

Solemn Graces #1: Once Upon A Midnight Dreary

by Thomas Castle

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Table of Contents

Chapter One - “The World Within The Woods”

Chapter Two - “In The Lion’s Den”

Chapter Three - “Finding Common Grounds”

Chapter One “The World Within The Woods”

All throughout human history, we have been warned against venturing too deep into the forest. For as long as we have lived near forests, we have been afraid of what lurks in the shadows of those ancient trees. We’ve gathered around campfires in the dead of night to tell each other stories about what happens there amongst the creaking bark.

There is no doubt that, at some point in your life, you will have heard some of these stories. Those tales tell of little girls attacked by wolves and children lured in by candy houses and teenagers unable to survive a single night in a cabin, all within the deep dark forest. Even today, we hear stories of people getting lost in the woods and nearly starving to death before miraculously finding their way out - and those are only the lucky ones.

In almost every case, these stories are born of a very natural fear that has stalked us since the dawn of conscious thought: the fear of the unknown. For as long as we have wondered about the edges of our own existence, we have also been afraid of what lurks beyond. We naturally fear what we can’t see or what we don’t understand, and so we made up stories to fill in the parts of the forest we had no knowledge of.

But what if there really *was* something in the forest to be afraid of, other than wild animals and the potential for getting lost? What if there was a world deep within the trees where the bright and warm surroundings of nature became a dark and twisted shadow of themselves? And what if, once you found it, you were unable to find your way home and were doomed to remain there for the rest of your life?

It was the tales of just such a world that brought a witch by the name of Grace Morgan to the town of Wicker Creek. The town itself was far out of the way of the rest of Inglenook, located by a creek of the same name and surrounded by the verdant growths of Blackwood Forest. To most,

it was nothing more than a few shops and a couple hundred people huddling together in the midst of nature - but to Grace Morgan, it was the chance to answer an age-old question that had long nagged at her mind.

Her life before coming here wasn't really much to celebrate, as she had spent many years of it drifting from one cheap motel to another in search of the next mystery to solve. She had always had trouble fitting in no matter where she went, and so remained an outcast even into adulthood. What little family she had no longer wanted her, and she never stayed in one place long enough to find a new one.

Perhaps that was why she was so drawn to this town. No one else would even have thought twice about the stories its residents told, let alone paid them a visit to investigate the truth of the matter. But there had always been a deep yearning within Grace to discover what lurked in the shadows where others feared to tread. This was why she was the person you called when you wanted someone to check for monsters under your bed or inside your closet.

That said, it was not the town itself that was the mystery. The residents of the town, however, were more than willing to point Grace in the direction of the true mystery. They all told her the tales of locals who went missing in the forest during particularly long nights, often those who had gone out on a camping trip and simply never returned. No one seemed to personally know anyone who had gone missing, but the town was convinced enough of the stories that Grace believed there might actually be some truth to them.

Just a fragment of possible truth was enough to convince Grace to pursue this investigation. She wasn't the type of person who would pass off strange noises around the house as being just the wind or squirrels in the walls. Instead, she was the type of person who stayed up all night, searching the house for the real cause of those noises. Being a witch, she was also the type of person who would be able to tackle whatever monster or creature she revealed as the culprit.

In this case, she was the type of person who would make the journey into the woods to determine for herself where this whole local legend came from. If she happened to find some of the supposedly missing people along the way, then she would be perfectly capable of bringing them home - or, at the very least, discover once and for all what had happened to them in Blackwood Forest.

So it was that Grace Morgan set off into the woods on the back of her horse, Ravenstorm. Being that no one knew anyone who had gone missing, Grace did not have any material to perform tracking rituals on and so was forced to search the old-fashioned way: meander around the woods and hope to stumble upon something more or less at random.

At first, there was nothing to be found but tall trees and woodland creatures but this was not surprising. One of the major aspects of the tales she was told was that you could not find this world in the woods if you were looking for it. Grace had ventured into the woods with the express plan of getting herself lost in the hopes that it would allow her to find the darker parts of the forest.

As the day wore on into night and the moon eased into the sky above, Grace had lost all sense of where she was or how she might be able to return to Wicker Creek. Her plan had worked so far; Ravenstorm had taken her so deep into the woods that it was easy to forget there was civilisation in this valley at all. There was a kind of peaceful isolation here, and she was beginning to wonder why she hadn't just taken up residence in the forest long ago.

Several hours after setting out on her journey, Grace began to feel a sense of *wrongness* to her surroundings. The trees had gone from thick and healthy trunks with leaves full of life to twisted and crooked things that clawed their way up from the black dirt below. An eerie mist replaced the clear air that surrounded the witch and her steed, rolling off what seemed like thick

and dirty rivers. Everything around her now had a musky and earthy smell, like a pile of wet grass clippings left in the sun all day.

This was a part of the forest not documented or even mentioned in any English textbooks, and was thus unfamiliar to Grace. Even Ravenstorm, the horse who had once been dragged underwater by a rogue merrow, was reluctant to venture much further into this place. At this point, however, they had no choice. The familiar trees of Blackwood Forest were nowhere in sight. It was just this, in every direction Grace looked.

Against the common sense a normal person would've had, Grace smiled to herself about having found the world within the woods and pressed further in the hopes of discovering its secrets.

On and on Grace Morgan and her horse rode until, finally, she was able to take in the first views of the world that would become her home.

In the distance, the revolving beam of what might be a lighthouse occasionally illuminated the shadow of buildings, their silhouette betraying nothing about whatever inhabitants might dwell within them. A foghorn called out across the mists, likely to be part of the lighthouse's duties, yet Grace felt as though it was welcoming her to whatever this world was. Even the crickets that chirped all around her seemed as though they were applauding her in some way.

At last, Grace and Ravenstorm passed through a covered bridge over a river, and shortly thereafter came upon the town itself. Grace's smile widened with a kind of dreadful glee she had only felt a few times before in her life. This was even more exciting than when she had been given her first knife for Almsgiving, which remained one of her fondest memories.

Grace gazed around this world within the woods, fascinated by the aesthetic of it all. A grand majority of the buildings were built of stone and brick, and the streets were exclusively cobblestone. There were no cars to be seen; instead, a number of horse-drawn carriages littered the way in between those cluttered buildings. There were few people travelling by foot, but those she saw were dressed in a very old-fashioned way one would not usually see in Inglenook.

Almost everyone who saw her stared at her as she passed by. Whenever she returned a look, that person quickly looked away and shuffled back to their business. Grace found this to be deeply unsettling. Was it just because she was an outsider, someone they had never seen before, or was there something else behind their gazes? Whatever the reason, Grace - though troubled by this - was far more concerned with taking in the sights of this secret world than pondering the motivations of its inhabitants.

Grace passed through a number of cramped and twisting alleyways that broke off from the main streets until she came upon a simple pub at the end of one such alleyway. Beside the door hung an old carved sign with the words CRYING WOLF around a depiction of same. She hitched Ravenstorm to a nearby post and proceeded inside.

The pub was almost as empty as the streets outside, with most patrons drinking silently around dark tables. A majority of them seemed to have a desire for isolation, yet almost all of them looked up at Grace when she came in. Even the group of young people standing by a wall Grace could not look at watched her move through the pub toward the bar itself. As she took a seat on an empty stool, they all went back to their drinks and quiet chatter and whatever they were doing with that wall.

After only a few moments, the apparent barkeeper approached Grace and spoke to her. "Welcome, stranger. What'll you have?"

“Greetings,” Grace replied, inclining her head. “I would like a meal and some information.”

“Well, there’s the menu,” the bartender said with a gesture to the folded menu beside her.

Even just glancing over the menu made Grace’s stomach nearly turn as she searched for anything with green instead of grease. At least there was a rice dish available, which didn’t sound completely off-putting.

“The rice salad,” Grace said. “And a glass of red wine.”

“Be just a moment,” the barkeeper said, before heading off to fetch her meal.

Grace turned her gaze on the pub as she waited. The patrons were largely an uninteresting sight, but whatever those kids were doing with the wall drew her attention. It seemed as though one of them kept throwing themselves against the wall while the others reacted with some kind of disappointment. She still had trouble looking directly at the wall and wasn’t sure why, but could look at the youths with no problem.

The barkeeper noticed her staring upon returning with her order. “Got a problem?”

Grace turned back to the bar. “Not as such, but pray tell, what are they doing with that wall?”

“You really are a stranger, aren’t you?” the barkeeper said. “There’s something not wrong with that wall, there is. No one knows what it is, but if you go at it just right, you’ll get yourself stuck in it. *Some* among us have made a game of it.” The sentence was punctuated with a pointed glare at the youths.

Grace nodded, attempting to understand the concept. “Such a game does not seem safe to play.”

“It’s safe for people who know their way around Grimstead.” The bartender shrugged. “More or less.”

“Grimstead,” Grace repeated. That must’ve been the name of this town, and she wanted to feel every syllable in her mouth.

The bartender gave her a bemused look. “I wouldn’t stay here too long if you’re gonna make it that obvious you don’t belong.”

Grace raised her eyebrow at him and took a sip of her wine. “My visit here was not by accident, you know. I came here in the course of an investigation, to determine the truth of some local legends. Therefore, it would be best that I stay until said investigation has come to its fullest conclusion.”

“I’m gonna say this one more time,” the bartender said. “This town ain’t safe for outsiders.”

Grace merely stared back. “I shall take that into consideration. Now, if you would point me in the direction of some place to stay the night, such assistance would be greatly appreciated.”

With crossed arms, the bartender smirked at her. “There’s a place down on Crow’s Wood Street. The Crawford Inn. You can’t miss it.”

Grace inclined her head in thanks. The barkeeper left her alone to tend to the other patrons while Grace finished up her meal in silent intrigue. Even if there really were no missing people, she had at least discovered a brand new world completely unknown to her before. In the attempt to solve one mystery, a whole new set of mysteries arose that Grace was eagerly anticipating the investigations of.

Upon finishing her meal and her wine, Grace left the appropriate payment on the counter and returned to Ravenstorm, still hitched outside. Together, the horse and her rider set off once more, in search of the Crawford Inn.

Several alleyways and cobble streets later, Grace arrived at the recommended hotel. It was a building of brick on the outside, with a painted sign posted near the walkway confirming it as the Crawford Inn. Standing before the building in the front garden were a number of crooked trees whose leaves shuffled in an unfelt wind. Grace gazed up at them on her way into the hotel, only to discover that what had at first appeared to be black leaves was actually several murders of crows that had taken roost amongst the otherwise naked branches.

The interior of the hotel came as a pleasant surprise. Its walls were papered with dark damask she had never seen on the mainland. The corners of the lobby were obviously paid little attention, based on the amount of cobwebs that had developed, though Grace was disappointed to find few spiders living in them. Many of the bare wooden floorboards gave a distinctive creak upon putting any sort of pressure on them.

Grace was met at the front desk by the owner of the Crawford Inn, whose name tag declared him to be one Bertram Crawford. She set the luggage she had brought with her down with a sigh of relief and was just about to speak when he looked up at her. His face showed a marked familiarity upon seeing her.

“Ah, you must be Messer Morgan,” he said to her.

Grace blinked in response. “How did you come by that knowledge?”

“The article in the newspaper, of course,” Bertram replied. “Might I see your identification?”

“The newspaper?” Grace asked, thoroughly intrigued by this. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“Your identification, please?” he prodded.

Grace raised an eyebrow in silent [word for angry judgement?]. Regardless, she procured her identification card, cringing a little as she saw the incredibly old and inaccurate picture. Her dark skin had been rendered even darker by the poorly calibrated camera, and she had shaved her head only weeks before that picture was taken. The cut suited her lifestyle back then, but she had since let her hair grow back out. She had come to prefer a more subdued style of makeup than she had back then, as well, and hoped the makeup in the picture wasn't *too* concealing.

Despite the differences, Bertram seemed to accept it and handed it back to her. “Your room's all ready for you, Messer Morgan. Also, I was asked to give you this.” He extended an envelope toward her, its shape and material unexpectedly fancy.

Atop the envelope was the key to her room - number 13, which bothered her as soon as she saw it. It was an odd number, not an even number, and so it stuck out as being *not quite right* in her mind. If it had been room 12 or room 14, she would have raised no issue with it, yet here she was stuck with room 13. Was this some kind of omen?

Regardless of the number, Grace pocketed both objects and signed the guestbook before her. Now officially registered as a guest of the hotel, she followed Bertram as he headed out from behind the desk and down a nearby hallway. The corridors became tighter as they ventured deeper into the hotel until Grace could almost feel the cobwebs wrapping around the black hair on her head. Despite their lack of spiders, this was an almost comforting feeling for her. Before too long, they reached the door of her room and entered into it, with Grace trying very hard to ignore the number emblazoned on the outside.

The room was no different in aesthetic from the rest of the hotel. Its furnishings were rather fancier than she reasonably expected from a hotel of the same size elsewhere. There was only one bed of two sides, already made, and a small coffee table under the window at the back of the room. To the left was another door, presumably leading to the restroom, which would be useful in a few minutes after such a long journey. All of this cemented a quite inviting feeling for Grace, and she glanced in approval at her surroundings.

Bertram seemed deeply troubled by this. “I don’t know how you found this place, and it’s none of my business, but I feel the need to warn you away. This town and the people who live here have a way of devouring those who don’t belong. You’re in the lion’s den here, Messer Morgan. Get out while you still can.”

His warning came as no surprise to Grace. “I have traveled far and wide across Inglenook,” she began. “While undergoing said travels, I have found that such a warning is typical from the older residents of small towns. It is especially common in those who are attempting to hide some terrible secret. I appreciate the warning, but I am fully capable of removing myself from whatever trouble I might encounter during my stay here.”

“So be it,” Bertram replied. “Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

Grace gave him the room fee of twenty gildings and sent him on his way.

Now alone, she turned her attention to the envelope she had been given. Her name had been penned on the front in a fancy calligraphy, and it had been sealed by an ornate wax seal of a type no longer used in the majority of Inglenook. Upon opening it, she discovered the letter itself had been penned on a kind of parchment both heavier and thicker than normal paper, and coloured a yellow one would only expect to see in a book from olden days or in the wallpaper of an upstairs nursery.

The whole thing was addressed to her personally and signed by one Dorian Belgrave, the apparent Count of Grimstead. In the same fancy calligraphy as her name on the envelope, the letter read:

For Grace Morgan—

If you are reading this, then you have arrived safely in town and checked into the local inn as expected. First and foremost, welcome to Grimstead! I trust that your journey here has been a happy one, and that you will enjoy your stay in my beautiful city.

However, there is business to attend to. You may know me as Dorian Belgrave, Count of Grimstead. Presently, I live within the halls of Castle Gaunt, which overlooks the city. I have heard much about your travels and the things you have done and would like to extend to you a formal invitation to attend a private conference at my home. I simply wish to meet with you; no more, no less.

I must impress upon you the anxiousness with which I am expecting you. I have already dispatched a carriage to await your arrival and bring you to me, should you accept my invitation. The time of our meeting will soon be at hand.

*Sincerely,
Dorian Belgrave
Count of Grimstead*

Though it was already getting late into the night, Grace was intrigued by this invitation. Count Belgrave was yet another person who had mysteriously expected her arrival in Grimstead. Perhaps if she attended this supposed meeting with him, she could finally discover why everyone kept acting the way they did around her.

For the time being, Grace set the letter aside and went to work settling into her room. Her clothes were easy to hang within the room’s only wardrobe, as she had packed only a few changes of clothing. The hygiene products she had brought went in the bathroom, though there

was only enough to last one or two nights. She had planned on being forced to camp in the woods, and so brought supplies for such an occasion.

After setting everything up, Grace stripped off the clothing she had been wearing since before setting out into the forest and made use of the bathroom's facilities and shower. As the warm and refreshing water poured over her skin, her thoughts turned to the letter and she began a debate with herself over whether or not to accept the invitation.

It could very well be a trap set for outsiders just like her, meant to lure them to their certain deaths. However, even assuming that were true, Grace was well confident in her abilities to defend herself, especially in contrast to the average passing traveler. Attending this meeting presented more of a benefit than a risk in her mind. By the time she finished her shower, she had made her decision.

The next hour or so was spent readying herself to attend the meeting. She settled on a pair of tight velvet shorts over floral leggings and a lace-edged top, all in an unsurprising shade of black - her signature colour. Even the scarf that she wrapped around her hair and the gloves that covered her hands were of black fabric. Complementing the outfit was her makeup, with lips painted as dark as a shadow and thick eyeliner meant to draw attention to her brown eyes.

After all of that, Grace packed up her drawstring bag with various bits of equipment she felt she might need, donned one of her many velvet traveling cloaks, and headed back through the hotel to inquire about this supposed carriage.

Chapter Two **“In The Lion’s Den”**

The carriage that stood outside the Crawford Inn was no different in technology to the others Grace had seen already, but she was somewhat surprised by the sight of it. It was a bulbous contraption of unidentifiable wood, intricate carvings lining the top and sides of the thing. Only two horses were reined to it, and a man whom Grace presumed to be the carriage driver was standing just in front of it.

This man was the oldest man Grace had ever laid her eyes upon. His creaking bones were stuffed inside a luxurious grey suit of three pieces, complete with a grey top hat sitting on his hairless head. A cloud of white adorned his chin just below puckering lips. Though the skin around his eyes made him look as though he were constantly squinting, it was clear that he was scanning Grace from top to bottom. His eyes spent a little longer on the holster attached to her belt than anything else. She shifted uncomfortably in his gaze, but ignored the feeling of being judged for the sake of business.

As she approached, he bowed his head slightly to her. “Grace Morgan?”

“The very same,” she replied with a considerably more respectful bow of her own head.

“I am Aldous Withers, groundskeeper of Castle Gaunt.” His voice shook with rasping breaths, as though each word presented an uphill climb for his lungs. “Master Belgrave sent me to retrieve you at your leisure.”

“Shall we depart presently, then?” she requested of him.

“As you wish,” he said, and helped her into the carriage proper.

Once she was seated, Aldous climbed atop the carriage and they headed off toward the castle that loomed over the town.

The path to the castle wound its way up a sizeable hill that served as the furthest border of the town itself. Though Grace could not yet see their destination in full, their ascension up the hill did afford her a full view of the town from above.

The moon, which had the convenience to be in its full phase tonight, lit the whole scene in a glowing blue. The town was clearly small, but it seemed much bigger at the same time, and none of the buildings looked entirely right. Some of them sat at unusual angles and looked as though they were being pulled down in a curve toward the ground. Others had strange and angular additions or even towers jutting up into the sky, and a great majority of the streets seemed to create a labyrinth of cluttering alleyways arranged in some vaguely familiar geometric pattern. There was an ominous emptiness near the heart of the town, a square where no buildings stood, and Grace's mind filled itself with thoughts of what might happen there.

Beyond it all, on the far side of the town, was a lake whose tides were covered with a sheet of swirling fog. Grace almost thought she could see things lurking within that fog, whether they be the ghosts of old ships or something far worse. Being this far away, however, made it impossible to tell just what those things really were. Somewhere on the lake was the lighthouse she had seen evidence of earlier, still sending its beam of oddly sickening light across the waters and the town itself.

The whole thing was difficult to look at for too long, as her rational brain attempted to make sense of the surreal architecture and landscape that sprawled below her. She pulled her eyes away from it and rubbed at them, attempting to clear away the shadow of a headache that had developed just by gazing at the town from afar. Upon pulling her hands away, Grace glanced toward the front of the carriage and saw for the first time their destination.

Directly ahead of the carriage, a large castle dominated the top of the hill, looking over the whole of Grimstead from its menacing perch. Its sharp towers and pointed spires formed an impressive silhouette against the luminous clouds. The tallest tower - a colony of bats swarming around it - nearly blocked out the moon as the carriage drew nearer to its gate. A number of the castle's windows were aglow with flickering candlelight, suggesting the presence of at least some life within its crumbling walls.

A set of overbearing iron gates opened on their own as the carriage passed through them. Grace's journey concluded shortly thereafter, the carriage settling into place in front of the castle's thick wooden doors. She gathered up her bag and disembarked from the carriage, approaching the castle's entrance.

Beside the door was a rope that she could only assume was attached to some sort of bell. Pulling the rope with her free hand confirmed this assumption, and even from outside she could hear the ringing of a quite loud bell, only slightly muffled by the wood and stone of the castle. Moments later, the doors before her swung open to reveal yet another in the series of men she had encountered on this journey.

Her first thought upon seeing him was how pale and how young he looked. This man was the definition of tall, dark, and handsome, though such a description was far from being Grace's type. He possessed a kind of unnatural beauty normally reserved for statues and paintings of immoral men. The warmth of his smile had trouble reaching the depths of his cold blue eyes, and when he spoke, it was in a tone that was both friendly and deceptive.

"Welcome to my castle," he said with a courtly gesture. "Enter freely and of your own will!"

"Count Belgrave, one presumes?" Grace said without moving.

“I am Count Belgrave, and I bid you welcome.” He motioned for her to come inside.

A moment passed before she entered the castle, proceeding with the same amount of suspicion she always maintained when interacting with men of such alabaster dispositions. Behind her, the old wooden doors slammed shut of their own accord, practically trapping her inside the castle.

“I would like to say meeting you is a pleasure on this night,” Grace said as she glanced about the place. The interior was almost as menacing as the outside, with the flickering torches casting what seemed like living shadows across the stone floors. “However, I must admit I have my doubts about coming here at all.”

“Then I shall do my best to assuage any concerns you have,” Count Belgrave replied. “Come, follow me to the parlour.”

In the interests of finding an answer for the questions she had, Grace followed the pale man through a number of cold, drafty passages until they reached the parlour. This was a room meant for comfortable meetings and casual chatter, although Grace doubted it was ever used for much of that. The windows were covered with thick red curtains of a shade that bothered Grace’s eyes.

Alongside one wall was a hearth already filled with flame, a single vase of wilted flowers sitting atop its mantle next to an old clock. The state of these flowers matched the large and wilted plants that stood in each corner of the room, all of them despondent and seemingly ignored. In front of the hearth sat two plush armchairs, both facing the crackling fire, with a coffee table between them.

On the wall above the hearth was something Grace took immediate notice of: a large painting of what seemed to be Dorian Belgrave himself, standing beside another man whose beauty rivaled Dorian’s. Both of them were dressed in an aristocratic fashion, wearing luxurious old suits like Grace had never seen. The other man, at least in the painting, had a waving mane of shining blonde hair and equally youthful features, his lips in a proud sneer at whoever had painted the thing. His right arm grasped itself around Dorian, as though attempting to keep him as close as possible.

Count Belgrave took notice of what his guest’s eyes had been drawn to. “That was done quite some time ago. The other man you see there is the Baron Rathbone, known to me as Jasper.”

“It is quite a realistic painting,” Grace replied.

“Yes, Jasper commissioned one of the best painters in Grimstead for it,” Count Belgrave explained. “I offered to paint it myself, but he desired to capture a full range of beauty in those strokes.”

Grace pulled her eyes from the painting to glance at Count Belgrave. “Where is he now?”

The crackling of the fire filled a brief silence.

“He’s out on the town presently,” Count Belgrave replied. “He would not take kindly to my asking you here, so we must hope he does not return early tonight, hm?”

“Quite,” Grace said. She took it upon herself to sit in one of the chairs facing the hearth. “What exactly is the reason you called me for this meeting, Count Belgrave?”

“Please, call me Dorian,” he said, turning to face her. “As I said in my letter, I simply wished to meet you in person.”

“How did you know of my arrival before even I knew of it?” Grace asked with a questioning look at him.

“Through the oracle, of course,” he replied, as though such a thing was obvious.

“Who is the oracle?”

“It’s the local newspaper.” He gestured to the table sitting between the two armchairs, on which Grace now noticed a copy of said newspaper. It did indeed bear the title of *The Oracle*

printed along the top. "It has the unique quirk of publishing most of its articles a day in advance. This issue featured an article which specifically references the visit of a witch from beyond the forest, whose description matches yours exactly."

Grace processed what he was implying here. "This would be the reason I received so many stares upon entering the town."

"I would imagine so."

"Why would the newspaper print an article about my visit?"

"It's not every day we get visitors like you from outside. Tourists and lost travellers pass through here on a regular basis, but witches of your apparent renown?"

"You speak as though you have heard of me before this article," Grace said.

Dorian shook his head. "Only what this article mentioned, I assure you."

"That brings me to the reason for my visit in the first place," Grace said. "I came here on the trail of several missing individuals who may or may not have actually existed. Since my arrival, I have received exactly two warnings about being an outsider here. Pray tell, what happens to outsiders in Grimstead?"

Again, the crackling of the fire filled an ominous silence.

"Terrible things, Messer Morgan," Dorian said with a heavy sigh. "This town is a haven for the monstrous. Those who come from beyond the forest have very little chance to return with their lives intact."

"That is a frustratingly vague answer," Grace stated. "What exactly do you mean by 'haven for the monstrous'?"

"It's a place where monsters come to feel safe," he explained. "There is very little room here for those who are neither monsters nor victims, and outsiders are almost always victims."

"Your tone borders on the affectionate, yet you look such a weary sort. Why is that?"

He gazed at her for a moment before practically falling into the other armchair. "It's not an easy life to live in this castle, Messer Morgan. I am burdened by all sorts of things the lesser folk could hardly imagine."

Grace's posture stiffened in her chair. "What sort of burdens could a man of your privilege possibly bear?"

"A great many, in fact," he replied. "For one thing, I'm sure you've noticed the wilted plants in the room."

"Quite," Grace said, looking aside at the plants. "How might that be such a terrible burden to you?"

"It's not the plants themselves but what they represent," Dorian said. "Old Widdershins has tried everything, but they cannot be revived. Even replacing the plants did not work, as the new plants simply died a few days later as well."

Grace merely stared at him, her brown eyes glimmering in the light of the fire.

Dorian seemed to take the hint and continued speaking. "You see, I believe Castle Gaunt to be haunted by the ghosts of...well, by ghosts. Jasper tells me to ignore them, but it has gotten quite difficult to do so in recent times." He shuddered, as if remembering a particularly fearful memory. "I can't tell you how many times I've been woken up by that ghastly shrieking of theirs."

"Ghosts do not usually cause plants to wilt in this manner," Grace replied, her tone almost accusatory. "Perhaps - if there is any truth to your belief - it's some sort of message. Might such a thing be this burden you speak of?"

Her only response from Dorian was a scowl at the burning logs.

"Why would there be ghosts attempting to send you a message such as this one?"

“Everything I have done has been for a reason,” Dorian said. “Were it not for myself and Jasper, this town would have a far worse monster stalking the streets at night.”

Grace was about to accuse him of being the very monster that stalked the streets at night, or at the very least of being pretentious and self-absorbed, but was interrupted by what sounded like the distant slamming of the front doors of the castle.

Dorian stiffened at once, a look that approached panic contorting his face. “Jasper has returned. You must leave at once.” He bolted from his chair and took Grace by the arm.

“His timing would appear to be impeccably convenient,” Grace said, pulling away from Dorian’s grasp. “But I desire to speak with him as well.”

Then came a voice from the corridor. “Dorian? Come to me at once, I’ve brought us a quite lovely meal.”

Before either of the two in the parlour could respond, the other man from the painting entered the room and immediately stiffened upon noticing Grace. His lips curled into a sneer and he looked away from her at Dorian.

“Who is this, Dorian?” he said, his voice suspiciously calm.

“She was just leaving,” Dorian replied, then glanced at Grace. “Weren’t you?”

Grace returned his glance with indignance. “I should say not, as I desired to speak with both of you.” It was, however, rapidly becoming clear to her that doing so was not in her best interests. She was already planning her escape, should things go more wrong than they had so far.

Jasper strode across the parlour to get a closer look at Grace. “Who are you? Why are you here?” He reached within his overcoat and drew out a rod of old wood, pointing the end of it directly at her throat.

“My name is Grace Morgan,” she replied, her own hand moving to the holster on her belt. “I came here on the trail of an investigation I am pursuing.”

“We have done nothing wrong,” Jasper said. “Leave this place and never return, or suffer the consequences of your actions.”

“If you feel it necessary to admit you have done nothing wrong, that only serves as a confession of guilt,” Grace pointed out. From the holster attached to her belt, she drew a slender rod of ebony wood, complete with a spiderweb pattern carved along most of its length.

Jasper noticed her wand was now drawn. “A sorcerer, I see. That absolves you of nothing.”

He opened his mouth to speak again, but Grace acted first. She pointed her wand first at herself, then at a spot somewhere behind Jasper, near the doorway, and prepared to cast a spell of her own.

“*Egō, saliō,*” she uttered, feeling a small part of her soul’s natural energy extending out through the wand. A tingling sensation enveloped her whole body as she was transplanted straight to the spot she had pointed at.

Jasper whirled around and pointed his wand at her, his mouth wide in a hiss. “*Sēparō!*” He slashed his wand through the air, sending out a burst of energy that Grace quickly dodged. Jasper’s spell hit the door behind her, cleaving it in two within its very frame. The top half clattered against the stone floor.

“That is rather counterproductive to my leaving, is it not?” Grace said, her tone warning him against casting another spell at her. “I can assure you this will not be the last you see of me. On this night, however, it shall be.” With those words, Grace turned, stepped over the bottom half of the door, and left the parlour for the drafty corridor beyond.

As she made her escape through the castle, Jasper turned on Dorian. Regardless of whether he had brought her here or she had come of her own accord, this invasion of their personal space

was a great offense against Jasper. His eyes filled with a roar of tranquil fury as he decided that their night would be filled with screams of a different nature than he had planned.

[Grace returns to the Crawford Inn and settles in for the night.]

Chapter Three **“Finding Common Grounds”**

From just past the window, there came a cacophony of cawing. The crows roosting in the trees outside were loud enough to raise Grace from her slumber, and the first thing she did was reflect on how surprisingly well-rested she felt after such a night.

Now, there is little to be said about sleeping in an unfamiliar place beyond how unpleasant it tends to be. The blankets don't cover you fully, the pillows aren't fluffed enough, and the mattress beneath you is lumpy and uncomfortable. You don't even have the luxury of pawing and padding your way around in the dark, since everything is different from the way you're used to. You're more likely to trip on your face, bruise your knee, and be awoken in a slurry of swears than find whatever you might be looking for.

Why, then, did Grace have such an easy time of sleeping at the Crawford Inn for the first time? Perhaps it was the fact that, despite it being a hotel, it felt more like home than any of the dozens of hotels she'd slept in up to that point. Even this town felt more like home than any town she had visited in Inglenook, and her second day there hadn't even begun yet.

Regardless of the reasons, Grace woke up in the late morning after having one of the deepest and most satisfying sleeps of her life. In fact, despite the events of last night, there were only two things that troubled Grace's newly conscious mind. The first thing was the dream she had actually managed to have while sleeping. It was almost a nightmare, one she hadn't had in a while, although it wasn't a bad enough one to wake her up at the time.

She laid in bed for some time after waking, attempting to go over the dream and remember every detail she possibly could, before turning on her side and grabbing her current journal from the side table. Rubbing the sleep from her eyes, she began writing down the details of the dream as best she could.

With that successfully recorded, Grace set the journal back down on the table and sat up in bed. A stretch wandered through her body with a yawn quick to follow. Neither of those things helped relieve the wave of pain she had woken up in, which was the second thing troubling her mind. Several parts of her body were simply sore for no apparent reason, something she had struggled with for the majority of her life, and it was difficult to find true relief from such chronic pain.

At the very least, her pain helped her wake up enough to pad to the restroom for a morning trip. She was just in the middle of washing up when someone knocked on the door.

“Housekeeping!” said a voice from beyond the door.

Grace dried her hands and headed for the door, making sure to wrap a robe around her - a very important step, given her preferred way of sleeping. Opening the door revealed the maid of

the hotel, of which there was only one, who greeted Grace with a smile. Her name, according to her name tag, was Marion.

“Clean your room, miss?” Marion offered.

“Perhaps later, thank you,” Grace replied with a courteous smile. “I pride myself on cleanliness in my daily life.”

The maid shrugged and pulled her cart off to the next room down the line. Grace watched her go and was about to close the door when she noticed tomorrow’s copy of *The Oracle* laying on the ground just outside the doorway. A number of headlines all competed for space on the front page, making for a layout that was a bit messy but ultimately readable.

Grace bent to pick the paper up and headed back inside her room. Upon closing the door, she locked and unlocked it exactly four times and tapped the doorknob in order to reassure herself. Then she headed for the bed to sit down on the edge with a groan of pain and turn her attention to the headlines of the paper.

One story in particular, penned by the editor and apparently sole employee of *The Oracle*, drew Grace’s attention. It was somewhat difficult to understand with the almost stream of consciousness style in which it was written, but Grace actually recognised this style to be the result of autowriting. A woman Grace had once been romantically involved with had included autowriting in her fortune telling routine, and it always resulted in texts similar to this.

Grace went to work translating the article into a readable form as best she could. What she came up with was something like:

Miss Purity Has Disappeared!

Virginia Lovelace, the most recent winner of the Miss Purity Contest, went missing sometime last night. These reports come to us from her mother, Prudence Lovelace, who is offering a reward for any knowledge of her whereabouts or help ensuring Virginia’s safe return.

She was last seen with a group of friends preparing to attend a party, though the location and nature of this party are unknown. The other members of that group have not come forward with any information regarding Virginia’s current whereabouts.

As usual in cases like this, the Town Watch’s official opinion regarding the case has been recorded as: “Well, these things just happen. She’ll turn up if she wants to.” In light of this, any help in locating Virginia is appreciated.

Before her disappearance, Virginia seemed to be following in her mother’s footsteps -

Prudence was once given the title of Miss Purity herself before moving on to a life onstage at the Peerless Playhouse. Time will tell if Virginia manages to do the same.

Next to the article was a picture of Virginia having just won the Miss Purity Contest. Virginia's golden blonde hair and bright blue eyes made it obvious to Grace what kind of standards this town held its young girls to. Despite her distaste for such a thing, Grace did feel a pang of lonely familiarity as the picture gave her another reminder of the fortune teller she had once loved - a woman whose hair shone like sun-washed honey and whose eyes were like the summer sky.

Grace closed her eyes and took a breath, pushing thoughts of lost love from her mind. She silently decided to contact Virginia's mother about her daughter's disappearance and attempt to find her. She had many reasons for this, of course, not least of which being the promised reward. But the main reason was the fact that a mother was missing her child, a feeling for which Grace bore no small amount of empathy. If no one else was helping to reunite the two, Grace might as well be the person for the job.

Additionally, although *The Oracle* promised articles a day in advance - meaning that Virginia, according to the given pattern, was actually going to disappear that very night - Grace had her suspicions about a potential connection between this disappearance and what had occurred at Castle Gaunt the previous night. These could not be confirmed without further investigation, but it was a theory she would keep in mind throughout the day.

It would take Grace another hour or so to properly wake up and prepare for the events of the day. Once she did, she headed out the door toward Prudence's house. [Also include something about Grace's cane for fibromyalgia, and Grace checking the local address directory to find out where Prudence lives.]

[Grace meets with Virginia's mother. Here, she learns that many people pressured Virginia into joining the Miss Purity Contest and that she didn't really want to join it. Grace also gets a lock of Virginia's hair and used it to enchant a lodestone, which will help Grace find her.]

At first, the enchanted lodestone in Grace's hand seemed confused as to where it wanted to lead her. This was not a good sign, as this usually meant that its target had been split up into multiple pieces. However, it could also mean that she had left some of her hair or any other part of her behind in one place and was actually in another place - and so, Grace continued roaming the town on Ravenstorm's back.

A short while later, the lodestone led Grace down a lonely road that ended, quite some distance from town, in a set of old wrought iron gates under a sign declaring it to be Common Grounds Cemetery. Extending from the gates on either side was a roughly made fence of piled stone that appeared to be overgrown with a crawling vine, with another fence of iron jutting up from that. Beyond the fence, visible through the gates, stood a foreboding graveyard that would presumably be Common Grounds.

The gates themselves were conveniently open, which allowed Grace and her horse to pass through them and into the graveyard itself. Grace held her breath until she was completely past the gates and inside the fence, as a manner of respect for the dead. Ravenstorm was not pleased with any part of the graveyard, so after a brief struggle, Grace allowed the horse to go free and continued down the path herself.

It was a fairly simple but fascinating place. Many of the graves rested under iron cages, all of which were marked with a crooked headstone of some manner. Beside each grave was a dangling bell, with a string leading down into the dirt. The vine that crawled over the fence had taken over the field itself, leaving very few patches of kept grass or bare dirt. Even the path below Grace was not entirely free of the vine, though it did appear to have been crafted from the remnants of broken headstones.

Every now and then, a gentle breeze would ring some of the grave bells as it rolled along the field. Following in its path would be the echo of unsettling whispers that broke the otherwise quiet air. It all sent shivers of wonder and mild cold through Grace's body as she explored this lonely necropolis.

At the very center of the graveyard stood a building of stone brick similar to the boundary of the place. Grace's guess that it was the church where visitation and services were held was proved correct upon reaching the building. The lodestone, as it turned out, wanted Grace to enter the church and so she passed through the old wooden doors and into the main hall.

The interior was poorly lit and just as simple as the rest of the cemetery. Vaulted arches loomed overhead as Grace walked among the pews toward the stage. There had been some kind of recent service here, as evidenced by the ritual books laying open on the ground, but Grace wasn't sure exactly what it had been.

The lodestone was pointing her toward a door to the side of the stage. Upon opening it, Grace found a staircase extending into the shadows of an unknown room. Shadows were not a problem for Grace, of course. All she had to do was trigger a specific charm on her bracelet to give herself the ability to see in the dark without the use of light.

Proceeding down the stairs led Grace to the crypt of the church, where the vaulted arches were low enough that she could reach up and touch them. Despite the lack of head room, the crypt was spacious enough in between the pillars and columns that held up the ceiling. Grace worked her way around them until she arrived at the lodestone's destination, only to find another lock of hair so sparse that she barely noticed it at first.

So Virginia was not here now, but she had been. Grace knelt and looked around for potential clues. She found a number of empty cups and faded glowsticks, plus a few pairs of lost underwear, that pointed toward a certain conclusion. Grace had been to her own fair share of parties in her younger days, so she quickly pieced together what had happened here. There was still nothing pointing toward Virginia's current location, however.

It was at this point that Grace, focused as she was on the floor, bumped headfirst into a coffin near the back of the crypt. She hadn't noticed this coffin until now, and straightened up to open it and look inside. Within the coffin rested the form of a very pale and very bony person whose face was painted to resemble a skull. A shock of bleached hair as white as the bones beneath that pallid skin laid in a mess on the person's head. Grace could not tell if this body was dead or just sleeping, but a smell of dirt and decay surrounded the coffin.

Whatever the case, Grace thought it best not to disturb this person's rest and so turned her back on the coffin to continue looking for clues. Just moments later, there came a ghastly groaning behind her that sent echoes throughout the crypt. She spun to face the coffin, only to witness the corpse-like person within gradually sitting up with arms extended in a blind grasp.

The groaning, a dusty and rasping noise from deep within their lungs, continued until the person was fully sat up. Only then did their eyes open wide in a stare as cool blue as a winter sky, and lock immediately onto Grace. With the breakneck speed of a slug, whatever this thing was struggled its way out of the coffin and began lumbering toward Grace with those foreboding arms straight out.

Grace pulled her wand from her holster and pointed it at this almost person, ready to utter her last spell in defense against the ghastly being. That painted skull face filled her vision as she was pushed against the wall. With a deep breath, what might be her last, she readied her spell and hoped her impending doom wouldn't be used for just another cheap cliffhanger.