. She glowered at Gareth.

"I want Mordecai," he said, "Bring him and you can have your friend back."

"Letting people go free is against the rules. I don't believe you."

"She'll break the law again. I have no doubt of that."

"How am I supposed to get him to come?"

Juniper could scarcely believe what she heard. Cricket seemed more

than ready to give up her master. Perhaps the bug didn't feel any loyalty after all. Maybe she'd even considered this particular possibility for resolution after she left Voldrin. She chose Juniper's freedom over the guardian's.

Gareth shook his head and smiled, "That's not my problem, is it? Your old master or your human friend. We'll wait here."

Cricket squeezed Juniper's hand, "I'll try."

She went back to the forest and the path into the trees. She faded back into the gloom.

Gareth motioned for Juniper to sit under the closest tree. She lay on dark grass and looked up to the branches stretching over her like great arms. He lay next to her to stare into the sky.

The jackals sat in a circle with their backs to Gareth and Juniper.

"I'll miss having you as a prisoner."

"I was only there for a day."

"Still. No one has ever played checkers with me."

"Never?" She turned to look at him.

He smiled at her.

"Gareth, what are you? You're not an angel, and not human."

He scowled, "I am called nothing but guardian." He rose and walked a few steps to gaze out over the flatland from which they'd come. He crossed his arms.

Juniper sat up on her elbows.

"I'm sorry if I offended you. I just wanted to understand -"

"Some things don't need species labels. They are because they exist. I'm a guardian. That is all."

She thought for a moment.

"You don't know what you are."

"This conversation is over."

Juniper felt sympathy for him, despite his cruelty. Did he even truly comprehend what he did to the souls he kept?

"Why does she mean so much to you - the living girl?"

"She's like a sister to me. She would do the same for me if our situations were reversed."

"Do you really think she wants you to sacrifice yourself for her? Wouldn't she rather see you move on? Wouldn't you rather go than stay here?"

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"I don't know how."

"What do you mean you don't know how? That's absurd. There's nothing to know."

"No portal opened for me."

He snorted, "You must be lying."

She glared at him. "I have no reason to lie about a portal."

"I knew there was something different about you." Gareth turned. He tilted his head and scrutinized her. "You look human enough on the surface."

"I am human!"

A short knife with a scalpel-like blade appeared in his hand.

"Maybe we should cut you open and see what's underneath." He stormed back over to grab her wrist and pulled her to her feet. "We can't have a demon running around Limbo."

She yanked her arm away.

"I am less demon than you."

Discordant howls of pain echoed in the forest.

Juniper and Gareth forgot their argument. She backed toward him as though he might protect her from whatever approached.

Cricket, in true cricket form, struggled through the forest, running, pulling herself along on two legs and one arm. She fell into trees, breaking branches near the path under her weight. Her eyes shone a vivid orange. She howled again. Under one arm, she carried a large, gilded object - Mordecai's mirror.

"Cricket?" Juniper tried to run.

Gareth's hand on her arm stopped her.

"Thief! Traitorous devil! Come back." Mordecai's voice came not far behind his minion.

Cricket was resisting. Her guardian master was ordering, and she was resisting and suffering, by the look of her. She collapsed at the edge of the trees.

The mirror flew from her hand. Juniper retrieved it and hugged it to her chest.

A massive shadow like wings swept along the treetops to shade the forest and the ground around them in night. The shadow condensed to the shape of a man.

Mordecai landed between Juniper and Cricket. Fear spread across

his face when he noticed his nemesis standing with Juniper.

Gareth stepped forward. He held the manacles.

"Time to pay your dues, old one."

Mordecai sneered, "Give back my mirror."

He stretched his hand out.

Gareth lunged for Mordecai who leapt straight into the air. He shot after, chains in hand. He wielded the manacles with determined grace, seeking a wrist or ankle.

The guardians became a blur of black as they tussled in midair. Fists flew. They kicked and grabbed and took turns throwing one another into earth and the edge of the trees.

The jackals vaulted upward to join their master in his battle. They swarmed the guardians as a smog-ridden cloud with teeth, and the sounds they made, so like desperate shrieking, pierced the fog.

Juniper rushed to Cricket's side.

The girl was awake, up on her arms, and catching her breath. Her dark eyes had returned to their normal state.

"Come on. We have to go."

Cricket nodded. She stood with Juniper's help.

As they plunged into the forest, Juniper took one last look at her guardian. He fought Mordecai fearlessly in the air, then on the ground. He would be alright, she assured herself.

The girls ran, off the path, in a thicket of close, spiny branches. Juniper carried the mirror under one arm.

Cricket picked up speed and then slowed down. She stretched, ran a few steps ahead. She returned to Juniper's side.

Her insect face grinned, "Hang on."

She took Juniper by the waist and lit into the air. They broke through the tops of trees in a long leap. After coming down on the opposite side of the forest, Cricket jumped again and then again.

Cracked lowlands passed beneath them, a river too. There were misty hills and gorges.

Juniper saw people.

Four of them congregated in a ring of stones.

The sight of them filled her with joy. She repressed the urge to beg Cricket to stop. She ached to know what they were talking about, who they were, why they remained in Limbo.

Cricket stopped to rest at the edge of a canyon, far from the fight between the guardians. Land around them was open and barren of any plant life.

"I think we're far enough." she said.

They sat on the ground. Juniper laid the mirror flat on its back.

She asked, "What if she's dead?"

"You're dead." Cricket reminded her. "Even if she didn't make it, she exists somewhere."

A roar of anger from Mordecai sliced across the land.

"How could we possibly hear that? We're miles away."

Cricket stared into the distance behind them with an expression of concern.

"He lost." She cared about what happened to her guardian.

Juniper put a hand on her friend's shoulder.

"I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize. His plight is his own doing for ordering me to turn you in. He didn't have to do that. He lost his temper." She paused. "I never thought Gareth would actually capture him."

For some inexplicable reason, Juniper was relieved that Gareth won. She was coming to think of him as her own guardian, even though he had never really protected her from much of anything but the punishment he inflicted on other souls who broke the rules.

"Now, save your friend."

It was daytime. She would need to use the mirror to cross onto the mortal plane.

A still very pregnant Nikki faded into view. She stuffed clothes into a suitcase on the bed.

Greg wasn't in sight.

Juniper leaned forward into the mirror and that familiar sensation of falling into water. She entered the bedroom through a piece of the dresser mirror still clinging to the frame.

A sound like muttering came from the direction of the living room.

Juniper found the boyfriend pacing from living room to dining room and back again. He carried the pistol in one hand and slapped the heel of his palm against his temple with the other.

He appeared to practice a conversation he intended to have with Nikki.

"No one leaves me. I seen that devil. You tell it to be gone. You and that baby are mine. Make it understand."

Nikki was leaving him...officially and there was nothing he could say to make her stay. He could kill her and her unborn child though. That's what this rehearsal was about. He would make this short speech as Nikki walked out, and when she didn't listen, he would have all the personal justification he needed to pull the trigger.

Greg stopped pacing, "No one takes my family from me."

"I do." Juniper told him.

He couldn't hear her, but that didn't matter.

She would ensure Nikki had a clear path to the door. She would be Nikki's guardian angel.

There was a jingle of keys from the bedroom.

Juniper moved to stand in front of Greg.

Nikki's footsteps in the hall.

"I'm leaving, Greg. Don't try to find me or I'll call the police."

The man tightened his grip on the pistol, cocked the hammer. Maybe he'd decided against the speech after all.

Juniper felt the tingle that told her she could push through the veil between the living and the dead. She gathered her energy, fed it with both love and anger, and used it to knock the gun from his hand. The gun skidded across the floor in the kitchen to hit the wall.

Greg watched in disbelief.

"Go to Hell. Take your devil with you." He lunged for Nikki, hands outreached.

Juniper kicked the back of his legs, then threw him the rest of the way to the floor by the back of his sweat-stained work shirt.

He scrambled away on hands and feet, searching the room for some indication of her location. He locked eyes on Nikki as he tried to stand.

Juniper punched him in the chest.

"Stay down!" Her voice rang against the apartment walls.

"Juniper?" Recognition crossed Nikki's face. "Is that you?"

Juniper, afraid of losing concentration, didn't answer. She kept her focus on the pathetic sleaze at her feet.

Nikki watched Greg struggle for a couple of seconds before saying a quick, "Thanks, Jun." and bolting for the door.

Her foot on the brute's throat, Juniper smiled as she listened to the

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footsteps on the stairs, the swing of the front door, the squeal of car tires.

What do the dead fear? They fear for the fates of the living, despite their witness to the hereafter. They fear retribution, but perhaps even more, they fear helplessness and insignificance.

"Get off." Greg tried to push her foot away, but his hand passed through her.

She put more weight on.

"I want you to swear never to touch her again." Her voice sounded strangely hollow.

He heard her that time.

"I won't touch them." he choked.

She pressed harder.

"I'll leave them be. I won't even look for them."

"I will always be watching."

That, of course, was a lie. She would spend the rest of eternity rotting in a cage, enduring torture, or running for her life.

The world around her went crimson.

Gareth was coming.

Juniper ran to the bedroom. She climbed onto the dresser and back through the mirror the way she came.

Part 11

Cricket blocked Gareth by planting her body between him and the mirror.

Chains for Juniper hung from his hand.

His jackals, rumbling a blend of eagerness and anger, circled them both.

This is the way Juniper found them. She emerged from the mirror to stand behind her friend.

The sky had once again fallen red, and the raised hackles on the canines' fur bled a flurry of ashes into the air. The ever-present fog had transformed into ominous clouds to bar the land and the canyon from view.

Once again, there would be no escape. He was ahead of the game this time.

"You run me ragged, Juniper Townsend. I barely had time to lock

Mordecai in his cell."

Cricket broke into a sob, which seemed unnatural for such a strange beast.

Juniper stepped closer to Gareth. She moved past Cricket.

He tightened his grip on his chain, but his hard expression faltered. She told him, "I think you should let me go."

"I can't do that."

"Yes you can. You did it once."

"I knew you couldn't leave her to destiny. You had no choice but to break the law again and end up back in my charge. I would be replaced if I let you free."

She approached him without fear.

"That's not true."

Juniper moved closer still, until they were chest to chest.

"Jun," Cricket began in a soft voice.

As Gareth looked down at her with his death pale eyes, the sky cooled to a gray blue color.

"I can't." He insisted in a weak voice.

Juniper took his hand into hers. The chain in his other hand evanesced, and she took that hand as well.

"Would you really lock me in a cage?"

"Yes."

She reached up to kiss him.

The growling around them ceased as the jackals crumbled into nothing.

Gareth's lips were cool and so was the hand which slid along her neck to touch her cheek. He held her to him for several moments.

When he finally pulled away, he told her, "No one has ever kissed me. I still -," His voice broke. "Maybe I can give you a head start."

She smiled up at him, "Thank you."

"You should use that head start to cross over."

Juniper backed away a step at a time, "Like I told you, no one offered me the chance for anything but Limbo. I think that means I'm supposed to stick around."

Cricket picked up the mirror.

"The mirror!" Gareth came for it.

Before he could get near them, Cricket grabbed Juniper and leaped

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into the air. The ground and the shouting guardian fell far away.
They were free...for now.

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