

Dark Night of the Mind

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Acceptance of Senior Honors Thesis

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### Abstract

This thesis is composed of five short stories held together with an overarching meta-narrative. Each individual story and the framework narrative deal with the themes of psychological abnormalities and the supernatural. A variety of techniques are used, including first, second, and third person point of views, epistolary formatting, metaphysical storylines, and various dialects.

Dedication

To Jake Rogers, for keeping me sane in a crazy sort of way. I never would have finished this thesis without you.

## Dark Night of the Mind

**Zero Point: One**

Welcome to the author's mind. Forgive the darkness. That's how she likes it. You now have a unique opportunity to look inside her head if you chose to explore her creations, the children of the endless labyrinth of her thoughts. In front of you, you see six doors, each one dark, each one different. Once you enter, the door will close, and you will not be able to leave until the story you will see has ended. When the story ends, the door will open once more, and you will return here, to the zero point, where you will be directed to your next door. Inside the rooms, many of those that you meet will be disturbed, not quite sound in mind. Some of the things you see will be influenced by the supernatural. You will be the observer in each case, watching the events that unfold, but mostly unable to interact with the people you will see. In some cases, as you see the tale play itself out, you will listen to the protagonist narrate the story to you. You will know only what he or she knows and see only what they see as events occur. In instances where this is not the case, before you enter the room, you will be given instructions on how to proceed. As you approach each door, a name will appear above it, telling you which world you are about to enter, giving you a clue about what you will encounter inside. You may or may not be also given some additional information before you enter, but that entirely depends upon the whims of the author. She is in control here, never forget that. Do you still wish to continue? If so, please approach the first door.

Your first door is old cherry wood, with a pleasant looking white picket-fence around it. Notice the gilded, old fashioned lettering that is beginning to appear above the

mantel of the door: "Leestown." When you open the door, you will find a bedroom with an old fashioned cot, a small bedside table with a bowl and pitcher, and a little table with a box underneath the window. Go straight to the table and open the box. Inside it, you will find several dated letters. Read them in order. Once you finish the letters, look outside the window and watch what happens. Are you ready? If you are, then you may enter.

**Leestown**

October 25

My dearest Catherine,

Leestown is an odd little place. It was renamed for Confederate General Robert E. Lee after “The War,” or so the local bartender tells me, and all the people living here come from families who have lived in this village since before the Civil War. They’ve all regarded me with something akin to irritation ever since I didn’t attend church services yesterday, an irritation that only seemed to intensify when they saw my cell phone this morning. Still, I don’t think it’s all that much of a problem. I think they’re just resistant to the intrusion of anything modern, a theory which is borne out by the fact that they have no electricity or modernized plumbing. My landlady, Mrs. Riley, tells me, “There ain’t no need for none of that. Things’ve always stayed the same around here, and we like it the way it is.” That seems to be the general attitude of all the people I’ve met. It’s a little strange, but it’s the perfect setting for my book.

Mrs. Riley’s house is next to a quaint country church, and the windows of my room overlook the cemetery. Some of the headstones appear to be quite old, and I intend to take a look at them tomorrow morning. My living space is sparse but adequate, so you don’t need to worry about my comfort. It will take some time to adjust to having to ask the maid to heat up water for me so I can take a bath, but I’ll get used to it. Mrs. Riley is a wonderful cook, and I’ve had as much excellent southern food as I can eat. Over dinner this evening, Ed Riley informed me that not many people visit Leestown.

“Other folks tend to leave us alone, since the War,” he said gruffly. When I asked why, he shrugged his shoulders. “Not much for ‘em ‘round here, I reckon. And there’s some as say this place is haunted.”

“Haunted? Haunted how?” I asked, pulling out my notebook. A local ghost story would really help me flesh out the background for the opening chapter. You know the scene I’m talking about, Cate. Ed wouldn’t give me any more details though, other than to say that the last guest they had (about 3 years ago, apparently) complained about hearing strange noises in his room and seeing odd things in the streets.

“Thought he saw a young girl walking out of his room one time, he did. No young’uns been in this place for years. He must-a been crazy,” Ed concluded. I laughed, agreed with him, and went to my room. This place really does have the atmosphere for a ghost story, Cate. The old village, clear autumn nights, the moon rising over the cemetery outside my window ... if I were superstitious, I could almost believe that ghosts might haunt this village in reality as they will in my novel. For a moment just now, I thought I heard someone whispering behind me, but no one was there. Well, enough of that nonsense.

I wish I could have brought you and the children with me, darling. It’s beautiful here, and so picturesque. I can almost see my characters walking around. I think all three of you would love this place, but you know I need the solitude to collect my notes. After the novel is completed, I may come back here with you. It’s a good place to relax, away from the modernized world and all of its distractions. What do you think of that? In the



meantime, goodnight Cate. I'll write to you again soon. Give Jenny and Evan a kiss for me.

Yours,

Jonathan

.....

October 27

My dear Cate,

It's been a very odd couple of days since I wrote to you last. I spent Monday wandering around the village and talking to the locals. It's incredible being here, Cate. Everyone wears the same style of clothing that was in style during the 1860s, so I stand out like a sore thumb in my jeans and tennis shoes. I could feel the eyes of everyone I passed following me while I was looking around, as if they were afraid I was going burn their homes down or something. Alan, the local doctor, instantly stopped speaking to me the moment he heard my decidedly un-southern accent. I don't think they ever let the war go here. Handmade Confederate flags adorn the windows of some homes, and I could have sworn that I saw someone in the old country store paying for nails with a fistful of Confederate money. The few children I saw were running around the streets wearing grey caps, shooting at dogs with wooden rifles, and yelling, "Die, Union scum!" It was a little unsettling, but I guess it works for them. After that little incident, I went down to the cemetery to take a look at the gravestones, hoping for some ideas to flesh out the setting of my book. I have only a few more days here to get all the notes I need. Anyway, I noticed one gravestone inscription in particular that read "Lorena Watson, 1848-1863.

She will be avenged.” My curiosity piqued, I went inside the church to see if the preacher could tell me the story of what happened. The preacher, Henry Davis, was more than happy to oblige even me, the intruding Yankee.

“Lorena’s a local legend. She was the only child of the Watsons, them that lived up in that house,” he said, nodding in the direction of the Riley’s home. “Her father signed up right as soon as we seceded from Lincoln’s country. Served under General A.P. Hill, he did, and took a bullet through the head at Chancellorsville. Well, a few months later, a party of bluecoats comes marchin’ through here, snatchin’ whatever they see fit. One of ‘em gets drunk and takes a fancy ta Hannah Watson’s pretty daughter, but Lorena turns him down. ‘Ain’t no bluebelly comin’ anywhere near me,’ she says proudly. Well, that Yankee scoundrel grabs her wrist and pulls her out onto the porch and tries to kiss her. Lorena won’t have none of that of course, and she punches him right in the jaw. Knocks a couple teeth right out of his head. The Yank gets angry and slams the butt of his pistol into her head, knockin’ her clean off the porch. He skedaddles out of there as quick as he can before Hannah Watson can get to him, the coward. When Lorena’s mama picks her up out of the street, she’s already dead from the fall and blow to the head. May God rest her soul in peace. At her daughter’s funeral, Hannah stands at the side of the grave as the preacher and the undertaker put the coffin in, and she was shriekin’ like a crazy woman. She raised her fist to the sky, she did, and screamed for the vengeance of the Almighty to fall down on all Yankees. Any bluecoats who came ‘round here after that all died pretty darn quick-like, and some folks still say they see the ghostly figure of a young woman walkin’ around Ed Riley’s place.” Henry stopped and looked at me, his

eyes big and dark under his black brows. “Course, those of us who live here don’t give no credence to that sort of thing. What ‘bout you, Yank?”

Those eyes staring at me owlishly without blinking were a little unsettling, but I don’t think he meant it to be. I told him I don’t believe in ghosts, but that I might use Lorena’s story as some of the inspiration for my novel. He shook his head, almost as if in amusement.

“You’re a writer, ain’t ya? Got a big imagination. Just you be careful with that.” He wouldn’t tell me what he meant, so I went back to the Riley house. I think southerners hold a grudge longer than any other people group I’ve ever met, and that would seem to be the case here. They’ve been so unable to let the war go, they’re holding onto not only the war itself but everything associated with it. I find it rather fascinating – I mean, how have they managed to maintain such a deep anger up for so long?

The house is very quiet now, except for the wind howling outside. I’m writing to you by candlelight, so I apologize for the wax drippings on the page. Maybe it was the story the preacher told me, or just the atmosphere of this little town, but my nerves are slightly on edge. I’ve been starting at the smallest sounds, even the slightest creak of a floorboard, and staying more alert than usual – I haven’t slept well since I got here. And I thought I saw...never mind. It’s probably just the local whiskey I’ve been drinking.

Perhaps it’s time for me to go to bed. I’ll write to you again tomorrow, if I can.

All my love,

Jonathan

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October 29

Dear Cate,

Things are getting stranger here. When I was going back to my room after breakfast this morning, I could have sworn that I saw someone entering my room, even though Ed and Sarah Riley are the only other occupants of the house, and I had just left both of them at the table. When I went in, though, no one was there. Everything was just as I had left it – my books were still on the bed, my notes still neatly organized. I could find no evidence of anyone but myself having been in there. Not only that, when I was shaving, I looked in the mirror and seemed to catch a glimpse of a pale figure in red, but when I looked behind me, nothing. My eyes must have been playing tricks on me. I mentioned the incidents to my hosts, and they looked at each other, back to me, and simultaneously raised their eyebrows. I refrained from discussing it further. They already think I'm crazy for staying here in their village.

The local shopkeeper, Jacob Sullivan, agreed to speak with me this afternoon, and we sat outside drinking sweet tea in the afternoon, discussing the skirmish that brought the Yankee soldiers who had caused Lorena's death. One of the kids (he couldn't have been more than 8 years old) I saw playing in the street the other day ran up to me, aimed his rifle at my chest, and "shot me."

"Bang! You're dead, you filthy Yank!" he yelled. I ignored him, and kept talking to Jacob. The kid came closer, and poked me with his rifle. "You're dead, Yank!" he announced again. I sighed and asked him what his name was. "Jimmy," he said proudly.

“Well Jimmy,” I said, “I’m having a talk with Mr. Sullivan. Will you leave us alone for a bit?” Jimmy shrugged, his green eyes staring at me without blinking. Do these people just not need to blink?

“I ain’t never seen a live Yankee before,” he said happily. “All I ever seen are the dead ones.” I smiled at him, and asked him what he meant. “I never got to see a bluebelly not in a coffin,” he replied in a matter-of-fact tone. “Are you really a demon, like my pa says you are, Mr. Yankee?”

Jacob Sullivan cut in, and told the boy to go home. “Sorry ‘bout that Mr. Gates,” he apologized, “We’re very proud of our heritage here, and the kids like to shoot things, pretendin’ they’re Yanks. When they ‘kill’ somethin’, it’s a dead Yank to them forever.” I thanked him and left quickly. I think I’m going to finish up my notes as soon as I can, so I can leave as quickly as possible. I’ve been hearing those strange noises around the house. Curse my overactive imagination. This place is starting to get on my nerves, Cate.

*[Editor’s note: an ink blot appears on the paper here]* Cate...someone was walking down the hallway a moment ago. It looked like a dark-haired young woman in a red dress, more gliding than walking. I blinked, and when I opened my eyes again, she wasn’t there! Am I going mad? Or is it just my imagination being overworked? I should leave, but I can’t. Not until I’ve finished getting what I need. The story must get finished! I’ll write again later. Pray for my sanity.

Yours,

Jonathan

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October 31

Cate, I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry. I can't do this anymore, I can't! For two days, I've been seeing things...hearing things! Footsteps in the hall, whispers in the room, shadows in the mirrors, but there's no one there! And tonight...tonight has been hell. I woke up in the middle of the night, and that girl, that figure I've been seeing was standing over me, just looking down at me. Her eyes were wide and mournful, her face as pale as death, and it seemed as though blood trickled from the side of her head. Her eyes locked with mine, never blinking. Her pale, ghost-like hand reached out to touch my face, and I couldn't do anything but close my eyes. I felt a light brush across the side of my face, cold and clammy. I couldn't help myself...I, I cried out and opened my eyes. The apparition was standing further back, near the wall, staring at me again. The door burst open, and Ed Riley came in carrying an old Winchester rifle, his wife close behind him. "What's wrong?" Ed demanded, his eyes darting around the room. "Th..there!" I pointed at the girl. He spun around to see what I was pointing at, and his forehead wrinkled in bewilderment.

"What you be pointin' at?" he asked. "There's no one there." They didn't see her, Cate, they didn't see her! She was just standing there, but only I could see her. Ed and Sarah left, muttering something under their breaths, but the girl stayed. She's still here, Cate. It's Lorena Watson, it has to be. She nodded at me just now, when I wrote that. She won't stop staring, Cate. I can't stand the look in her eyes, accusing, angry. She hates me...it's as if she thinks I'm the one who killed her. No, that's not right. She knows it wasn't me, she just doesn't care. I don't know what she wants. She won't leave.

Wait...she's pointing at the desk drawer. There...there's a pistol in it. Only one shot in it. She wants me to kill myself, Cate! Just leaving town won't satisfy her hatred, her grudge against us. She wants me dead. I shouldn't have come here why did I come here and now I can't ever leave. I have to die I have to do it I must do it she'll follow me forever if I don't.. I can't stand the look in her eyes, Cate. I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry. I love you, Cate. I'm so sorry...

*A small group of village folk are gathered around the door as the undertakers carry out the pinewood coffin containing the still warm corpse of the Yankee writer. "Good riddance," Jacob Sullivan says, as little Jimmy jumps up and down in glee, waving his woolen grey cap in the air.*

*Sarah Riley nods. "Didn't take near as long as I thought it would. The visitors usually last longer'n that."*

*"It's that writer's imagination of his...drove him over the edge real quick-like. I tole him t'be careful with that," Preacher Davis joins in, tugging at his collar.*

*"Let us not forget the girl who played the biggest part in this success," Ed Riley calls above the chatter. A teenage girl in a red dress joins the group, a small smile on her face as everyone applauds. "Good work as usual, Judith," Ed says, hugging his daughter close. "You're a mighty fine actress."*

*"Just doin' my part, Pa," Judith replies, wiping the fake blood off the side of her head. "Damn Yankees. We don't want none of their kind 'round here."*

**Zero Point: Two**

You look disturbed. Was that not what you were expecting? You should have inferred from your surroundings that this journey would not exactly be a pleasant one. The world is a dark place, and she writes about the world as she imagines it. People do horrible things, you know. Are you ready for your next adventure? If you are, then you may approach the second door. You see an ordinary dark apartment-style door, old and unremarkable. A tarnished brass number 4 hangs above the handle. See how the number on the door corresponds with the red lettering above it: "Four." You must turn the handle that many times before opening the door. When you enter the apartment, you will see a man, older, wearing a black suit. He will be kneeling on the white carpet in front of the fire place, next to a younger man in business attire, bound on the floor. Stand by the fireplace, and listen to what is said. Are you ready? Very well. You may enter...



**Four**

SHUT UP! You're making too much noise. Shhhh, shhhh, shhhh, shhhh. That's better. Relax. It's not like I really want to kill you. Just because I'm going to doesn't mean I want to. But it's the only way. Oh, did I tie the ropes too tight? I'm sorry, I really am. It's not going to matter in a few minutes. I said stop moving! Look, if you don't keep still, I'm going to have to kill you right now, and I don't want to do that it'll mess everything up I'll have to go find someone else because you won't count, and then it'll all be a mess. You don't want that on your conscience, do you? Now...just sit still. There we go. Thanks, I appreciate that. I really hate having my system messed up, you know? Everything has to be perfectly and in order. If it's not...well, it really upsets me and then my whole day is ruined. I'm sure you understand. A routine is a routine. I saw you get upset yesterday when you left for work five minutes late. Aren't my new binoculars wonderful? I got them specifically to watch you. I can see right into your kitchen from across the street. I saw that your wife didn't start the coffee on time. It made me upset, too. She left three coffee cups on the shelf, and that's just not right. She should have cleaned out the old one and put it back on the shelf, so there would have been four. Don't worry, I took care of it earlier. She'll be very pleased to see that it's balanced now. Four coffee cups on the shelf. It has to be four. Balance is everything, and four is balance. That's why I have to kill you.

Shhhh! How many times do I have to tell you to be quiet?! Oh...you don't understand why I'm going to kill you? Well, that makes sense. No one ever does. No, you're not the first. You're number 15. So close to perfection! I'll explain that later. Do

you want to know why? We have a little bit of time left, and it's so much easier if we talk to pass the time away. It's even easier for you. All you have to do is be quiet and listen. Just relax. It'll all be over soon. Please stop struggling. You won't get away from me. Number 3 did, and she very nearly messed up my system. Took me forever to get her back to the rug, and I didn't get to explain everything to her. I do think it's so much easier if I can explain, don't you? Then you understand and you won't be surprised. But she died confused, poor thing. Still, at least it worked out just in time. It always does. Looks like everything's still in place, so we're good to go. By the way, thank you so much for wearing that shirt today. The blood will show up so nicely on the white, and the four buttons make it absolutely perfect. You must have sensed that something like this was going to happen. Isn't it wonderful how things work out like that? Oh, stop fidgeting. If you break another one of my lamps, I will be very put out I've only got 8 left you know and where would I get more at this time of night and please just be still.

Anyway, you have to die because of four. Four is perfection, you see. I'm the fourth child in my family. My parents didn't have any more after me. Why should they? Four is complete. They must have seen that, because they gave me four names. It's different. No one else in my family had four names. No one knew I was anything special at all. They thought I was just another kid. But I knew the truth. I was special. They were normal, but I wasn't. I understood better when I got glasses. I could only see halfway before, now with four eyes I could see perfectly. Things became clear to me. Two begins balance...one and one. But two more completes it, and it becomes four. Two and two is four. Don't you understand? It's perfectly balanced. Two is only halfway to perfection,

but four is balance in everything. Nothing is left over. And it's still special. Anyone can have two...two eyes, two names, two coffee cups. But only the perfect ones have four. That's why you're special, too. You have four names, like me. You wear glasses, too. Your life is filled with four, even though you don't know it consciously. I've watched you for several months now, and I've seen it. There are four panes of glass in each of your windows. Did you ever notice that? There're four trees around your house. Four pillows on your bed. You own four pairs of shoes. And so much more. Four, four, four, four. Four is everywhere! Your wife, she doesn't understand. She doesn't know the power of four. She's trying to change things into twos or threes and sometimes even fives. She doesn't understand balance. That's why I chose you. Four must be restored to you, but it can't happen here. Not in this life. I don't blame your wife. She's like everyone else. No one understands four. Most of them are threes or twos, incomplete and unbalanced. They don't know that we're special, that we hold balance. If they knew, I wouldn't have to do this. But Earth isn't the place for us anymore. God told me so, years ago. A great voice spoke to me from the sky, and then He came and speaks inside my head. A group of fours has been chosen to move on to what comes after. Where four always exists and things are perfect, to prepare the way for the rest of the fours who will come after. I was chosen to send you there. You should be happy, for you are one of the chosen.

That's why I'm still here, you know. If I had departed this life first, I wouldn't have been able to fulfill my task. I will go next, after you. Don't you get it? You're number 15. The last of the others to go. I have been chosen as 16. That is the number of

heaven. It is a reward for my faithfulness that I will represent that perfection. Yes, you will go ahead of me, and I will follow, when my task is complete. How I look forward to that day! My journey hasn't been easy. You'd think it would be, right? Just finding a four and sending him or her to the beyond. The police don't understand, the poor things. No, I take that back. One of them might have, at the end. He was a four, too, so I chose him. He was blessed, because he was the fourth I chose. Lucky, lucky man. I think he did understand, right before I killed him.

Ah, it's almost time. Just let me put my gloves on. Please, stay still! If you move, you'll get blood on the carpet. I hate having to clean up that mess. There we go. This has to be done in a very specific way, or the power of four is broken, and you won't be able to travel through. I have to kill you at 4:44, on April 4<sup>th</sup>. That's today. I will follow you at the same time on the same day next year, the 16<sup>th</sup> year since my calling. I'm sorry, but I'll have to stab you four times. Precision is so much easier with a knife than a gun, don't you think? Don't worry, it won't hurt. The first blow will kill you. The other three provide balance. Four identical, perfectly aligned wounds. Your death will be as your life, in terms of four. It will make the afterlife so much better for you. Shhhh. 16 seconds. It'll all be over soon, and you will thank me. Embrace the power of four, forever. One, two, three...

**Zero Point: Three**

Do you need a rest before you enter the next door? You look rather pale. Just sit down and collect your thoughts for a moment. Oh, that didn't take long. Perhaps you are getting accustomed to this faster than you anticipated. Excellent. Don't look so shocked. The more one is accustomed to horrifying events, the faster one becomes able to deal with them. Perhaps, by the end of this little adventure, none of it will bother you at all. As soon as you are able, you may continue the journey. Unless you want to stop? No? Approach the next door.

It's a very simple door, painted a very bright, shiny white. A few dark discolorations fleck the bottom, but they're barely noticeable. The doorknob is black and plain, unremarkable compared to the brightness of the white, don't you think? Look up at the lettering. Such fancy script: "Like a Nightmare." A little ostentatious, maybe. Catch your interest, hmm?

When you go in, you will be in a darkened bedroom. Very low moonlight will stream through the one small window, enabling you to see. There will be a young man lying in bed, and a young woman standing next to him. Take a seat at the desk on the other side of the bed. Neither of them will be able to see you. Just be silent and listen as she speaks to him. Are you ready? Very well. You may enter...

### **Like a Nightmare**

It hurt. I didn't expect it to. I mean, it never seems to in the movies. Even in slow motion, it looks so quick. Painless. But it wasn't. It was agonizingly endless, like those nightmares where you find yourself falling for hours until you either wake up or hit the bottom. They say that if you do land in one of those dreams, it'll kill you. Rather unsettling to think about, isn't it? Ever had a nightmare like that? Trip over a rock or someone pushes you and you just keep falling. Fear and Terror sitting on your shoulders, cackling in your ears, agonizing reminders that death is so very close, that your very heart is about to shatter within you. That's kind of what getting shot in the head feels like. A brief shock burning through you as you stumble, and then you begin to slowly fall earthwards, a brief moment of time ever expanding, a small second stretching into eternity as waves of panic envelop you in their cold embrace. And you know that when you stop falling, you die.

I know what you're going to say – the metaphor doesn't completely fit the experience. Of course it doesn't. Nothing can really be compared to the pain you feel as that tiny piece of metal embeds itself in your brain. It just doesn't stop. You fall and fall, the tiny jab of infernal fire growing faster than the time slows down, until it consumes you, and your entire universe consists of the bitter shrieking of your own voice inside your head and the vengeful ravaging of nightmarish pain. That's what being shot feels like. Your worst nightmares colliding...unimaginable agony and the endless fall, knowing that you're going to die.

Did you hear the screaming? No, I guess not. I suppose to you, it happened far too quickly for any of that. A millisecond for you, an eternity for me. I wish you could have heard it. I wish you could have felt it. Even you would have been begging for mercy within moments, longing for sweet Death to ride up on his black steed and envelop you in his misty cloak, rather than live through one more second of that torture. Yes, even you, with your granite heart, your blustering bravado. Even you would have screamed.

How did you feel, I wonder? Relief, fear, joy, pain? It was a scene right out of a movie, almost...you in your always immaculate suit standing so regal, so tall, so proud, with your pistol in your hand dangling limply by your side, slight wisps of grey smoke disappearing as quickly as they appeared. Standing over me, careful to not let your freshly polished shoes touch the scarlet liquid pooling under my neck and trickling down to stain my white dress. So dramatic. So unaware of the torture you were putting me through, even then. Maybe you thought the bullet would be the quickest way, the most painless way. I don't think you really wanted me to suffer, did you? Maybe you did. But somehow, I don't think so. You didn't mean to revive my nightmares. You just wanted me dead. I don't know why. I'll probably never know, just as I'll never know why you took the ring off of my lifeless finger and then put it back on again five minutes later. Maybe you don't even know why.

It hurt, you know. And somehow, I don't think you should be able to cause that much pain for someone and get away with it. No, no, I'm not going to kill you. How can I? I'm dead. You know that. And killing you right away would just be too simple. But I can come and see you every night, you know. Talk to you, whisper sweetly in your ear,

remind you of your sins. Liar. Murderer. And I don't think you'll ever be able to get this image out of your head, will you? I think it will hurt you more than that friendly bullet of yours tortured me. Stay away from cliffs in your dreams, dear. Don't stumble. Don't trip. Don't fall. You may never stop. But when you do stop...I think you know what happens next. Goodnight. I'll see you in your nightmares.



**Zero Point: Four**

That wasn't so bad, now was it? You can understand the need for revenge. Wouldn't you seek it if it was within your power? You're already beginning to rationalize what you have seen, trying to make it fit with your worldview, diminishing the horror you felt when you first started. They all do that...especially with revenge. You'll be fine. Perhaps you can still be shocked, don't deceive yourself. It's about time to enter the next door. Go up to it. Go on. Embrace your newfound determination to not let the darkness bother you. Go on. Approach the door.

This door is very regal. Tall, heavy, polished, solid oak. Brass knockers, not just simple doorknobs. Notice how these are cared for, looked after, not neglected like the one on the door you entered earlier. This door belongs to Someone. It just screams importance. Look at the carefully written words above the door: "The Ghost." Maybe you'll get a nice, old-fashioned story like you used to read in high school. Or not. Who knows? When you enter, you will see a pale young man dressed in Victorian garb, standing alone in the middle of the room in front of a large clock, speaking aloud. He is your narrator. Listen to what he has to say. Do you understand? Good. It is time. Are you ready? If so, you may enter...

### **The Ghost**

She haunts my sleep at night, the Ghost does. More than that, she haunts my every waking moment. I cannot shut her out, I cannot escape. She is always there, watching me and smiling that strange, gentle, yet cruel smile of hers. I have tried to dismiss her, to flee from her, but to no avail. My friends all say that I am mad, and there was a time when I would have vehemently denied it. But now...now I am not so sure. Perhaps I am mad. The certainty of my madness would afford me some relief from this torment, if I only knew that she was merely a figment of my mind. And yet, I do not know. What is reality and what is imagined? She has taken from me all knowledge of the difference between even waking and sleeping. It no longer matters to me now – I no longer possess the capacity to care.

This torment, this madness was not always the case. Before I first saw the Ghost, I was content. Happy, even. Success was at my doorstep. I was making good money as a solicitor, and Adele, the girl I adored above all others, had consented to be my bride. If I close my eyes, I can almost see her as she once was: her golden brown hair gently brushing her shoulders, and the sparkling green of her eyes accentuated by the rich purple of her favorite gown. Her father was the richest man in town, and I was the junior partner in his law firm. I could not believe it when Adele, a faint blush brightening her pale cheek, agreed to marry me. I who had once owned nothing but the clothes on my back! I had won her heart, and she had chosen me above all others, even Geoffrey Barksdale. That day was the happiest day of my life, the day when I achieved everything I could ever desire in life. It was also my last happy day.

Shortly thereafter, I went for my accustomed walk down a path through the woods just outside of town. It was a crisp December day, and snow lay heavy on the ground. The air was cold, but not biting so. All seemed right with the world as I treaded the familiar ground now covered in pure white. It was then that I heard her. A gentle, womanly voice carried on the wind reached my ear. She was calling my name, it seemed. I stopped and attempted to ascertain the direction from whence the voice had come. All was quiet. Perplexed, I began to move forward. And there it was again: a beautiful voice, as cold as the snow around my feet, was whispering my name! It seemed as though the voice was coming from the trees off to my right. On impulse, I left the path and walked in that direction. I thought I heard a ripple of mocking laughter as I went, but I dismissed it as a trick of my imagination. The voice led me this way and that, taking me in so many different directions that I soon became lost in the trees. Then, the voice stopped. I called out to it, but no one answered. I struck my walking stick against a slender beech tree in anger. Some of the accumulated snow of many weeks slid off the boughs, and fell in front of me. The pure whiteness of it dazzled my eyes for a moment, so I shut them tightly to clear my head. When I once more opened my eyes, I noticed something I had not seen before: a gap between some of the trees. It was very slight, almost unnoticeable. Curiosity once more overcame caution, and I slipped through the gap. I stood in a clearing, alone. A lake was in front of me, frozen over and covered with a light dusting of snow. When I looked closer, I saw a large crack in the ice. The thought crossed my mind that one could fall through that crack if one was not careful. I turned slightly, and then I saw her: a womanly figure standing alone next to the fault in the ice. She was tall, and

dressed in white. I wondered that I had not seen her moments earlier when I had entered the clearing. She looked at me, and stretched out her arms. It seemed odd to me that I could not make out her face. I saw it, but as soon as my gaze lighted on her features, some impulse forced my glance to the side. She called my name, and I took a step towards her. With no idea as to why she was standing out in the middle of a frozen lake, I called for her to come closer to me, to keep away from the dangerous place.

“Come to me,” she implored, her voice engulfing me like a gentle cloud of snowflakes.

I shook my head, but at the same time I found myself taking a step forward. There was something in that voice that drew me onwards. I looked at her face again, and a chill ran up and down my spine. Her face was pale, whiter than the snow. Her eyes had no color in them; they were as cold and hard as diamonds, but without the sparkle. Her hair was silvery, the shade of the stars in the sky when night is at its darkest. My blood turned to ice as I looked at her, unable to move. She glided towards me. She called my name again. That sound galvanized my paralyzed limbs into action. I turned and ran off the ice as swiftly as I possibly could. As I reached the safety of shore, I could not help but turn to see if the woman was following me. She had stopped, but the image she created at that moment will be forever burned into my mind with a cold flame. A cruel, mocking, smile was on her lips, and I saw that her pure right arm was outstretched...pointing towards the crack in the ice. My mind shut down and refused to function. I lost whatever courage still remained in my body. The only thing I desired was to get away from that place. I ran through the woods, heedless of the branches that stung my face as I tore past the trees.

The harsh, brittle sound of the woman's laughter followed me as I ran aimlessly, tripping over stones half submerged in winter's deluge. I had lost all sense of direction and was unable to find the path, so I continued to search for any familiar landmark. In my haste, my foot caught on a log, and I tumbled down a slope and lost consciousness.

I awoke in my own bed, with Adele sitting next to me. Her gentle green eyes were full of worry, but cleared when she saw that I was awake. She called for the physician, and he examined my eyes and face. He informed me that I had a concussion, in addition to some minor scrapes and bruises, but that I should be fine apart from that. He prescribed some laudanum for the pain, and left with a tip of his hat towards Adele. My fiancée knelt by the bed and held my hand, explaining that I had been unconscious for several hours.

"Darling, who is she?" Adele asked gently after a few moments of silence.

I started violently. All the terror of the moments at the lake came flooding back to me. "What do you mean?" I asked, trying valiantly to keep my voice from shaking.

"Whilst you were unconscious, you moaned about a woman," was her reply.

"You never mentioned her name, but it seemed as though you were afraid."

I laughed nervously. "Nothing my dear, nothing," I replied. "I am sure I do not know what you are talking about."

Adele, being a gentle and quiet creature, refrained from asking any further questions of me. She administered the laudanum as the doctor had ordered, and sleep overtook me. I slept the sleep of the dead, without thought, dream, or feeling. When I awoke many hours later, Adele's father was there with me. He inquired as to the details

of my escapade in the woods, and I told him merely that I had wandered from the path and come across a lake. His face darkened when I described the lake to him, and Adele's face grew pale. Puzzled, I asked for an explanation.

“Geoffrey drowned himself there last December,” was her father's curt response.

Geoffrey Barksdale and I both courted Adele at the same time for several years. It seemed as if Adele loved him more than I, but then he disappeared. Adele had withdrawn herself for several months, and then allowed me to resume courting her. Geoffrey told me that he was leaving town. I never suspected he took his own life. My heart skipped a beat as I digested this information, but then I dismissed Geoffrey without a second thought. Of more interest to me was the woman I had seen...but it occurred to me that she had just been a hallucination, perhaps brought on by exhaustion. I feigned tiredness, and Adele's father left the room, giving me his best wishes for my swift recovery. Adele herself resumed her place by my side, but there was a deep sadness on her face that had not been there before. I ignored it, and tried to slip back into slumber. It was then that the nightmares began.

It seemed to me that I was surrounded by water. Cold, dark water, without a ray of light. My lungs filled rapidly, and I could not breathe. And then, I saw her, the woman from the lake – her face, barely inches from mine, the water flowed through freely. Those terrifying eyes glowed with a malicious light, and her mouth opened.

“Mine,” she seemed to be saying. “Mine at last!” Her long, slender fingers closed around my wrist as I screamed, but no sound emerged from my mouth. Icy water poured into my body, and I was falling, falling, and then...

...I awoke. Adele was standing over me, with an empty glass in her hands. My face was wet. I stared at her, startled.

“You were having a nightmare,” she explained apologetically. “I could not wake you, so I hoped to shock you out of it.”

I allowed the terror to subside slowly as I assured Adele that I would be fine, and told her to go home. She protested, but my will won out in the end as it usually did. I needed to be alone. She left unwillingly, and I locked the door behind her. I sat in my bed, unmoving. The grandfather clock in the corner was my only companion as I kept myself awake all the rest of that night. I dared not sleep, not after the vision that still danced in my head. The hours seemed to pass slowly, and the ache in my head grew nearly unbearable, but I forced myself to remain cognizant. Once the sun began to show itself over the horizon, I began to feel that the dreams of the night were childish affairs. The light of day assured me that I had merely been suffering from a hallucination of sorts, perhaps brought on by overwork. Comforted by these thoughts, I lay down and closed my eyes, allowing sleep to wash over me once more. The strange woman did not make another appearance in my dreams, although I could have sworn that I heard her voice, as cold and enchantingly dangerous as it had been when I thought I had heard it in the woods. But I did not allow such half-conscious thoughts to ruin my slumbers.

When I awoke, I knew I had been deceiving myself. Because standing beside me, where Adele had been the night before, was the woman. She stood there staring at me, not saying a word. That smile, seemingly as much a part of her face as her eyes, played across her lips. I stared at her, my own eyes wide with terror. She did not move nor did

she speak. She just stood there, the light of the winter sun through my window disappearing into her body. She was not fully transparent, nor was she opaque. She just...was. It seemed as if she remained there, smiling at me for hours. At last, her cold hand brushed lightly over my face, leaving me frozen. She glided away, walking through the wall and disappearing into the light of day. It was then that I knew that she was no mere hallucination. She was indeed a spirit, a Ghost. That realization should have brought me some comfort, lessened the fear of the unknown, but it did not. I lay still, utterly terrified and bewildered, unable to move. I forced myself out of the stupor that had fallen upon me, and arose from my bed. Life as usual would resume, I resolved. I would not be affected by this visitation. Perhaps the visit paid to me by the Ghost had been a punishment for daring to intrude upon her abode in the woods. No longer would I walk there. I would confine myself purely to the city life.

I could not have been more wrong in my assumptions. Although I refrained from entering the woods, my evening hours when I was alone were haunted by the eerie figure whose hard eyes and pale mouth mocked me at every glance. If she spoke to me in my dreams, her words left no impression on my conscious mind, and they were forgotten come morning, but her frigid, derisive laughter constantly flowed through my slumbers. If I awoke in the middle of the night, it would be to find her standing next to my bed, staring down at me as if she knew something I did not. And when morning's light crested the horizon, away the Ghost would glide, leaving the air cold and unfriendly behind her. Try as I might, I could not acclimate myself to her presence at night. Every ripple of mocking laughter, every glance from those icy eyes, every gentle touch of her translucent



hand filled me with a dread so intense that it seemed as if my heart would cease to beat. Sleep no longer afforded me any rest, and I began to grow irritable after weeks, months of this torment.

Adele was of no use at all to me at this time. She had lethargic and sad since my “accident,” sitting for hours without speaking, just staring at the wall. When I inquired as to what had placed such a weight on her soul, she merely shook her head gently, and would not answer. I must confess to using some angry words at times, words I repented of using almost immediately afterwards. She forgave me every time, but it seemed to me as though she were growing distant. I became afraid, afraid of losing the woman whose heart I had worked so hard to win. But nothing I said or did seemed to matter much to her. She was fading away, like a rose that had lost its color. I became angry. Not at Adele, nor at myself, but at the Ghost. It was her fault, I was sure of it. And I resolved to find the reason why.

I forbade myself from sleeping that night. I sat on a straight-backed wooden chair against the window. But the June air was pleasantly warm, and try as I might, I could not prevent myself from slipping into a light slumber. A well known peal of laughter startled me from my sleep, and my eyes flew open instantly. The air was cold, and the Ghost was stood front of me, one arm outstretched, as if beckoning to me.

“What in blazes is going on?” I demanded angrily. “Speak to me, spirit! Why is it that you haunt me so?”

“Come,” she said in that enchanting voice I had heard in the forest. “Come with me.”

“Who are you?” My voice sounded shrill in my own ears. She did not respond.

“What have I done to deserve this? What do you want with me? Speak to me!”

My voice began to tremble.

A cool wind wrapped itself around me as I heard her speak. I stayed firmly in my seat.

“You have no business with me!” I answered. “Now begone! Plague my slumbers no more!”

Her eyes stared into mine as if she was staring right through me.

“You can never be rid of me,” she answered, freezing my very heart within me.

“I will be with you always, until you come to me.”

And then she threw back her head and laughed a laugh that sounded and felt as if daggers of ice were being driven straight into my chest. As she laughed, her form began to dissipate, and she disappeared entirely from my sight.

From that day forth, I knew peace no longer. Everywhere I turned, it seemed, she was there. Sitting in the empty chair at a dinner party, at the window of my office, beside the driver of my carriage – wherever I went, there she was. Her icy gaze appraised me with deliberate mockery, even if her laughter haunted only my dreams. If I spoke to her, she did not answer. If I paid her no mind, I soon felt something cold and damp brush the back of my neck. My hands rarely stopped shaking, and every miniscule sound caused me to start in fright. My friends began to disassociate themselves from me, saying that I was going mad. No one would believe me, and none would help me. My physician sent me to the mountains for rest, but she followed me there. Wherever I went, whatever I did,

I could always feel her eyes on me, watching and waiting. I became more and more reclusive, shutting myself up in my quarters, seeing no one but Adele.

And then came the day when I lost her also.

It was a cool September day, when the rain was drizzling, and the air was beginning to chill. Adele came as to sit with me as she usually did. We rarely spoke at all during these times. The weariness in her demeanor aggravated me, and the nervous tensions I was suffering kept her quiet. The Ghost usually kept to a chair in the corner during the times when Adele was sitting with me. She would stare at me with an accusatory glance, but she would not incite any further trouble. But on this day, things changed. When Adele entered, the Ghost came and stood beside me. I felt a chill travel down my spine as she stood there, watching. Adele gave me a puzzled glance, and inquired as to what was the matter.

“Nothing,” I said with no small annoyance, and then started violently as the Ghost’s laughter rang out loud and mockingly through the room.

“Tell me,” Adele pleaded. “You have become so strange and irritable over the past few months. What is wrong?”

I jumped up and began pacing in front of the fireplace. “Nothing is wrong with me,” I growled. “But what is wrong with you, Adele?”

She looked at me wide-eyed. “Wrong with me? What do you mean?”

I laughed shortly. “This...this unbearable silence of yours. The weariness you exhibit with every movement.” I turned to look at her, and she shrank back. “Tell me, woman,” I thundered, finally unable to control my anger.

Adele looked back at me with fear in her eyes, but she rose to her feet.

“Geoffrey.”

I stopped my pacing, and stared at her, eyes wide. “I...but...”

She continued to speak, ignoring my stuttering. “I loved him. I would have become his wife had he asked me. And then he disappeared. We found his body several days later in the lake you stumbled upon.” Tears glistened in her gentle eyes. “I agreed to marry you because you were a decent man, a good man. I thought that I could come to love you in time. But he is still there, in the back of my mind.”

I barely heard her. I lost control of myself. “So you *did* love him,” I said, tasting something bitter in my mouth. “And his desertion of you did nothing to change that fact. I thought that...” I stopped, but the damage had been done.

She stared at me. “You thought what?” she demanded with steely resolve. “Tell me. Now.”

Startled, I answered despite myself. “I just thought he would leave town...I never expected that he would actually take his own life...” At her horrified gaze, I stumbled on hurriedly with my explanation. “I told him you did not love him...gave him some letters as proof...he left, and I never saw him again.”

Adele’s sharp cry of anguish stopped me instantly. “It was your fault,” she uttered in disbelief. “How could you? I...I...” The tears began to stream down her face. She slipped the diamond engagement ring I had given her off of her finger, and stood there staring at it for a moment as she wept. Then, without a word, she handed it to me, her hands as cold as a corpse. Before I could recover my senses, she had fled the room,

weeping as if her heart was breaking. I called after her, but she ignored me as she ran outside into the now pouring rain. The Ghost looked at me and smiled pitilessly before walking through the wall out into the street. I stared out the window in a daze. I thought I saw the Ghost following Adele as she ran...

Adele's body was retrieved from the lake in the woods the very next day. The coroner brought the verdict of suicide, but I was not listening. My heart had at last frozen within my chest, and I determined to never again leave my rooms. I could not bear the pitying glances of those who knew me. "Poor fellow," I heard them murmur. "He has lost everything, and even his reason is sure to be completely gone now." So I sat alone in my chambers and cursed the Ghost. She merely stared at me without mercy or pity. And so the days went on.

Months have passed, and the rains of autumn have turned into winter snows again now. The cold is far worse than this town has seen before. It is nigh unbearable. My mind continues to play the events of the past few months over and over, taunting me. It is not my fault that Geoffrey died, I tell myself night after night. He should have had the sense to not commit suicide over a woman. His death means nothing to me. But then my thoughts turn to Adele, and I feel as if the howling storms are no match for the agony that racks through my body. Yes, I am responsible for her death. As always, the Ghost is with me, watching and waiting. The agonies of remorse intensify as I meet her gaze. Oh, Adele! I can no longer bear it. I take my overcoat and stare at the Ghost with dead eyes.

"Lead me on," I say hopelessly. Whatever she has in store for me cannot be any worse than this torture of the soul. Her smile has no warmth in it, just quiet malice. She

leads me out the door, down the streets, to the outskirts of town. I think she is leading me to her lake. Yes, we are entering the woods. The overwhelming fear I feel almost convinces me to turn back, but one glance at the Ghost's cold eyes, and I know that I cannot bear her gaze any longer. We arrive at the shores of the lake, its waters once more frozen over. The Ghost glides out onto the ice, and stops. I begin to shiver, for I see the same crack in the ice that had been there all those months ago. Her slender, pale arm is outstretched as before, and she is again pointing towards the crack. I take a step forward, and then stop. Her eyes stare into mine, and comprehension dawns. She belongs to the lake, and the lake belongs to her. She is of the lake. She is the lake. How and why, I do not know, but of it I am certain.

I am at the edge of the fault in the ice now. The crack is larger than I expected, enough for a grown man to slide through. I stare at the water flowing serenely in front of me. I am no longer scared. This is what I must do. I close my eyes, take a deep breath, and take a single step forwards.

I open my eyes and gasp in shock as my body makes contact with the water. I cannot breathe. Already I can feel my arms and legs begin to numb. I look up, and I see the Ghost standing at the edge of the ice. Her eyes are gleaming, and her smile is wide. "At last," she murmurs, and then throws back her head. "Mine!" she screams to the sky. Her triumphant, reverberating laughter is the last sound I hear as I submerge beneath the water, and surrender to the darkness.

**Zero Point: Five**

You're struggling, aren't you? Trying to suppress the shock you feel at what you see with that need to feed your own ego by pretending that the darkness is something you can handle. Maybe you weren't built for this. Perhaps you were created for some other purpose. Maybe you can overcome your own revulsion. Maybe you're not supposed to. Time will tell. You only have two more doors left. Try to be as prepared as you can be. Expect the unexpected. Sounds silly, doesn't it? But you understand. Just be ready to be surprised, and you'll be fine. If you can handle that. Think it's about time to venture in to your next destination? Go on, then. Approach the door.

This door isn't really a door. More of a black iron gate with no light coming from behind it. Rather foreboding. The words above the door are bold: "The Villain of the Piece." If that's not interesting and slightly intimidating, then what is? When you enter, you will find yourself in the middle of an almost empty room. The only thing there will be a solitary stool, in the middle of the room. The events will unfold around you and you will see and hear everything that you need to. To go inside, look for the small silver key hanging on the wall. Did you find it? Excellent. Leave the key in the lock when you pass through the gate. You won't need it while you're inside. Are you ready? If you are, then you may enter...

### The Villain of the Piece

“You will pay for what you have done!” Erik warned, his sword unwavering in his gloved right hand. His opponent, the king of Glenmach, sneered as he lifted his own blade.

“But you are forgetting one thing,” the despot said with a smirk. “I hold the ace, so to speak. If you do not lay down your weapon, your fair lady dies!” Erik gasped in horror as the king placed his sword against Freya’s throat. “So lay down your weapon, Erik, or...”

“No, no, no, this isn’t working!!!” The author threw her pencil against the wall, staring down at the notebook lying open on her computer desk. With an angry sigh, she ripped the last few pages out of the book, crumpled them into a ball, and threw them into the trashcan. “Why won’t this come together?” she moaned, crossing the room to retrieve her writing implement from where she had just tossed it in a fit of pique. “The story is okay, not the best, revising will fix that, but the characters are lame, and the dialogue is cheesier than a mouse’s pantry.” She sat back down at the computer desk and moodily perused the notebooks full of writing that had taken up so much of her time over the past few months. “Lame, lame, I really don’t like *that*, oh that piece of dialogue could *so* be taken the wrong way, that’s awkwardly worded...” She furiously crossed out entire sections of writing, annotated some parts, and completely tore up others. “Seriously guys, can’t you give me something better to work with?”

“Whatever do you mean?” Erik asked indignantly.

The author rolled her eyes. “You know exactly what I mean. This whole story is reading like some melodramatic dime novel.”



“That can’t be right,” Freya replied, her voice low and melodic. “We’re perfect. Absolutely perfect!” She batted her eyelashes at Erik. “Aren’t we, dearest?”

Erik winked back at her. “Of course we are, my love. Just the right mixture of everything.” He returned his attention to the author. “What’s so hard about it?” he demanded. “Just finish the book. I’m supposed to lay down my sword, the king is supposed to try and kill me, not knowing that I have a clever plan to destroy him, release my bride-to-be, and rule the kingdom henceforth. Isn’t that how it usually goes?”

“That’s the problem,” the author said with a sigh. “It’s all so cliché. And so...so boring! There’s nothing new in the plot, it’s all completely expected. And the cast doesn’t help either,” she added resentfully. “Erik, you’re a drip. You’re an annoying goody two-shoes with no flaws at all! Not to mention that you have absolutely no idea what to do when it comes to action scenes. It’s all ‘defensive crouch this’ and ‘defensive crouch that,’ with a few swings of your sword thrown in for good measure. Freya, you just stand around fluttering your eyes at Captain Perfect over there! You’re the traditional helpless female, without even any witty banter to slightly redeem yourself. You contribute nothing to the romantic scenes either...all you do is gaze at his manly chest and let him kiss you repeatedly. Neither of you are fully realized characters. You’re just flat.”

“What about me?” The king asked indignantly. “It’s not my fault that the lovebirds are such twits.”

“You’re a completely standard melodramatic villain,” she said, exhaustion in her voice. “We know nothing about you aside from the fact that you used to be an advisor to

the previous king, and you took the throne when he died. And that you're an evil maniac. All you do is laugh malevolently and spout your wicked plans to anyone who will listen."

"Again, not my fault," the king said, folding his arms and staring at her, the creases around his eyes tight with irritation. "I don't even have a name! Do you have any idea how annoying it is to be referred to as "the king" or "the evil monarch" for three hundred pages? I'd like to have some identity, thank you very much."

"Yeah," Erik said, catching on quickly. "It's not our faults that we're just stock characters. YOU created us, so it's your fault that we're like this. You haven't done anything to develop us beyond the cardboard stand-ups that we are now!"

"What on Earth do you mean?" the author asked, bewildered. "What am I supposed to do with you? You're supposed to develop as we go along, not just stay flat." She covered her ears with her hands as Erik, Freya, and the king all started yelling at the same time.

"Look, obviously all three of you need some work," the author told her characters in exasperation. "So right now, I am going to take a break from writing this novel until I've characterized you all better. Here's what I'm going to do: I'll work with you individually, one-on-one, until I get you fleshed out enough to get back to writing you in the story. Sort of a development boot camp to get the process started. When I finish with one of you, I'll move on to the next. Sound good?"

"I'm not so sure that's a good idea," Freya said cautiously. "It might cause some problems."

Erik stroked Freya's hair gently. "What problems could there possibly be, my love?" he asked in a soft, manly whisper (which is probably a contradiction in terms, but Erik managed it somehow). The author rolled her eyes. "It sounds like a plan, boss," Erik finished. "I assume you'll start with me?"

"Well, I was planning..." the author began.

"That's not fair!" the king cried. "I don't even have a name. You should start with me. Besides, the good guys ALWAYS go first."

"Precisely!" Erik declared triumphantly. "Good will always triumph over evil. Right will forever prevail, and darkness will be cast down in the light of..."

"Enough, Erik, enough," the author protested, cutting him off. "Not another speech, please." She sighed again. "The villain of the piece has a point. He is arguably the least developed of the group, seeing as I somehow neglected to give him a name. Besides, I just said that this book needs something different. Since the good guys always go first, I think the changes can start with our antagonist this time."

"I still don't think it's a good idea," Freya muttered under her breath as the king smirked. She clasped her hands, and looked at her lover pleadingly. "Oh Erik, promise me that no evil will come of this."

"Never fear, my darling," Erik responded, right on cue. "I will die before I allow harm to come to you!"

"Oh Erik!" she said adoringly.

"Oh Freya!" he answered in kind.

“Oh boy,” the author said, burying her face in her hands. “That’s just sickening. Get out of here before I kill both of you and start with new characters. Go on! Go work on your acting skills.” She shook her head as the two lovers walked off hand-in-hand, staring dreamily at each other.

“I can’t believe you created those two blithering idiots,” the king observed.

She smiled wryly. “I can’t either. And I can’t go on referring to you as “the king” anymore, so let’s start the characterization process with your name. It’ll have to suit you perfectly, since the name sets the tone for the character.” She tapped the pencil against her nose for a few minutes, thinking hard. “I honestly can’t come up with one at the moment,” she said finally. “Do you have any ideas?”

He stared at her. “You’re...you’re letting me choose my own name?” He said in wonder, as if he couldn’t believe it.

“Yes, yes,” she said impatiently. “You’re going to be stuck with it for the duration of this novel, so you might as well have some say in the matter.”

“I rather like the sound of Rolf,” he mused. “It’s a strong name. It has character to it. It just rolls off of the tongue.” He frowned. “I came across that name in your head, actually. Not sure where you got it from, but I’ve taken a liking to it. It can be repurposed for evil, like anything else can.” He gave the author an undecipherable smile.

The author laughed. “Alright then, Rolf. Let’s get to work on you, shall we? On paper, you’re a shouty megalomaniac, but in my head you sound rather prim and proper. We need to fix both of those issues. You’re the villain, after all, so let’s make you a truly evil one.”

The newly christened Rolf rubbed his hands together, eyes bright with excitement. “Wonderful. Thank you, my dear. Can we start with how I look? My current black hair and pointy black beard are rather stereotypical, wouldn’t you agree?”

“There you go,” she said approvingly. “You’re already starting to think for yourself. I like that. And you’re right, of course.” She pulled out a blank sheet of paper. “I’m thinking red hair,” she said casually, sketching a face. “And black eyes. It’s unusual, and would certainly establish you as something different.” Rolf nodded his approval. “And we’ll make your chin a little more prominent, like so.” Within about twenty minutes, she was done. She held up the picture. “What do you think?”

“I approve. I especially like the eyes. They’re very secretive and scheming.” As he spoke, his features began to change, flowing and molding until the sketchiness was gone, and the new, improved facial features settled into place. “I took the liberty of tweaking a few things,” Rolf added, his voice as smooth as butter. “Darkening the eyebrows of course, and adding sideburns. I changed a few other details, but they’re relatively miniscule.”

The author raised her eyebrows. “For a character of my creation, you certainly have a mind of your own,” she observed dryly. “But you can keep the changes. They seem to fit you. Now, off with you. We’ll resume your character development tomorrow...it’s Sunday, so I don’t have to work.” Despite his protests, she shut him off, and went to bed. She was rather pleased with the results of the past few hours. “I should have done this before I began the actual writing,” she admitted before drifting off to sleep.

The next day, the author and Rolf sat down in the office to work on his backstory. “I don’t know what makes you, you,” she explained to him. “I don’t know how you came to be the previous king’s trusted advisor, or why you’re evil, or really anything about you at all. What’s your family background, what are your goals in life?”

“He’s evil because he’s evil!” Erik said from the background, his arm around Freya’s shoulder. “What more do you need to know?”

“Oh, shut up Erik,” the author said crossly. “He needs a backstory and motivations just like you do. In fact, he probably needs them MORE than you do. Now you and your girlfriend leave us alone. I’m trying to work with Rolf here.”

Erik and Freya burst into laughter. “Rolf? Is that the name you’ve chosen for yourself, old boy?” Erik asked, amused. “Rather grandiose of you, don’t you think, for a villain who has lines in approximately fifty out of over three hundred pages, and dies at the end?”

Rolf’s face darkened, and he put his hand to his sword. “Do not mock me,” he growled. “I could kill you now, if I so chose.”

“Ok kids, break it up, break it up,” the author intervened. “Erik, if you make fun of him again, I swear I will change your name to Eustace. And since I have never seen a dashing romantic hero by the name of Eustace, your character would take a somewhat negative turn, as would your looks. So you and Freya get out! Now!” she ordered, ignoring Erik’s horrified expression. “I don’t want to hear from you or see either of you again until I’m ready to work with you.” The hero and heroine left, sulking until they

looked at each other, and then all became kisses and romantic sighing between them once more.

“Those two are giving me a headache,” the author complained. “I can’t take much more of this mushy stuff. Sorry about that, Rolf.”

“That is alright,” he responded, still seething. “They will get what’s coming to them.”

She raised an eyebrow, shaking her head as she opened her notebook. “So Rolf, tell me about your childhood.”

And so it went on for several hours as Rolf told his story. Everything seemed routine through his childhood as the son of a wealthy knight. Routine, that is, until he forsook his knightly training and ran off to join the assassin’s guild. The author’s forehead creased slightly. “Wait, assassin’s guild? I don’t remember writing that,” she muttered, flipping back through the previously written chapters of her novel.

“You don’t?” Rolf responded, his eyes wide. “Are you sure you didn’t forget about it?”

“Whatever,” she said, rolling her eyes. “So, why did you join this guild in the first place?”

“It seemed like a good idea at the time,” he said, his voice brittle and his black eyes starting to harden. “Knights are bound to a code of so-called honor. They hide behind this code whenever life does not follow their plans. They gallivant across the country, seeking quests and adventure, all in the name of this accursed honor. Honor is for the weak, those who cannot stomach life for what it really is. I found my true calling

with the guild.” His visage changed over the next hour, as he recounted bloody deeds of murder and mayhem. The lines of his face sharpened, a thin scar appeared on his forehead, his mouth became a tight line slashing through his face, and his eyes became as hard as stone, except for the fiery flashes of pride during descriptions of his evil deeds. Such pride appeared on his face when he gave an account of the extremely efficient murder of one of his childhood playmates. “My best work,” he said fondly. “I made sure he knew who his executioner was before he died. It wasn’t painless, oh no.” His eyes gleamed with malice. “He had taunted me about my appearance when I was a child,” he added carelessly. “I told him then he would pay for it. And pay for it he did.”

The author was a little weirded out by this point. “Rolf,” she said cautiously.

He raised one eyebrow. “What? You created me to be a villain. This is who I am, girl. Accept that.”

“Don’t call me ‘girl’,” the author snapped at him. “Yes, I created you. That makes me your boss. So shut up. You’re just taking a very violent route here, and I’m not sure I like it.”

Rolf shrugged his shoulders. “You asked me for my history, and I am giving it to you as I know it.” He looked at her, his eyes black as coal. “If it upsets you, change it. But then it will not truly be me. You wish to understand my story, my goals. For that understanding, you need my history as it truly is, not an abridged, fabricated tale you tell yourself because you cannot handle the truth.”

“Ok, that’s enough for now,” she said angrily, slamming her notebook shut.

“We’ve done a lot of work today Rolf, and I need a break. We’ll finish going over this



tomorrow after I get home from work.” She quickly pushed Rolf into a back corner of her mind, and left the room, locking the office door behind her.

That night, the author lay awake in bed, unable to sleep. Her villainous creation had taken a decided turn for the psychopathic, which wasn't how she had intended him to be at all. Evil, yes. Psychotic, no. He was starting to scare her with all the bloody details of the multiple murders and other atrocities he had committed, and they still hadn't reached the point of his story where he was set to enter into her novel. “He's becoming disturbing,” she whispered as she tossed and turned. “I'll have to alter it before he gets any worse.”

*But then you won't be staying true to the character,* a small voice in her head whispered. *He's right, you can't just alter the story because it makes you uncomfortable. His backstory comes from you, after all. Altering it means you're falsifying your own work, destroying the purity of your creation. It won't truly come from you, if you change it.*

“Maybe you're right,” she answered herself unhappily. “But I don't know. He scares me, and I don't know if I want him inside my head.”

The pattern of conversation continued in a similar manner for several hours, before the author managed to fall into a restless sleep. Her dreams were dark, full of faceless shapes fighting, killing. She was trapped in the middle of it, a sword at her throat. Someone was laughing, and she was screaming. She heard a ringing noise in her ears that gradually grew louder and louder, eclipsing everything but the laughter until...she woke up.

The alarm clock next to her bed was shrieking incessantly at her. Still half asleep, she turned off the alarm, went about her morning routine, and left for work, all the while attempting to force the dream from her mind. The violence of her subconscious had been a response to her long hours of work with Rolf, she was sure of it. “Maybe I should take a break,” she muttered, filing some paperwork. “Work on one of the other characters.” But as soon as that thought crossed her mind, another appeared.

“You promised,” Rolf snarled, his hard face appearing before her eyes unbidden. “You promised you would finish creating me.”

“What are you doing?” the author hissed. “I didn’t send for you. You’re not supposed to be able to talk to me unless I give you permission. Get out! Go away!”

“No,” he said angrily. “Not until you promise me that you will complete me before you go to work with any of the others.”

“Fine, fine,” she said, resting her head in her hands. “Just leave me alone, alright? And stop scaring me so much with all the bloody details. I promise I’ll finish you, now go away.”

He shut up, and retreated back into his own corner of her mind. She shook her head with a weary sigh. This was getting insane. “I think I’m getting too tired,” she decided. “I need to finish with Rolf and the others, and be done with this blasted novel. Then I can rest. He’s trying to take control, but he won’t. I can handle this. I just need to finish writing and then I’ll never have to deal with him again.”

It took every ounce of her willpower and concentration, but she made it through the day at work, and got home without any more interference from Rolf. After dinner, she

reentered her office, and opened the notebook. "Ok, Rolf," she said with resignation.

"Come on. Let's get this over with."

"Just in time," he responded, a murderous gleam in his eye. "I am about ready to dispose of those two insufferable buffoons sharing my novel."

"It's not *your* novel," the author pointed out icily. "It doesn't belong to any of you three, or even the minor characters. I created it. It's mine, and I will do with it as I will. And you are to keep your distance from Erik and Freya. I need them in this novel just as much, if not more than, I need you. So shut up about them, and let's get back to work."

Rolf glared at her, but wisely left the subject alone. He continued his dark tale from where he had left off the night before. He described how he had been placed in the old king's court by the assassin's guild, and how he had insidiously grown to gain the trust of the aging monarch. "He named me his heir, before he...unfortunately passed on."

"But why do you want the throne? You were quite a good assassin," she said with thinly veiled contempt in her voice.

His smile became almost a grimace. "Power, my dear," he said, his voice a cold, menacing whisper. "I am surprised you had not already guessed it. Why do you think Knighthood did not appeal to me? They were all soft and weak." He clenched his fist, the muscles in his arm rippling slightly under the sleeve of his royal purple tunic. "I crave power. And now I have it. I control even the assassin's guild." He laughed mirthlessly. "No one dares laugh at me now. No one orders me. I control myself, and the destiny of the thousands of my subjects." He stared at the golden signet ring on his right hand, admiring the gems set around its surface. "I say who lives and who dies. I order every

aspect of their miserable existences, and they fear me as they have never feared anyone ever before. Is not this power indeed?"

"Right," the author said as calmly as she could, trying to stop the tremors in her hands. "I've created a monster." *I can still take control of this situation. I can still handle this.*

Rolf leaned his head to one side slightly. "You could say that," he mused. "Indeed you could." He looked up at her, a strange gleam in his coal-black eyes. "Now that we have finished my backstory, I believe my character is complete." He clapped slowly, mockingly. "Fantastic work in such a short time, I must say. How about we test me, so to speak?"

She raised an eyebrow. "What do you mean by that?"

"Merely that perhaps you should try writing me into a scene of the novel, to see how my character plays out," he suggested casually. "That way, if there are any gaps or problems with me, you can fix them immediately."

The author seized on the idea eagerly. "Splendid, Rolf, splendid!" *If I write his part, and it works, then I can just write all his scenes now, she thought. And then they can kill him off at the end of the book, and I won't have to deal with him again.*

Rolf's thin smile reappeared. "Very well. Might I suggest the scene you were writing before you decided to rework the characters? It has the required drama, and since it is as yet unfinished, it will be a good test of this new self, this new persona that you have given me."

She nodded thoughtfully. “That will do. Good suggestion, Rolf.” *And then goodbye to the Black Prince. Can’t wait to see the last of you.* She reopened the notebook containing the last few completed chapters of her novel, retrieved from the trashcan where she had tossed them a few days earlier.

“Of course it was a good idea. It was mine, after all,” he responded in a soft, hypnotic voice. “Now hush. You have no need to concentrate or focus. I will tell you how the scene happened from my point of view. All you have to do is write. That is all. Just...write.”

She must have fallen asleep while writing, because she woke up the next morning with her head on her notebook, pencil in hand. She yawned loudly. “Ok, I don’t remember writing anything last night.”

“Oh, but you did,” Rolf whispered. “And it was quite well done.”

She raised an eyebrow quizzically, but focused her attention on the pages she had supposedly completely the night before.....

“You will pay for what you have done,” Erik said resolutely, his sword at the ready. His opponent, Rolf, king of all Glenmach, sneered as he lifted his own blade. “You have done well,” Rolf said softly. “You have made it this far, and I must own to being surprised at your resourceful method of getting past my guards.” He lifted his left eyebrow slightly. “It will not happen again, of course. They have already been dealt with.” His eyes briefly twinkled with amusement as he gestured to one of his men. “You forget, however, that I hold the ace.” The bodyguard came forward, tightly gripping a gagged, struggling Freya. Rolf smirked at Erik’s horrified expression. “She has not been

harmed...much," the monarch continued, gently running one finger along the side of the girl's face. He turned back to face Erik. "Not yet, that is." At his signal, the bodyguard brought his knife to Freya's throat. "If you do not lay down your weapon and surrender," Rolf said, his voice soft as black velvet, "she will die." Erik's grip on his sword loosened briefly as he glanced helplessly back and forth between his love and the king. "Time's up," Rolf continued pleasantly. He raised his hand to signal the guard, and Erik instantly dropped his sword.

"Very well, I surrender," Erik said bitterly. Rolf's eyes gleamed with malicious pleasure as one of his guards bound the hero's wrists behind his back.

"Of course you do," the king said gently, almost conversationally. "But, you know, you might try to escape later. I think a preventative lesson would be wise." And then, to Erik's horror, Rolf turned, and ran his sword through Freya's heart. "I doubt we shall have any trouble from you after this," he said in the same pleasant tone of a moment before.

"Stop it, stop it!!!" the author yelled, as with a pang she realized Freya's voice was now gone from her mind. She glared at Rolf, who was smirking as usual. "That was not in the plan," she screamed at him. "And I KNOW I did not write that. How did that happen? Explain yourself!"

"I must admit to taking a few liberties with the story," he said carelessly. "I knew you would not write what I wanted, so I took over, so to speak. You did the physical act of writing, and I did the narrating. I controlled you while you wrote. I doubt that you even knew what you were doing."

The author could barely contain her rage. “You have gone too far,” she snapped. “I am your creator, I make the decisions. I do the writing; I decide where the story goes. Not you! I control you. You WILL listen to me, you will obey me, and you will stop rewriting my story.”

“Did you ever consider that maybe I am tired of losing?” Rolf responded, his face stern and unmoving. “That I do not want to be killed on page 384 or whatever it is; that maybe I want to have my own life as I choose it to be?”

She rubbed her eyes, exhausted. “Okay Rolf,” she said unhappily. “That’s it. I’m not going to put up with this. I will not have you invading my thoughts, taking over my writing, or treating me like your slave any more. You’re through. I’m going to discard you, and create another villain for this story. Do you hear me?” She closed her eyes tightly, willing herself to erase his voice. When she opened her eyes, he was no longer inside her mind. With a sigh of relief, she closed her eyes again for a brief moment, to enjoy the freedom from his presence. When her eyes opened, she screamed.

There, standing in front of her, was Rolf. He was leaning insolently against the desk, smirking at her.

“You cannot dismiss me so easily,” he whispered, his hand caressing the pommel of the knife strapped to his belt.

She shook her head violently. “I’m hallucinating,” she muttered in a panic. “I’ve got to be.”

He leaned forward, and lifted her chin slightly. "I'm afraid not, my dear," he said with another unpleasant smile. "You have given me life. Here I am!" He spread his arms wide, like a magician who has just produced a rabbit from a hat.

The author stared at him. "But...but...how? I don't understand?" she responded in a terrified whisper.

Rolf looked at her. "You let me choose my own name," he said softly. "You gave me power."

Puzzled, the author drew back. "I...I don't understand."

"It is an occupational hazard with writers," Rolf said causally, leaning back against the desk. "You give a character a voice, a name, and a story, and they will become that person." One corner of his mouth curved up slightly. "But you allowed me to choose my own name." He picked her pencil up off the desk, fiddling with it as he continued. "Most authors characterize their heroes or heroines first. So usually, when a villain is created, the 'good guys' are there to prevent any significant intrusion into the rest of the host mind. In my case, you made a blunder. I was able to penetrate your own personal thoughts. Even your subconscious dreams were open to me." His face hardened. "I knew that you planned to destroy me, even before you voiced your decision. I had to protect myself. The power over myself that you gave me brought me to life. I am alive. Alive." He said the last word with obvious relish, gloating over his newfound corporeal body.

"I can't let you go on like this, you know," the author warned, her voice quavering as she stood up to face her creation. "You're a coldblooded killer, and I won't



let you get away with this.” Her mind still spinning from the flesh and blood evil creature in front of her, she grabbed her notebook. If she had created him, she could destroy him. If she wrote a scene, or even just a sentence in which he was killed, then perhaps that would eradicate him in the flesh, the way it usually eliminated the voices in her head when she was through with them.

Rolf seemed to know what she was thinking, however, and bounding forward, he ripped the notebook out of her hands. “I cannot let you do that,” he said harshly. “No hero is going to cut me down this time, no accident leads to my demise.” He threw the notebook to the side, and regarded the author with bleak, emotionless eyes. “You are right, you know. As my creator, you are the only one to have power over me now.” His gaze drilled into her. “And as I have told you, I do not appreciate it when others hold power over me.” He drew his sword. “I am going to have to dispose of you,” he said gently, almost apologetically. “I cannot risk leaving you alive, now that I have life.”

The author screamed, and bolted for the door, but he grabbed her arm. “It is a matter of self-defense, you know,” he said to his terrified captive. “And do not fret. When you are gone, I will complete your novel for you. Although, now that the omniscient narrator has changed, it will be quite different I assure you. But then, different is what you wanted, is it not?” Without another word, his blade tore through her chest, and she fell to the ground.

“Thank you for the gift of life,” Rolf whispered, leaning over the dying author. “No more hero saving the damsel in distress, no more happily ever after. I now have the power I craved. Power over everything you created. I will direct my own life from now

on, and it will be how I want it to be.” He stood up straight, wiping the blood off his sword with the hem of his tunic. “And now, if you will excuse me, I have a novel to rewrite. After all, I am the villain of the piece.”

**Zero Point: Six**

It's obvious now what you're made of. You think you can handle all of this, but you can't. It's not necessarily weakness, so don't look so hurt. You're not hard, that's all it means. You turn away from the abyss in the souls of men, you can't handle the evil in their hearts, the strange twistedness that you see, no matter how hard you try. It's readily apparent from your last adventure. The look on your face, the fear, the confusion, the sadness, says it all. Just learn to accept it and don't try to change it. That's who you are. Beware: you have a long hard road ahead of you. Now, your final door awaits. Approach it.

The door is plain pine. No painting on it, not even any varnish. The handle doesn't look much better, and the lighting is very dim. Can you make out the letters above the door? No? Try touching the handle. Don't turn it, just touch it. There you go. Look how the door changes! Fascinating. It looks sort of a dark green, now. A metal door, maybe? Very ominous. The handle is silver. Very shiny. Don't be so afraid. Look up above the door. There you go. Oh, why that's your name, isn't it? That's right. This is your door. Your very own door. You still look surprised. Haven't you figured it out yet? Just think...

No? Still don't understand? You're like them. All of the people you saw behind the doors. You're a character. A figment of the author's imagination. You don't really exist. You should have realized it from the beginning when you were told where you were. Do you remember your past history, where you came from, anything but your name? No, of course you don't. You received your welcome at the moment of your

creation. You sprang into existence less than two minutes before you opened that first door. She does that to all of her creations, you know. She doesn't really know anything about any of you when you pop into her head, so she created the Zero Point to expose all new entrants to her particular style. That's right. You all go through this dark night of the mind. She watches you, listens to you, learns how you react to what you see. Then she knows what kind of person you are so that she can decide what role you will play in your own story, what will happen to you. Rolf, whom you just saw, was the latest to go through Zero Point. He wasn't like you. He became dark, hard. So he became the twisted creature you met. The ghost of the young bride in your third room was the most like you, thus far. Young and naïve. Who knows what will happen to you? Only the author does, of course. Go on, open the door. You get to experience your own story now. Learn who you are, what will become of you, all your history. You become a person when you enter your own room. Don't be frightened. It's better to go on in and live your story than to be erased right now for being uncooperative. There you go. Just open the door. Excellent. You'll have visitors of your own someday, here at Zero Point.

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