

The Monstrous Hunt

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Now that you're finally calm, Oliver, please tell us exactly how it happened from the beginning.

It was too hot a day to be dressed so heavily. There was little shade in the ruins of Hastings Castle and the ocean breeze was strangely absent.

My top hat was sticking uncomfortably to my head and I had sweated through my velour overcoat. I was so uncomfortable that I had even planned to go home and give up on the entire endeavour. Only a handful of people had come to the fair and of those, the Renaissance purists were strangely absent. What was the fun in sweating to death if you couldn't even annoy uptight losers with deliberate anachronism?

My friend Benji had given up on the fair itself and begun to climb the walls of the castle ruins. He had been a friend of convenience since I answered his ad for a flatmate six months before.

People thought we were twins. We were both tall, thin and lacking in muscle. We both had flat brown hair

and green eyes though his hair hadn't been cut in a few weeks and was beginning to grow over his ears. The only significant difference was that he had a rounder face.

Despite our physical similarities, Benji and I had little in common. He was obsessed with American Football and old books that I thought people read only under threat of failure in school. He had been willing to humour me in coming to the fair but I doubted we would be doing it again. He was too nice.

In the corner of my eye, I could see that he was nearing the large arch when I heard him call back to me. When I looked, he pointed at the base of the wall.

There were two guys pretending to have a sword fight. They were surprisingly good. I didn't know who they were because I couldn't see their faces. They were wearing helmets made of tinfoil covered cardboard. Usually that level of costume denotes people who barely try, but these guys fought like they were really in a battle hundreds of years ago. It was hard not to watch.

Benji called again, yelling that the view from the walls was better. Knowing they were developing an audience, the two guys fought even harder. I could see from above them that one had the Arms of York on the front of his white tunic though the five gold lions on the crest were made of felt and were more a neon yellow.

They began to get tired and Benji and I got bored. I felt a prick in my hand and looked down to see a mosquito. I tried to swat it but it was too fast and flew away. Benji nudged me and gestured to the exit, indicating we might as well go.

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We were just about to climb down the wall when I noticed a group of girls walking up to watch the exhausted 'warriors.'

The girls couldn't have been older than their early twenties and were definitely not Renaissance purists. Their dresses looked more like the gowns from fantasy books and fancy dress costumes than the pages of history.

The guys saw them and tried to start up again but it got pretty sad. Some of the girls were laughing.

In the midst of this group, there was one girl who seemed entirely uninterested in the fight. She was looking at the ruined walls. She was oblivious to her friends' laughter and completely content in her own world.

Her pale skin glistened in the sunlight and contrasted deliciously against her auburn hair. Pastel chiffons covered the bodice of her dress, softening her appearance while accentuating everything enticing about her. In a world with this woman, the Venus was a hag.

I watched her. I couldn't help it. When the two fighting had finally given up and walked off, Benji pressed me to leave. I refused so he left without me.

I spent the day perched atop that wall, watching her walk through the grounds where a castle had once stood, watching her sit upon the lush grass to eat a picnic with her friends, watching her enjoy everything about the day.

I seemed to have found the perfect spot, for no one showed any evidence that they saw me watching her. Unfortunately, there was little shade upon my perch, causing my physical discomfort to increase. I tried to ignore it.

Late in the day, a breeze blew through the ruins. I got a second wind. I could have stayed there another day, just watching, but she and her friends chose to leave. As they made their way out of the ruins, they walked towards the wall on which I sat.

I didn't want it to end there. It was too soon.

The moment she passed, I scrambled down the walls, fully intending to introduce myself. Unfortunately, two things happened. First, as I was almost at the ground, I stumbled. I wasn't entirely sure she had seen me and didn't want that to be her first impression. Second, one of her friends, a short, chubby, Chinese girl, asked when their train left.

I listened very carefully. I wanted to know where she was going, determined that it wouldn't end in those ruins.

They were heading back to the train station that moment. They hoped to get back to York before midnight. She went to school there.

In my moment of insanity, I knew I had to follow. I called Benji on my mobile and told him I might not be back at the flat for a few days. He didn't care. Then I made my way to the train station. The goddess and her friends took a longer route along the main roads so I was easily able to outrun them. I didn't want to seem weird.

I made it in plenty of time to catch the London train. It was the only one so I knew they would be on it. On the ride, all I could do was wait and hope that I didn't lose them before York.

Um, excuse me.

Yes.

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Could you loosen my restraints? My chest is itchy.

Is it?

Very.

*I'm sorry, but we must leave them as they are.
Please continue*

Given the late hour when I arrived in York, there weren't many faces on the platform and it was quickly and depressingly clear that I had lost them. I tried to figure out how that was possible. There had been only one train leaving London for Edinburgh and that was the only train that stopped in York at that late hour.

I paced the grungy platform. I stopped and looked around with misguided hope that they may be on the bridge that crossed over the tracks. There was only one straggler left on the overpass: an old woman with the hairy helmet of a short perm and wearing a cardigan matched with a brown skirt down to her calf. As she trundled her luggage along, I made my own way over the bridge and towards the exit.

I gave a quick peak at the coffee stand and kiosks but they were shut for the night. As I emerged from the station, I stopped next to the small queue of taxis. The driver of the taxi next up watched me and gave a scowl when I continued to walk down the pavement.

Despite having no idea how to find the girl, I was not willing to give up. I turned the corner to cross over

the Ouse and I headed towards the Minster. The pubs were closed and few people were still walking the streets near the massive building. As I approached, I found myself feeling oddly defiant as I looked upon the softly lit grotesques and statues that adorned its massive exterior.

I had been to York several times before when I was younger. My mother had loved the annual Viking Festival and more than once had expressed displeasure that my school didn't force us to re-enact the sagas like York's did. Though I had never shared her enthusiasm, those day trips came in surprisingly handy as I worked my way through the tourist streets with little trouble.

As I was passing Stonegate, I heard a strange noise. Stonegate is a street that looked dark even in the daytime and seemed little more than a darkened alley at night. It smelled of damp cobbles and strong alcohol.

I stopped abruptly and looked down the road. I couldn't see much in the darkness but the sound was still there.

It had two levels of depth to it. There was a high pitched quality that was too loud to have been human and yet made me think of screaming, and a low pitched quality that I could barely perceive but made me want to hide like a kid under the covers. I would have teased a kid hiding like that, but at that moment, I did not feel much like teasing anyone.

Two options came to me. I could run or I could investigate. A brief image of the bimbo in a horror movie came to mind. I moved my foot intending to walk back the way I had come, but then I reminded myself

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how stupid I was being. I walked down Stonegate, my head high and my shoulders back.

I should have run.

Halfway down the block, I noticed that there was something in the darkness of Stonegate. I saw movement on the far side of a rubbish bin. Stopping momentarily, I tried to see what it was. It looked like a person hunched over and struggling with something. I walked closer.

I should have backed away. I began to see that he... it was naked.

I called out.

I should have shut up.

What did you call out?

I asked if they needed help. When it heard my voice, it stopped what it was doing and looked up.

Everything in me froze. I couldn't even fall to the ground in shock. My muscles just stayed exactly where they had been the second I had seen its face.

Where there should have been lips and eyes, even some small nose, its skin had been tugged, ripped, and pulled into a long, bloody point that stood out at least a foot from its head.

It was looking at me. I don't mean to say it just knew I was there. Of course it did, I had shouted at it; yet, without eyes it *saw* me.

It turned and ran. For a moment, I did nothing but stare as it turned the corner and out of sight. I gave my head a quick shake.

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I was so hopeful that it had all been a weird hallucination that I had almost convinced myself. As my muscles relaxed, I continued walking down Stonegate.

I would have ignored the rubbish bin entirely had it not been for the faint whimper and whisper for help. Involuntarily, I gave a quick glance only to have a reason to look back more thoroughly.

A body lay upon the ground. The man was wearing a white tunic with a large crest of York upon it. The bloodied, fluorescent-yellow lions stared back at me.

As the white of the fabric began to turn red from the gaping wound over his heart, I blinked away my shock and knelt down to help him.

His eyes were open but his body did not move except for a random twitch. The whimper could not have been real. His eyes were lifeless, his heart entirely destroyed and mangled in the gaping hole. If what I had seen was not real, how was he dead?

I reached out and touched the wound. It was wet, sticky, and warm. My stomach flipped.

Looking around, I confirmed that the thing was not returning and also that no one else was around. No one would ever believe what I had seen. I would be the next wacko on David Icke's website. I couldn't help the guy. He was already dead. I could only help myself, so I ran.

And the Myyga?

You know what happened.

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I want to hear it from you. What happened to the Myyga?

I wanted nothing to do with the Myyga. I returned to the train station, fully intending to get on the first train back to London.

The air was cool and full of morning moisture by the time the next train arrived, but in that time my brain had worked very rapidly. I thought of the entire reason I had come to York and what the woman I sought would think of my situation. Though I doubted she would laugh at me for wanting to run—she wasn't me after all—I worried she would think me a coward. When I realized she wouldn't think anything of me because I had yet to show her I existed, it gave me pause.

Perhaps it was exhaustion, perhaps it was the growing daylight making the previous night's events seem more a dream than anything, or perhaps it was even my desperation to explain the events away that caused me to take one look at the train steps and the ticket in my hand and turn around to walk straight back into town.

In the daylight with the growing number of people on their way to their jobs, I was not as afraid of the monster.

Watch your tone please.

My apologies, I simply meant that I was scared but given that it was no longer in front of me, I was unsure it truly existed.

Continue.

Several perky backpackers were starting a morning hike over the stone walls of the city. They were the type that would wake up at the first twitch of a bird. Their presence amongst the exhausted rats of society seemed to lighten the stress over everyone. Normally, I hated people like that. What was so wonderful about life? They would have irritated me any other day but at that moment, I found them reassuring.

Despite that, I found myself walking in the other direction, back over the Ouse. I was somewhat aware that I was returning to the scene to verify what had happened though I hadn't had the nerve to admit it to myself. That could be why I took a slightly different route, turning down Lendal to approach Stonegate from the opposite side.

Turning the corner as the street opened into a large square, I stopped. There was little I could do but stare for several moments, for my brain refused quite violently to process what I was seeing.

Across the square and at the opening of Stonegate, there was police tape sectioning off the street and two Bobbies trying to placate some bystanders.

I approached.

The tiny crowd were mainly shop employees trying to get to their jobs and the bobbies were trying to explain that there wouldn't be a point in trying to get to work for many more hours and that maybe tea at Betty's would be a better option. They refused to say what had happened.

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Moments later a van pulled up and those who got out began to put on protective gloves and ready various equipment such as swabs and numbered cards. Then, everyone knew, even without my firsthand knowledge, that the police had a murder on their hands.

Betty's wasn't open yet so the crowd moved to the MacDonald's up the street. I began to follow as I had little clue of what else to do. My spontaneous adventure was turning out to be far less enjoyable than I had hoped.

As the pack of bewildered and slightly frightened staff walked up the street, I stopped. Emerging from Lendal was a tall, auburn-haired woman, one I could not have been more overjoyed to see. I changed direction and walked briskly towards her.

Her companions from the previous day ran to catch up to her. I slowed. Did these women go everywhere together?

My original euphoria dampened to the point of a small gladness that at least I could keep track of her again. I followed, only now becoming over-conscious of how out of place my attire from the festival would seem and also newly terrified that they would recognize me and think me a creep before I had the chance to explain myself.

I slowed more.

Luckily, the same Chinese friend who had asked about the train the previous day spoke far louder than was necessary. She really did seem obnoxious. They were walking to the university campus for a class.

My euphoria tried to revive itself. Knowing the route she walked to get to classes would surely make getting her alone much easier. Though I was not yet

ready to give up on that particular morning, I was satisfied to log away that information for later, when I needed it.

While fascinating, I am really more interested in the Myyga.

If you had let me speak even a moment longer, you would have gotten what you wanted.

It was while I was following them that I saw it again. We were just passing Market Street when I looked down the road only to see it slip down a side street. At first I thought it was just the events of the night coming back to me in haunting visions. I had to know for sure. With the light and the growing number of people, I felt secure in a way my brain knew was mental but I proceeded to break off from the woman and her friends to follow the Myyga.

The side street was very narrow and dark. If it had not been for expensive real estate it would have been nothing more than an alley. As it was, small little shops lined it, though all had yet to be opened for the day. The quaintness of it made me want to vomit or maybe that was my mind and fear rebelling against my feet and curiosity.

I heard a shuffling in the darkness and stopped. My plan did not seem so safe now but I had committed and was not going to be a coward. Alright, I was a coward but I wasn't going to indulge it and be one of those losers on the forums I visit.

When I heard a large thump upon the pavement, I picked up my pace. This road did not go all the way

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through. It was a dead end. No matter what, I was going to come face to face with the thing again.

Tone.

Sorry.

When I got near the end, even in the shadow, I could tell that I would not have the same fate of the man from the night before. The Myyga was curled up on the ground against the corner. The point from its face looked dried out and shrivelled. It wasn't moving.

It was dead?

Yes. It had died right before I had gotten to it.

What did you do with the body?

You don't know? I couldn't do anything with it. When I touched it to confirm it was dead, it turned to ash.

To ash? How did it do that?

You tell me.

I need more information. Can you tell me anything more?

To be honest, when the Myyga turned to ash, I was relieved. I barely understood what the thing was, so hopefully you can understand why this did not shock me at the time any more than the previous night's events. I

naively clung to the conviction that the ordeal was over. No more would be dying and I could return to my original task.

I needed a coffee to reinforce this conviction. No matter what I had felt for the future, the images of the past day refused to depart my mind. I walked back to Betty's.

There was a larger crowd of curious onlookers gathered around the police tape now. Most of those were simply trying to get a look at whatever gruesome scene they were barred from and, upon failing, moved on. The worried expressions on the handful of others made me think they were more employees.

I walked into the tea shop. The warm smells of tea, coffee, and pastries greeted me. Looking around, I recognized four people at one of the tables as having been from the group of employees before.

"A seat, sir?" a young woman asked me. She was dressed with the clean, white button-up shirt that was the uniform. She smiled pleasantly even if mechanically.

I nodded and requested a seat by the windows.

With a quick smile and nod, she guided me to one of the many empty tables next to the group of four. I sat down and saw I had a good view of all the streets surrounding Betty's. For a moment, I felt nervous, like I was too out in the open. Though the initial pain of that feeling subsided quickly, I was never able to remove my uneasiness entirely.

I looked around. As time passed, the tables began to fill up with tourists and those on breaks until there was a line at the entrance to get a table.

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Though she was pleasant enough to my face when checking on me, the woman who had seated me was not pleased I was taking up an entire table for hours for a coffee and pasty. I saw her glare when she thought I wasn't looking. I would still be paying so she had to deal with it. I felt no guilt.

There was an unnatural lull in the babbling of conversation in the room. I looked up at Stonegate. Sure enough, the police were loading a body bag into the back of an ambulance.

The investigators paid little attention except to wait for the ambulance and other officers to get out of their way. They went back into the darkness of the street to finish their work.

I turned back to my coffee but stopped in mid-sip as I heard loud laughter coming from the treats shop in the entrance. Wonderfully, the woman and her friends were looking at the chocolates.

I took the bill that the server had long since placed on the table and checked the amount. I fumbled in my pocket for the right change, almost dropping it on the floor before I could get it to the table. Despite my quickness, the group was already leaving when I stood.

I followed them.

They continued down the street to a nearby bookstore. Her friends walked further back into the store right away, stopping by the magazine racks. She stopped to look at a book on a promotional table near the front. It was my chance.

I walked up and pretended to look at some books next to her. I rarely lacked confidence but when I caught the smell of lily perfume, my knees weakened a bit.

Recovering quickly, I said, "Are you students at the university?"

Idle conversation had always been my weakness. What point was there in it? I never cared if my lack of skill at it offended anyone but now the question I had just asked seemed pointless in a far different way than usual.

She didn't even look up, just gave a non-descript jerk of the head that couldn't clearly have been said to be a nod or a shake.

"You and your friends seem close," I said.

She stopped in mid-motion as she was opening one of the books. Her head tilted up and for a moment she did not look at me. Then she did and that is when I truly went weak. The moment was far too short as her abrupt manner brought me back to myself.

"Why have you been following me?" she asked.

I scrambled for an answer, lamely responding, "How do you know I've been following you?"

Her cheeks reddened as she said, "It would take an idiot not to notice. Even a blind and deaf person would have noticed you around so much. A frumpy looking top hat and velour jacket aren't exactly inconspicuous."

In my off-kilter pause, she added, "Are you mental?"

Strangely, this question of my sanity brought me back to my comfort zone, so many days taking lumps on internet forums perhaps. "Are you a bitch?" I asked.

She jolted at my words; possibly she hadn't expected me to give it back.

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I said, "I wanted to introduce myself to you but haven't had the chance until this moment because your friends are always around. A guy thinks you're attractive and you attack him."

She didn't back down. "You have to admit, it's creepy," she said. "Who else dresses like that and follows someone around, watching their every move? A stalker."

"Then I'm a pretty bad stalker," I said. "I didn't see you until this morning and I only followed you for a couple of blocks. I spent the rest of the morning in Betty's and *you* walked in where *I* was. I just saw an opportunity to introduce myself. As for my clothes, I've been rehearsing for a play. It's just my costume."

She considered for a moment. "I guess you're right. You are a pretty bad stalker," she said. "Sorry about that."

Her hackles were dropping and I felt my muscles relax in kind.

"I'm Oliver," I said as I offered my hand.

Taking it in a firm shake, she replied, "Amelia."

Amelia. The most gorgeous name in the world matched her perfectly.

"Would you like to meet up sometime?" I asked.

She hesitated again. I wasn't too worried because her hostility had nearly evaporated. I could work with this.

"How about at the tea room in the Shambles tomorrow? They have afternoon tea for the tourists at four so we should meet at two," she offered.

Her desire to avoid the tourists melted my heart. So far, she was everything I had hoped.

I felt all weak and happy as I agreed. I told her I would see her then. I said good-bye and left the bookstore, not wanting to press my luck for the time being.

I was sure nothing could ruin my mood. The first thing on my adventure had gone right. Then I passed Stonegate and started walking up Blake Street, the smell of fried chicken and burgers wafting down the road.

I heard the sound but louder than I had remembered. It was the same sound I had heard before interrupting the Myyga the night before. I stopped where I was and looked around.

Though the streets were busy and there were police not far behind me, I was terrified. I looked around frantically and saw nothing. After another moment, I continued up Blake Street.

The sound got louder.

As I was approaching an unmarked building between two shops, I noticed it had a recessed doorway that was in shadow. The sound was louder still. My heart clenched; my stomach flipped.

I looked around again. It was daylight and there were people around. Surely I was safe and, after all, the night before my presence had scared the Myyga away. My rational arguments did little to placate my fear but I pressed on anyway. Within a moment, I saw them.

There were two Myyga squatted over a body. Their long points jabbed into its chest and the grotesque clicking and squishing sounds of their act hit my ears as they worked.

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I screamed nonsensically and ran at them. They stayed only long enough to see what was coming at them before they fled.

I called for help. I yelled down at the constables who were making sure no one crossed the police tape. I screamed for someone to chase the monsters.

I mean no disrespect. It is simply what I said at the time.

When I saw the police running, I turned back to the victim and nearly lost my bowels right there. The body below me was clad in a white tunic adorned with the crest of York, marred only by the blood and the hole that showed his exposed heart.

I heard the footsteps of the constables slow to a stop behind me, one of them swore.

"What did you do, kid?" the other said.

They thought you had done it?

Yes. I told them I had chased someone off but they didn't look like they believed me. They claimed they saw no one.

They did not see the Myyga?

No. Despite being the middle of the day on a busy street, no one did.

Why do you think that is?

To be honest, I think they were using me as a scapegoat. A second murder had happened so close to

where they had been standing that they were probably seeing visions of messy sackings in the media.

There was little other reason aside from my proximity. The street was full of witnesses who had seen me walking up the pavement, though no one had seen the Myyga or even the victim until I had shouted out.

To their credit, the police did not arrest me but they did take me down to the station of the North Yorkshire Police.

It was a dreary brick compound. Its atmosphere did little for my confidence. The large canopy of trees around the main building added some beauty but my mood was too low by that point to be improved by foliage.

I cooperated with the constables. Seeing as how they had jumped on me as a scapegoat so easily, I saw no reason to provoke them further. I stayed quiet as they escorted me into the building and did not speak until hours later when I sat in a beige, fluorescent-lit, interrogation room. It smelled of printer paper and bad coffee.

A detective sat across from me. He had a folder open on the table in front of him. He introduced himself as Detective Graham, the head of the Criminal Investigations Department.

He looked surprisingly young even though he was bald with the slightest bit of white fuzz beginning to grow around the sides and back of his head. His nose looked like it had been broken and set improperly years ago but he still looked as though he could have passed as a TV presenter, possibly even a news reader.

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"Every witness on that street saw me walking," I said. "Not one of them would say I killed that guy."

"We know," he replied. "We aren't charging you with anything, but you found the body and you had said something at the scene about seeing the culprit."

"Culprits," I corrected.

He was surprised. "There was more than one?"

"Two," I informed him. "Two ..." I hesitated.

They would think I was nuts if I told them the truth so I lied just a little. "... Guys," I said.

The detective called out to someone not in the room, "We need a sketch artist."

"Wait!" I said. "I didn't get that good a look at them. No one else even saw them and they were running away when I showed up. I didn't see their faces."

"Forget the artist," he called out as if to the same person. Turning back to me, he asked, "Is there anything you do remember?"

I looked down at my knees as I considered my answer. The smell from my body wafted in front of my nose and I realized it had been days since I had changed clothes let alone showered. I would have to remedy that before my meeting with Amelia.

"Take your time," Graham said. He was not being impatient but his words brought me back to the situation.

"They were both about my height, male," I said. "They were athletically built, not quite like a track star but toned enough." In an extra bit of daring, I said as much as I could before the raising of an eyebrow would turn into outright scoffing. "And their skin was almost greyish."

"Excuse me?" the detective said, the scoff threatening to spill over.

"What I mean is that they looked like they don't spend much time in the sun and are malnourished or something," I corrected. "Not healthy looking if you get what I mean."

He nodded as if he did. I suspected that his mind had jumped straight to drug addicts with visions of two guys on PCP. I didn't correct him.

"We might need to speak to you again," he said as he looked down at a form in front of him. "I see you have given us your name and mobile but your address is for Hastings. Where are you staying in York?"

"I haven't figured that out yet," I said.

He looked agitated by this information, yet he was a level-headed man and did not direct his frustration directly at me. "Would you mind staying in the station until you have made other arrangements?" he said. "I can't make you stay but given the severity of these crimes, it would really help us out."

I nodded. "I can stay for a while, but I've got a date tomorrow that I can't miss."

Graham looked me over. "You got a date looking like that?" he said. Despite the harshness of his comment, he looked at me as though he pitied me.

More than anything, it was the pity that bothered me. "I can be very charming," I replied, trying not to reverse my good fortunes by insulting the man in charge.

He forced a smile as he picked up the folder and stood. "Well, thank you for your help," he said.

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"Wait," I called, daring to take one advantage of his good nature. "Why was the victim wearing a tunic with the crest of York on it?"

His brow furrowed and he frowned. "What are you talking about?" he asked and then began to flip through the folder. "There is nothing about that in the police reports and that is the kind of thing they would mention, kid," he said.

Scanning the pages of the report, he seemed to confirm his memory. "Yes. Here it is," he said. "The victim was a male in his late thirties, wearing a Manchester United jersey and jeans." He looked up at me, no longer frowning but his brow still creased slightly. "Is there anything else you wanted to tell me?"

I shook my head. "No," I said. "I must have imagined it with all the shock. I was just at a Renaissance fair yesterday."

Graham seemed satisfied with my answer and gave a firm nod of parting before leaving the room.

I was beginning to question my own sanity about the Myyga. Maybe they really were just human psychopaths and I had imagined the pointed faces and the body turning to ash. I comforted myself with the thought, though I failed to set myself completely at ease. After all, no one had seen anyone, human or otherwise, near the body on Blake Street. I even began to wonder if maybe I really was the killer.

That worry changed quickly.

York was in the height of tourist season. All the inns and hotels were fully booked for weeks. Detective Graham took pity on me after hours of trying to find a place to stay.

His wife's little brother did security at one of the colleges on the university campus. They had some empty rooms and he would let me stay there so long as I paid the required fees. I was just thanking Graham for the help when the station turned into chaos.

A new call had come in. There had been two more murders. Two bodies found together. Detective Graham ran out the front door of the station.

I wasn't sure they were related to the cases I had seen until I heard the dispatcher chatting with one of the Bobbies who had stayed behind. The Bobby was a young, dark-haired man. He looked like he had volunteered to stay at the station just to chat up the young and fit blond. He leaned on the counter and let his eyes wander as they talked.

"Weirdest serial killer I've ever heard of," she said.

The bobby asked, "Holes over the hearts?"

She nodded before adding, "But this time there were two piles of ash, one next to each body. What kind of killer leaves a card like that?"

Hearing this, my limbs weakened and tingled uncomfortably as my blood turned cold and raced back to my heart. It pounded harder to accommodate the stress of the influx.

Were the two new deaths what made you realize the Myyga were real?

It definitely made me realize I wasn't completely insane.

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What made you realize the Myyga were real?

What happened after my date. No one could have denied it after seeing that.

Before that, I was confused, curious, and feeling a little mad.

Just before leaving the police station, I heard someone mention the murders were on Coppergate. I resisted the urge to go to the new crime scene myself. It would have been a quick walk if I had chosen to make it but I decided to focus upon my original reason for coming to York.

Before heading down to the university campus to take advantage of the offered accommodation, I walked back into the part of town with the biggest cluster of shops. Within half an hour, I was walking to the university with new and, most importantly, clean clothes as well as other much needed items. They included a toothbrush.

Detective Graham's brother-in-law was just a young guy but he was eager to do his job. He had short dark hair that seemed needlessly gelled flat. At first, he seemed a bit daft but he got me set up in my room fast enough and left me alone.

The room was in the graduate residences overlooking a small, stagnant lake. It had a bed and washroom which made it exactly what I needed.

I sat down on the narrow bed and leaned forward onto my knees, trying to decide what to do until I saw Amelia the next day.

Only 24 hours previously, I had been in Hastings and in that short time there had been four murders by the

Myyga. Knowing there was more than one, I considered the possibility of there being swarms. I hadn't been harmed yet but that could have been luck.

I decided to stay inside until I left for the Shambles the next day. I ordered a pizza from the campus pizzeria and settled in for a long and boring night of playing solitaire on my phone.

The next day, I cleaned up completely, binned my top hat and velour jacket, and pulled on jeans and a white t-shirt for my date.

I arrived at the Shambles a few minutes early and easily got a table in the tea room. Though Amelia had been everything I had wanted up to this point, her choice of venue was less than ideal. It was a quaint place with tiny china thimbles and tea cups in glass display cases. Everything about it was intolerably cute and it lacked the enticing smells of Betty's. The aroma of tea was heavy in the room but the pastries were cold and there was a mustiness that could not be ignored even with a cup of tea right under one's nose.

A few minutes later, I heard the door open and looked up to see her scanning the room. She looked right at me but didn't move. I waved at her. Apparently, she hadn't recognized me. She gave a start when she realized who was waving at her.

Trying to impress her, I stood when she approached and greeted her warmly.

"Sorry," she said, "You look so different without that stupid hat."

I laughed and we sat down and ordered.

She looked better than ever. Her long auburn hair waved in large curls around her face and she was

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wearing the slightest bit of make-up. She didn't need it. Her pink V-neck blouse teased me with cleavage. I forced myself to look at her face.

She asked me what I did for a living. I lied and said I was training to become a barrister. She was studying astrophysics. She was perfect.

We talked for an hour, though the conversation had died off several times only to be restarted. It felt like she was holding back, which annoyed me, but I didn't want to drive her away either, so I took it.

Then, she stood up and said good-bye. It was so sudden that I just stared at her for a moment. Once I managed to come back to myself, I asked, "Where are you going?"

She looked me right in the eyes. She was unafraid of the confrontation. "You seemed like an interesting guy," she said, "But you really aren't my type. It wouldn't be fair to drag this out. I'm flattered you liked me but I think it's best if I leave now."

I couldn't believe it. She was giving up so easily. I went to so much trouble to get this chance and she just arbitrarily changed her mind.

"What about me doesn't meet your expectations?" I asked.

She let out a heavy sigh before asking, "Can't we just leave it as it is and not get into it?"

"No," I said, getting angrier, which apparently showed.

She stared right at me again. "Fine, if you want to be that way about it," she said. "Yesterday you're behaviour intrigued me because you claimed to like me and were chatting me up while simultaneously being a

prat. I thought maybe there was more going on with you, something good. Instead, you seem more to be the prat who has to try too hard to be nice. I'm not interested in assholes. Good-bye, Oliver."

"What if I weren't an asshole?" I asked at the same time she was turning away from me.

She didn't even look back. "Good-bye, Oliver," she said with more venom before leaving the shop.

I threw some coins on the table to cover our order and ran after her. I looked both ways down the dark and narrow Shambles. She was gone.

I swore at myself, wanting to punch a hole in a wall. I didn't even know how I had cocked that up so badly. As I fumed, a patch of bright yellow on someone's shirt caught my eye.

I looked up at the man passing me and realized it wasn't a shirt. It was a white tunic with the crest of York. I could not see his face because he was wearing the same helmet from the fair.

As he walked north, I followed. He turned where the Little Shambles open up to a large street with trees and benches in the middle. More yellow caught my eye. There was another person who had just turned into the same area from a side street; the same tunic, the same helmet. Then a third person brushed passed my shoulder, looking just the same as the other two.

At this point, I was convinced I was going mental. I stopped where I was and gave my head a shake. It didn't help.

Then the Myyga came. Three of them from all directions. They closed in upon the three people.

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I knew what was coming. I was just about to step forward and yell out to them. No one else seemed to see them, despite what was happening.

Before I could move or yell, two grayish hands were wrapped around me, one restraining my body and the other covering my mouth. Next to my left ear, I could feel the side of the point. In my peripheral vision, I could see the end of it just beyond my head.

The Myyga kept me restrained so tightly, there was nothing I could do, no resistance that would have worked fighting it off. I watched as the three other Myyga surrounded the people. They faced their victims, held them by the shoulders and pushed their points into the men's chests right where their hearts would be.

No one, not even the victim's themselves, seemed to notice. It was as if they had stopped in the street simply because they had wanted to and were completely unaware of what was happening even as their bodies collapsed upon the ground.

No one noticed. Shoppers and tourists continued about happily, looking at the displays in shop windows and chatting.

As the Myyga crouched over their victims and continued to suck, I saw the skin colour of the victims pale. They were being drained of blood, yet even when the blood was gone, the Myyga continued to suck and something new happened.

The bodies began to change. At first it was just the visible skin of the hands. It became ashen like the Myyga's. Then even the tunic and helmet disappeared. Their faces were featureless. After another moment, the faces stretched into a long point. Only when the

transformation was complete did the Myyga stop their sucking. Then, these three new Myyga stood with them and all six walked down the street.

The Myyga holding me let go. I turned around, prepared to defend myself. It was not interested. It was already walking away.

Did you understand what the Myyga were trying to show you?

Not even slightly. Why had they left me alone? Why could I see them and why was I the only one they were uninterested in? I was more confused than ever about the earlier murders and more terrified of the Myyga with all the new questions. Somehow, I could see who they would pick to change but this gave me little comfort.

Why?

Because I began to see the yellow marked tunic everywhere.

You saw them right away?

No, but it was only a day before a small number of people became almost everyone.

That makes sense, but you did not see any more Myyga right away did you?

How did you know that?

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The effects intensify gradually but that is not what interests me. Please continue your account. Tell me when you began to see the crest again after the Myyga showed you the change.

After I saw the Myyga change those three people into their own kind, I headed back to my room. Frankly, I intended to hide, which I did successfully for the night.

Unfortunately, I needed food at some point. There was a cafeteria in the main building of the college so I went there to eat the next morning. It was quiet.

I was so uncomfortable. I expected to see the Myyga everywhere. Though they had never once threatened me, they were alien enough that I was not convinced I was safe. It had already become clear that no one else was. Four deaths had happened already and three more people were no longer human but pointed-faced... uh... Myyga.

Every time someone walked into the cafeteria while I was eating, I half expected to look up to see the crest while the other half expected to see a Myyga. No matter how many normal looking people walked in, I was surprised each time.

I didn't eat very much before my stress decimated my appetite. Far from helping my mood by giving me energy, the food had now joined in the churning and roiling of the fluids in my stomach.

No matter how many normal looking people entered the cafeteria, I felt sick. Even as my sense of immediate threat from the Myyga lessened, my mind

switched to thinking of my disastrous date with Amelia. I wanted to show her she was wrong but had no idea how.

The hinges on the door creaked noticeably and I jolted but it was just a tawny-haired man looking for food. I needed to leave. My stomach lurched again.

I ran.

There was a men's toilet nearby, which I almost didn't reach in time. After I had expelled the small amount of breakfast I had managed, my limbs were weak. The image of my secure little room came to me.

As I stumbled back out into the hall, I nearly fell to my knees. I had to stop. I was bent over, breathing heavily with my hands on my knees to support me. I looked up at the security desk and froze. Graham's brother-in-law was not looking back at me. Instead, I saw the same familiar helmet. I straightened and as my perspective rose above the counter, I saw the crest.

Looking around, I was determined to find the Myyga. There was none. There were no others around either. The large room was silent but the figure continued to face me, even as I walked slowly around the counter.

"Can I help you?" I asked.

He did not move and made no sound.

"What are you?" I asked.

Still no response.

"Well, if you don't mind, I am just going to stay for a little while," I said before walking to one of the chairs in the corner by the window and sitting down.

Out of all those wearing the crest, I had seen only one, the first one, who had not been attacked by a Myyga. I had decided to wait until that happened.

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But it didn't, did it?

No. I could not figure out why but I waited for three solid hours. He never moved and no Myyga came for him. I eventually gave up and headed back to my room where I sat on my bed, considering my options.

People in York were dying. I had no ideas. Further, I had no idea why the Myyga had changed those people or what they even were. With so little information to me but the very real danger still present, I considered my reasons to stay.

I had none.

Amelia hated me. Far from my usual response, I just couldn't find it in myself to hate her. In fact, I was beginning to see her point. I needed to change.

I began to gather my pathetic collection of belongings into a small plastics bag. I would need to leave York. As I stuffed each item in the bag, I considered my future.

How could I stop being the prat? What could I do? I needed to move from Hastings, maybe talk to my father about that job he was so excited about for me.

Dressed and packed, I set off for the train station.

The streets were quieter than they normally would be in the middle of a summer day. Depressions in the pavement contained puddles of water. I figured the rain must have driven the tourists inside. I passed only a handful of locals as I approached the bridge near High Ousegate.

Then I saw the yellow again. I stopped as the figure passed me and continued to walk down the street.

Looking around, I didn't see any Myyga. With what had happened earlier, I was not even sure I would.

I crossed the river and was at the bottom of Micklegate when I saw another. The closer I got to the train station, the more I saw. My heart pounded with the strange increase in their numbers but I refused to turn back. I would get on the next train no matter where it led.

When I walked into the ticket centre in the train station, I could go no further. No matter what I had wanted, I had been stopped. Each and every person within the ticket office was the same helmeted figure and just as before, they did not respond to me.

Pulling out my mobile, I discovered there was no signal. I swore as I stormed out to the platform, determined to get on a train whether I had a ticket or not. I'd pay on the train if I had to.

I stood on the nearest platform, trying my best to ignore the crests walking by.

An hour passed and no trains came. The platform did not get any more crowded and no one but me seemed agitated by the delay. It was as if there simply weren't any trains and dozens of people were waiting simply to wait.

I needed to find a different way out of the city.

As I left the train station, I was blocked from going further by a line of at least twenty Myyga. At that moment, I was convinced it really was my time. They had left me before but this time they would change me.

I turned around. There were Myyga behind me. Where had they come from? They had not been in the station. With all my options closed to me, my nerve was the only thing that remained.

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"All of you for me? That's a bit much don't you think?" I said. I think I was taunting them because the anticipation was too unbearable. If I was going to die, I wanted it over with.

But they did not approach.

"What do you want from me?" I yelled.

One stepped forward, separating itself from the group. It walked up to me and stopped. I winced as I anticipated the piercing of its point into my chest but it did not strike.

It reached out with one arm to wrap it around my shoulder. I jumped slightly at the touch. It guided me down the pavement, out of the covered taxi lanes of the station, and stopped. It lifted its other hand and indicated the city before giving me a firm push on the back causing me to stumble.

When I recovered my balance and looked up, all the Myyga were gone, leaving behind a normal crowd of travelers except for the smattering of figures of yellow amongst them.

What did you think the Myyga were trying to tell you?

That they wanted me to do something in York.

Did you know what that was?

Not really though I suspected it had something to do with the figures. I began to think that maybe it was not the Myyga that were the problem but the figures and

only I could see them. Perhaps it was that ability the Myyga wanted.

The figures were the problem?

Yes, like the enemy of the Myyga or something.

Why do you do that?

Do what?

Assume there is a battle?

The way I saw it, people were dying. There really was one.

If it is time to die, what's wrong with dying?

You're mental.

You are ignorant. Now, continue your story before I am forced to show you the consequences.

When I walked back through the town, it was even quieter than before. I saw Myyga and crests alike, walking about as though they were entirely normal people simply on their way to work or the shops. Every now and again, I would see one Myyga following a crest. I knew all too well what would happen but also that there was little I could do to prevent the change even if I should. I continued walking.

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I crossed the river and ignored the shops, stopping only when I had reached Coppergate. I saw nothing down the street except open shops but no customers and no shopkeepers. A crest brushed by my left shoulder as it walked past the opening of Coppergate. I looked around. There were still people walking along the other roads but not one had a human face. It was points and helmets everywhere.

I walked down Coppergate and stopped again when I saw the police tape. It was blocking off the Viking Centre. That must have been where the victims were found. There was still no one around.

I ducked under the tape and descended the stairs. I had no idea what I was doing. Logically, I felt it a waste of time given what I had already witnessed the previous day. What more could I learn from their ash?

My fear and confusion drove me onward until I was traversing the underground exhibit. The lighting was poor and it smelled horrid; too much of synthetic hay and feces to 'smell the Vikings' as I traversed the displays of wax figures and mock huts.

A peculiar sensation made me freeze. Without having heard or seen anything strange, my blood felt as though it were draining into my feet. My body had perceived some threat before my mind had caught up. My instincts told me to turn back. I ignored them.

The wax exhibits gave way to a small room with display cases. The lighting in this area was much better and I could see several evidence cards scattered around the room. There were no police. It was entirely quiet.

I had watched enough horror movies to realize I had been an idiot and that this was the worst place to be.

When I heard the low, vibrating tone, I nearly wet myself. At first it sounded like a tuba from a great distance, then almost like a howl, then lyrical like a song. I could feel my ribs vibrating from the low frequency.

I looked around for the source. There appeared to be nothing. I tried to discern its direction. I thought maybe it was coming from right in front of me and yet it sounded like it was all around me.

The tone itself was trying to pierce my heart. It felt like it had succeeded and was sucking upon it. Strange, invisible lips moved over the surface. I could not lift my legs despite how much I wanted to run. The touch was too painful for me to have the strength to fight yet too intimate for me to accept. I tried to push it away. I even managed to lift my hands as if I could physically push against it. Despite the absurdity, I had to try.

The tone changed the more I was violated. It became more varied and soon I made out words.

"Oliver," it whispered. "You are delicious. Now I may have all of them."

I was confused. I had no idea what it was. I had no idea of anything but as my mind raced through any and every memory, trying to find an explanation, the voice spoke again.

"Indeed they all will be delicious too," it said.

Did it mean other people? I had no way of knowing but assumed as much. I worried for Amelia despite her dislike of me.

The pain lessened.

With the dullness, my head cleared slightly. Maybe it really was Amelia who was in danger, her and everyone else. I needed to get to her.

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The piercing eased. The tone evened and became quiet.

As with everything else, I could make no sense of it but I was no longer stuck to the spot so I ran. As I turned the corner to run up the stairs to the outside, I crashed into a man and fell back on the ground. Looking up, I was surprised and also irritated to see Graham.

"How the hell did you get in here?" he said, looking down at me. "And why the hell are you in a crime scene, you stupid git?"

I stammered, trying to give him an adequate answer and failing.

"Michael?" he called to someone behind me. "How did he get in here?" Graham's face was slowly turning purple with his anger.

A young constable trotted up and looked down at me. He seemed as shocked to see me as I was to see either of them.

"I don't know," he said to Graham.

This was not what the detective wanted to hear. "Do I dare trust you to tell me whether he touched anything?"

Michael straightened as if his lower back had been slapped with a paddle. "He couldn't have touched a thing, sir. The team is still taking those re-shots you requested. The lot of us have been there the whole time and he wasn't there."

The creases of Graham's forehead smoothed so that they were no longer forming large ridges. "At least there's that. Where's Gabaldon? He's not up at the line keeping people out."

Michael shrugged. "I don't know, sir."

Graham looked back down at me. Unfortunately, he hadn't forgotten I was right there. "Well, tell that layabout he's in trouble if you see him. I'll join you in a minute," he said, still talking to Michael, "But I've got to deal with this one first."

Michael nodded and returned to the room with the display cases.

"Get up," Graham growled. "I'm seeing you outside myself."

I nodded and did my best to stand. Though the process did result in me being vertical on my feet, it had not been the most graceful effort to right myself. There had been a flailing arm at one point.

As we neared the top of the stairs, Graham stopped and turned around to face me.

"I don't know what you thought you were doing here," he said. "Maybe you kids think the police with more education and more experience than you are too dumb to figure this out."

I tried to tell him that wasn't it at all but he cut me off.

"Honestly, I don't really care about your reasons. You are an idiot who is going to muck up my crime scene. There is absolutely no evidence showing you had anything to do with these murders except that you keep showing up at the murder scenes. If that continues, a logical person might begin to wonder and innocent or not, I personally will arrest you if you come near damaging any of my evidence again. Am I clear?"

I felt it best to say nothing so I nodded.

Graham stood aside and held up the police tape to let me under. Once I was back on the street, I turned

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to say good-bye but he had already set back down the stairs.

The noise of the shoppers brought me back to myself. Looking around, I saw that there were people everywhere though things were still not entirely back to normal. Amongst the human crowd, I could still see a peppering of crests and points.

Despite the mundane surroundings, I could not forget what had happened. Though the tone was gone, my ribs still ached as though the vibration had bruised them. My chest around my heart felt swollen and abused and there was no way I would ever forget that violation. No amount of scrubbing would have rid me of the crawling on my skin.

Its strange words came back to me as well and I thought of Amelia. Not knowing where else to go, I began to run back to the University to look for her.

Before you continue, can you tell me anything more about the vibration? Did you see anything? Even the faintest of images?

No. I could only hear and feel it.

And nothing else? You did not see the investigators photographing the scene? You didn't see anyone before going in there?

No. I already told you. It looked deserted. I have no idea what was going on.

Tara K. Young

When the tone violated you, you said it felt like you had been pierced by a point. Was it one or two?

What?

One or two?

I couldn't see it. I don't know. It felt like one but I can't say for sure.

I need you to know for sure.

Well, I don't!

Then we have a very big problem.

Why does it matter if it was one or two?

How many piles of ash did the police find again?

Two, one from each of the Myyga involved.

The Myyga that you interrupted. Perhaps remembering that, you will understand why I find the number so important. We are treading upon unfamiliar territory. We must have every detail.

This has never happened before?

We didn't think it possible until you came along. You are the first ever to cause us such trouble.

The Monstrous Hunt

I find that hard to believe.

So do we.

Now tell me what happened after that. When did you next encounter the sound?

Not for over a week. As I told you, I began to run back to the university, hoping to find Amelia because I was worried she was in danger. After the strange encounter, after the sound indicated it was going to go after everyone, I did not want to take any chances. No matter what the Myyga wanted, I needed to leave York.

As I ran, I noticed the number of crests and points dwindle. By the time I ran by an Italian restaurant, I could see none in the crowds. The sudden lack of them unnerved me more than their abundant presence.

A fluttering of pale chiffon near the restaurant window caught my eye. I looked and stopped when I saw Amelia about to sit down with her friends at a table by the window. She was wearing the same dress she had worn at the renaissance fair. Seeing visions from that fair had yet to be a good omen.

I knocked frantically on the window but when she saw it was me, she turned back to the menu that was sitting in front of her. I couldn't let something as trivial as her thinking I was a prat stop me so I went inside and walked right up to her table.

"Amelia," I said. "I need to speak with you."

She did not look up but her friends did. The obnoxious friend looked me up and down. Her lips tightened and her eyes narrowed. The other girls just watched as they fidgeted in their seats.

"Don't make this weirder than it already is," Amelia said. "Just go. I told you everything I thought yesterday."

"Fair enough, but this is too important," I said. "Please, just give me a few minutes. Please."

Finally, she set the menu down on the table and looked up at me. I probably looked crazed but she did not react to my appearance. After several more moments, she relented and stood, squeezing out behind the others' chairs at the table. I guided her to the small alcove of the restaurant entrance.

"Have you noticed anything strange in York lately?" I asked.

She was sardonic. "You mean aside from you?" she asked.

"Of course, aside from me," I insisted, refusing to be insulted at such a tense time. "There have been four murders, all strange, that the police can't explain."

"And?" she asked.

"And? And I witnessed two of them," I told her.

This news jolted her and she finally seemed to see why I was so frantic. "Who was it?"

I didn't dare tell her the truth. She would think I was crazy. "I haven't even told the police everything," I explained. "I was too scared. They don't know I saw the first one too."

"You need to tell them," she said. "What if this is a serial killer? Was it the same person each time?"

I couldn't tell her. "Not exactly but they are connected," I said.

"Is the killer after you? Do they know you saw?" she continued to press me, too smart to let it go.

The Monstrous Hunt

"Yes but that isn't my problem," I said. "There is something worse going on because of it. Everyone is in danger."

She scrunched her nose briefly, almost like a twitch but then her face softened considerably. "Have you told the police this?"

"No," I said. "They wouldn't believe me."

She nodded. "Perhaps you should try anyway," she said.

"They'll lock me up!"

She glanced around my shoulder back at her friends at the table. "My friends are waiting for me," she said. "I better go."

As she tried to step around me, I put my arm out to block her way.

"Please, listen to me," I pleaded. "Maybe I am crazy but I need your help to figure this out and the first thing we need to do is get to safety."

"I can't go with you," she said.

She was being so frustrating I wanted to scream, but I knew it wouldn't help. "Let me show you," I said. "I'll show you what I am talking about."

I had nothing to show her but I just needed her to come with me. If I could get her out of the city, we might be safe.

She bit her lip. "I don't know, Oliver," she said. "How can I trust you?"

There she was being candid again. I had nothing to offer her so I begged.

"Please," I said. "It will only take a half hour."

She looked back at her friends.

"It really can't wait," I added.

She bit her lip again.

"Please, come with me." I refused to relent until I got the answer I wanted.

She looked at our feet then back up at me, penetrating my eyes with hers. "Alright, Oliver," she said. "I'll come, but I'm not promising anything."

That's the best I could hope for. I took her hand. She had instinctively tried to withdraw it at first but did not fight when I finally grasped it in mine. I opened the door of the restaurant and we walked out onto the street.

I stopped so suddenly that Amelia ran into my back. In contrast to when I had gone into the restaurant, the entire crowd was now made up of crests and Myyga, and both were now approaching like riot police in solid lines from either direction down the main road.

I clutched her hand even more tightly and ran, pulling her behind me.

"Oliver!" she yelled. "What's going on?"

"You wouldn't believe me," I yelled back without taking my eyes off the entrance to a small back street across the road. I could see the sunlight sparkling off the Ouse on the other end. It was our only chance.

"Then you know what those things were?" she yelled.

I stumbled. I had nearly stopped but when I turned my head to look at her, I saw both the Myyga and the crests pursuing us and I had the presence of mind to continue.

I was not sure if I should find her ability to see them comforting or terrifying as it confirmed I wasn't losing my mind.

The Monstrous Hunt

"No one else has ever seen them before except me," I replied, unable to explain further under the circumstances.

The crests had begun to run as they chased us. I tried to run faster but I had never been very good at such things. I gained little speed but we were almost at the river.

I had no idea what would happen but it seemed the only logical escape. I tightened my grip around Amelia's hand and when we got to the edge of the paving, I jumped, bringing her with me as we fell the several feet into the water.

Why did you fear the Myyga? They had never harmed you before and you had said you even though they wanted your help.

Which is exactly why I thought they wouldn't let me leave York. Their pursuit kind of proved that for me, didn't it? I didn't care about them when I needed to get Amelia out. I wasn't about to let whatever that vibration was kill her.

You really are a selfish boy.

How can you call me selfish? I was panicked. I was just trying to stay alive. I was just trying to keep Amelia alive.

When you remember it, you will know what I say is true. Continue. What happened in the water?

Despite the summer heat, the water was freezing. I tried my best to keep my mouth shut so I didn't swallow. Though Amelia had choked out some water after first surfacing, she was now responding well to the situation. We were still holding hands somehow though I was genuinely surprised by that. I think it was more her doing than mine as she was squeezing my hand very tightly.

As the currents carried us, we both looked around at the adjoining streets. It appeared that the points and crests had all congregated around that restaurant. There were no people downstream but I knew that wouldn't last long. We had to get out of the water. They had not followed us in but it was too cold for us to hide in it for long.

Amelia started pulling me towards the eastern banks where there were several wharfs and steps leading up to the streets downstream. With both of us kicking, we managed to reach the wharfs before the currents had carried us too far. We scrambled out of the water, breathing heavily.

"We need to find a way out of the city," I said. "They wouldn't let me leave last time. They stopped the trains somehow. Do you have a car?"

She was doubled over, bracing her hands on her knees as she wheezed. All the fabric of her dress was now sopping and clinging to her legs. I couldn't figure out how she had managed to swim so well.

She shook her head at my question but lifted her head slightly so that she could look around even while trying to get her breath back.

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I followed her gaze and saw streets and paths everywhere. We were not in a safe position.

There were several cars parked along the driveway overlooking the river but I didn't have any keys and despite my father's opinion of me, I had never stolen a car in my life.

To my surprise, Amelia started walking towards the nearest vehicle, a yellow hatchback.

"We need to get to The Dales," she said. "But we can't run there. It's too far."

"I don't know how to start a care without keys," I said as I tried to keep up with her.

As I followed her to the car, she said, "Go to that one," and she gestured toward the black SUV parked in front of it. "Check the wheel well," she instructed.

I had no idea what she was talking about but she knelt down, reached her hand under the yellow car and began groping around.

When I stupidly hadn't moved, she said, "We're looking for a spare key."

"What?"

She was losing her patience with me. "We are looking for one of those stupid magnetic things that holds a key. My dad used to use one right up until he got his car stolen."

She finished with the hatchback and began moving towards the SUV, not waiting for me. "Hurry up," she said. "Try that one." She pointed at the blue coupé further down the road.

I trotted up and copied her searching movements. Aside from dirty and greasy hands, I had found nothing. She hadn't found anything either.

We checked the next car and the next before she stopped me.

"Wait," she said. "We aren't that far from the restaurant."

"And?" I said.

She looked around. "*And* there aren't any of those things. Weren't they following us?"

I had been in the middle of groping a modified Evo with bright orange rims. I stopped and looked around. She was right. It would have taken only moments for them to catch us. Standing up, I brushed my hands off on my jeans.

As I looked around, trying to see any sign of a Myyga or a crest anywhere even on the other side of the river, I noticed the city sounded like the city. It sounded like cars and people were moving around but I could not see anyone.

Amelia seemed to notice it as well; she walked down the pavement towards the restaurant and turned the corner. When she went out of my sight, I ran after her. She had stopped immediately out of my view and was looking up the street at the people going in and out of shops and pubs and running to catch busses.

"Not again," I said.

She turned her head abruptly to look at me. Her eyes narrowed. "What do you mean 'Not again'?" she asked.

"This happened to me earlier," I explained. "It seemed like everyone was gone. I saw strange things and then everyone was back. I don't know what's going on."

"Why did you want to leave York?" she asked.

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"When I tried to leave before, those things stopped me," I said. "They are the things that killed those people and I saw them make more. They just took three people and turned them into monsters right in front of me. The more time passes, the more I see. Everyone is in danger but no one can see what I can."

"We need to tell someone," she said. "Let's go back to the restaurant and get my friends. Sarah has a car. We can all leave town."

I turned to face her more fully. Her hair was sopping wet; her face strained with the events. I thought of the things I had encountered at the crime scene. Its low song threatened my insides again. I reached up and put both my hands on either side of her face. She flinched at first but did not push me away.

"Your friends despise me. To some extent even you hate me. Why would any of them believe anything I have to say?"

She tried to respond but I didn't let her. I needed to make her understand. I held her face more tightly just to make sure he knew I was serious.

"There is something scarier than even those pointed face monsters," I said. "It almost got me too. It was the worst violation I have ever felt in my life. It is coming after us. It is coming after you because of me. We can't risk your friends trying to stop us from getting away. Maybe they will be alright. There were several people at the crime scene that were completely unaware of the thing and they were unharmed. If your friends remain ignorant, they will be fine but you saw those things. You are not ignorant. It will come after both of us."

She said nothing so I pleaded. "Come with me. Run with me right now. We don't have the luxury of hoping people will believe us right now. Please."

As she looked into my eyes, I was sure she was going to run. She was shaking. She nodded despite how firmly I held her.

"I'll tell Sarah I need to change," she said. "I'll get her keys."

Until her reply, I had not realized I was holding my breath. It felt cleansing to finally release it. With this new sensation flooding my muscles, I released her.

"Sorry," I said, realizing it might have been a bit much.

"Wait here. I'll be right back," she said before running up the street towards the restaurant.

As I waited, I concentrated on steadying my breathing and getting my heart to follow. I turned to look back out over the water.

I still couldn't see anyone on the banks of the river and it unnerved me. Minutes passed and the city noise began to quiet. My efforts of calming myself were undone within a breath. I spun around and began to run up the road. When I was halfway, I heard footsteps hitting the paving rapidly. Amelia came running around the corner.

"They're coming!" she yelled to me as she ran. "The Car is parked on the other side of Clifford's Tower."

When she reached me, we ran together back down along the river until we got to a small grove of trees. She guided me up a slope through the trees to the road. On the other side of the road was a large mound

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atop of which was an old stone tower. It was shining yellow-white in the sunlight. She ran around the base of the mound and I followed.

A sea of cars met our eyes on the other side. She seemed to know where she was going and I continued to chase her until she stopped at a small, white Fiat and climbed in.

I jumped in the passenger side and had barely shut the door before she had already started it and we were driving away.

"What the hell is going on?" she screamed at me.

"I have no idea either," I yelled back.

Between gear changes, she reached up and tugged her hair nervously to force it behind her ear. "Everything was fine. I was going to leave. I wasn't even going to come back. Everything was bloody fine," she said.

Despite her ramblings showing she hadn't planned on trusting me after all, I was too curious. "What changed it?" I asked.

She glared at me but didn't say anything for a moment then continued to talk without answering me. "No one was in the restaurant. Sarah's purse and all the other girl's belongings were there as if they should be sitting right there. One of those weird knights walked out of the bathroom. I freaked. I grabbed Sarah's purse, got the keys and threw the purse at the thing and ran."

I refused to let her get away with anything. "What changed things?" I said. "What happened?"

She glanced at me. Her fingers twitched rapidly against the steering wheel. "I thought about why we jumped in the river and that you've seen more of this

than I have. I decided to trust you and come with you after all. All this has something to do with *you*."

She was so furious that was the last thing she said to me in the car. She wouldn't speak to me the entire ride. She just stared straight ahead as she drove us from the city.

Sitting there silently, I became angrier and angrier. What did any of this have to do with me? Why was I the one the Myyga had chosen?

Are you really that clueless? You are the one that ruined everything.

I didn't do anything wrong. I went to York to find a girl. It's the Myyga that ruined everything. Why did they have to start going after people? Why couldn't they just let me leave?

You think that just because now you could see them that was the first time? You are truly arrogant. Why should the Myyga have to fix what you started?

I didn't start anything!

The moment you interrupted the first Myyga, you consigned it and the man to the worst of deaths. Even after you saw what happened to it due to your actions, you did it to two more Myyga and another human. The thing you seem to be best at is sending those who were never meant to die to their deaths and those who were meant to die to Hell.

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If you are implying I had anything to do with her death then release me and maybe I will do you the same courtesy.

I would be insane to release you in your state. If you are still too arrogant to believe me, then recall for me what happened when you fled to the Dales.

When we arrived in the Dales, Amelia decided to speak to me again. She said there were caves throughout the area and that we could easily find one and take shelter there. She stopped the car along the road. We got out and began to hike up the nearest hill looking for one of the caves.

After an hour, we climbed onto a plateau that was scattered with boulders and overlooked the valleys below. Along the rock face, we found a small opening just large enough to crawl through. There was a large enough pocket inside the rock for us to stay comfortably, even if it did smell strongly of powdered rock. Even though it was still afternoon, we both wanted to climb into the cave and hide. Being on a highly visible cliff was not comforting.

We managed to make a fire, thanks to Amelia's experience camping as a child and my random knowledge from reading trivia websites. We huddled around it and didn't speak. I continued to run over the events in my head. I tried to figure out what the Myyga had been trying to show me.

I assumed they had wanted me to stay in York to take care of that thing in the Viking Centre but I could not see how that explained what they had shown me near

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the Shambles. It did not explain many things. Why were the crests showing up more and more?

The crests were those who you had consigned to death with your actions.

I couldn't have been responsible for all of them.

In the moments you decided to run from York, you were. The moments when you would have faced the beast, they would have lived.

Then explain to me what happened that night.

Go over it again and you will see the truth of it. You did not stay in the cave. Think about what happened.

We had forgotten to get food or any supplies when we ran. We had been so focused upon escaping that it hadn't occurred to us. We quickly realized how foolish that was. Amelia didn't say anything but I heard her stomach growl. With everything going on, she seemed afraid to speak. If staying hidden for just a night would have saved us, I wouldn't have worried about the lack of food, but hiding seemed much more indefinite than that.

I decided I needed to return to York to get supplies. I planned to make it a quick trip to survey the situation as well. Now that Amelia was out of the city, I wasn't as worried as I had been.

When I told her, she insisted I not go. Then she insisted I bring her too. I refused. Despite her pleading, I

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was going to leave. She was going to force me to let her come. I had to fight her off and wrestle her for the keys.

Once I was outside the cave, I rolled the largest boulder I could push. It was only up to my knees but I was able to roll it in front of the opening. It covered the space perfectly though I could hear Amelia's renewed protests from the other side. I figured nothing would be able to find Amelia in there and the rock would slow her down enough that I could get to the car before she could catch up.

It was night. Covering the cave entrance blocked off the firelight making it difficult to see. There was no moon to help guide my way.

My eyes took several moments to adjust to the darkness and even then I had to take my time to descend safely. I worried that Amelia would catch up but I did not see her the entire hike. Whether it was because she too had trouble in the darkness or simply because she had given up, I did not know.

It took me twice as long to get back to the car, partly because of the darkness but also because I got lost. When I finally managed to find it and start it up, the clock said it was 3:30. If I was quick, I could get to York, get the supplies, and be back by morning.

I had no trouble staying awake. I had always been a night owl and my adrenaline had yet to be exhausted. Though the ride back to York seemed quick, the sky was turning from black to royal blue by the time I arrived.

The streets were silent.

At first I thought it might be because of the hour but then I realized I did not see any Myyga anywhere. I

was getting nervous but I also needed to know what was happening. I parked the car in the same lot we had found it and began to walk; now looking for evidence more than supplies.

The less I saw what I should have seen, the further I walked. When I turned onto Coppergate, I froze. As far as I could see down the road, there were mounds of ash. There were dozens.

And you are telling me that for every single one of them I would have been responsible? I had not interrupted them. How could I have caused their deaths too?

You did. Your earlier efforts created the beast.

That thing? I am the one that created that?

Yes and you created the new Myyga doomed to die. With each you killed, the beast gained strength and more and more had to be created to try to stop the same monster you refused to face. We never could have stopped it but we were willing to try. It was not our responsibility.

But you think it's mine?

Yes, but you seem determined not to. That is why you must remember. What happened next?

I felt a hint of the same sensation I had at the crime scene. My chest began to tingle. I turned and ran as fast as I could back to the car, terrified of what was

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coming. As I neared the car, I began to hear the whispers. It sounded like a crowd of people chasing me and whispering.

Could you tell what they were saying?

"More."

Telling. Continue.

I jumped back in the car and sped away. As I put more distance between myself and York, the quieter the whispers became. Something was slowing down their advance or I was getting faster. After I had not heard them for several minutes, both my heart and breathing slowed. My heart felt pierced with sharp pains despite its renewed languid pace. I tried to ignore it.

The sun was nearly up and I realized that the road I was on looked different from before. When I was forced to stop for petrol just outside of Thirsk, I took out my phone and checked a map. I had taken the wrong road.

Amelia had taken us along a route that was nearly deserted. I was now on the edge of a larger town and had several more to pass on my way. The possible threats worried me but at least I could still get back.

The petrol station was deserted, but that would be expected at such an hour.

I turned off the car.

There was no one in sight.

Before I dared to get out, I checked that all the other doors were locked except mine. I got out slowly

and looked around. I had expected crests and Myyga to descend upon me at any second. When there were none, I closed the door and walked quickly around to the pump.

I had managed to start filling the car, though it had taken several attempts to unscrew the cap because of my shaking fingers. After a minute or so, I checked the pump screen to see it was approximately half full.

There was movement.

I jerked my head around the pump to get a better look at what I thought I'd seen.

There was a man in jeans and a striped button-up shirt walking around the corner of the petrol station and out of sight. Yelling at him did not seem a good idea.

The car must have been nearly full so I closed it up quickly and walked after him. When I turned the corner, the man was crouched down, petting a golden retriever whose tail was wagging so enthusiastically that his butt end was carried with it in the movement.

"Was it a car?" the man said to the dog. He strangely seemed like he expected the dog to answer.

"Who are you?" I asked. I had not intended to sound so rude but it was done.

He was now scratching the animal behind the ears and did not stop when he looked up at me. "Just a man," he said.

Perhaps it was all the stresses I had had that day, but with that unhelpful answer, I nearly walloped him.

"I mean," I said, "What's your name and what are you doing here?"

This question seemed to catch him off guard. His head tilted an inch to the left and he seemed to consider for many moments. Then he chuckled.

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"You know what? I can't even remember my name," he said. "I know why I'm here. I can remember all of that but the distance between me and my name seems so large now."

"Stop talking mental and tell me the truth," I said. "How could you forget your name? Do you have amnesia or something?"

His eyes narrowed. "It doesn't matter anymore. Don't you understand that?" he said.

The dog's tail had stopped wagging and he too was looking at me like I was the mental one.

I gave up on the name and moved on. "Why are you here then? You said you knew that."

"This is where I had met my wife," he said.

Now I looked at him like *he* was mental. "At a petrol station?"

"Would a night club or the internet have been any better?" he asked. He didn't want an answer.

He continued, "I was always a horrible driver. I hit her bumper because I didn't break soon enough coming into the station."

"How romantic," I said.

He stood, ignoring the dog now. "You've never had anyone you've loved." He was explaining not asking.

I thought of Amelia. I needed to get back to her. I *loved* her.

I had said nothing and yet the man nodded knowingly as if I had just told him everything.

"I see," he said. "That's not love, kid. You're incapable of it."

How dare he judge me? "You don't know anything!" I yelled. "You don't even know your own name. Don't pretend you know anything about my life."

"Your meeting was so romantic?" he said, apparently unfazed by my outburst. "You didn't even talk to her. You just followed her around like a stalker."

My lungs dropped themselves into a new home behind my navel. "H-how did you know that?" I asked, my voice quiet with the lack of breath to carry it.

"We can all see everything of each other here," he said. "There are no secrets after the Myyga help you."

At the time, I had no idea what a Myyga was, let alone they were the very thing I had been dealing with. I was about to ask, when he continued.

"I suppose you can't see because you are different," he said. "I should have realized that immediately."

"Realized what?" I demanded.

With a flick of his chin, he gestured at my arms.

I looked down and my still-not-fully recovered lungs made another painful drop into my guts. My left arm looked ashen and grey just like that of a Myyga. My right looked as though it would have been as well if not for black scales that looked like they were slowly spreading out from my shoulder to overtake it.

I reached up to my face, fully expecting to feel a point, but it was still my face. My lungs gave a convulsion as they attempted to take in a steady breath but only half succeeded.

"You aren't worthy enough for that, kid," the man said. "Seems they made a mistake with you."

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I was terrified and confused. The man in front of me no longer felt like some random guy. I saw him as a threat as bad as the crests and Myyga.

I ran to the car. I needed to get back to Amelia.

"It's too late," he yelled after me. "Might as well leave her alone like she always wanted."

He was lying. She was fine. She wanted me. Sure, she had rejected me but things had changed. She hadn't meant it.

I jumped into the car, started it up, and sped off in the direction of the Dales. Supplies, Myyga, none of them were as important as getting back to that cave.

What did you think of the man's words?

I was determined to believe it was all a lie or even a trick of my brain, being under so much stress.

You did not want to know he was telling the truth.

No, I didn't.

He was right about everything. We did make a mistake on you. We expected more.

Sorry I failed your expectations. Though it seems a little unfair to test me when I don't even know what those expectations are.

That's the only way the test can work and every single one before you has succeeded. We never expected to encounter such trouble.

Neither did I.

It's too late for all that now. Continue with your story. We need you to remember every detail before this can be fixed.

As I raced my way back to the Dales, the surreal conversation I had just had swirled around in my mind and haunted me. How had he known those things? And given the proof that he was aware of so much, how could I truly deny that Amelia might be in trouble?

The hike back up to the cave was likely faster than the first time. I knew the way and I was running but it felt far too slow. It was taking too long. Then even parts of my own mind turned on me, becoming convinced that the man was right and that I would be too late. I was not sure exactly what it was I feared to find. Would she be a Point or a Crest? Would she be dead? Would that thing that attacked me somehow be here too?

I emerged onto the plateau and looked around. The morning sun lit the entire area so that it was easy to investigate at a glance. There was no sign of anything amiss. My boulder was still blocking the cave just as when I had left.

With great effort, I managed to move the boulder away from the opening enough to get inside. It was dark. The fire had gone out and there was no sign of even the smallest ember glowing its last. The air was thick with smoke and stagnant.

As I tried to crawl forward, my hand brushed against something. It was cold but feathery soft. I tried to

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look at it but the light from the entrance did not enter that far into the cave. My fingers shook as I touched it. It was Amelia's hair.

"Amelia?" I called, hoping she had just been asleep.

There was no answer. I moved my hand in the darkness to find her body. I found her hand. Her fingers were too cold to be normal.

"I am going to get you out of here," I said.

I grasped her hand tightly and pulled. As her body dragged on the ground and I was able to move closer to the light of the entrance, I saw her other hand and grasped that as well. I pulled, tugged, and dragged her from the cave.

When I had her out in the sunlight, I checked her over. I called to her.

Her eyes were closed, her skin too pale to be natural. I called to her again. She did not answer. I dared not check for a pulse. I held her close and told her everything would turn out alright, that we would overcome all the craziness. Her hair became wet with my pleading.

I begged her to wake up and come back to me. I loved her so much. I couldn't live without her. I had done the craziest things of my life chasing her down because I loved her. I rocked her.

When the reality was so obvious even to me, there was no need to check for a pulse. There would have been none. My fingers shook beyond control even as I tried to pull them through her hair.

I wondered what had happened. There was no sign of anyone else having been in the cave. There was

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none of that same horrible feeling of that thing that had violated me. She was not a Point or a Crest. She was simply dead.

That was when you came.

No, it is not. You can remember.

That's all I have left. What more do you want from me?

For you to stop hiding and take responsibility.

I didn't do anything!

Remember, Oliver! Think back carefully and you will remember. Think!

No!

Yes. What were you thinking as you held her? Were you alone? It is there inside you. The truth wants to be freed.

Fine!

As my mind searched for someone to blame, I heard her voice.

"It's never you, is it?" she said.

I jerked my head up to the west. My grip upon her body nearly gave way. It slumped in my slackened embrace.

In all her beauty, she stood at the edge of the plateau. She was not alone. A Myyga stood next to her.

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The morning sun upon her made her nearly glow. The Myyga looked as grey as always.

I looked down at the body in my arms, confirming that it was her. I looked up at the vision before me.

She gestured at the Myyga. "He saved me," she said. "All my fear and pain, all the terror you gave me, it is gone now."

"I gave you?" I asked. I was too confused to be offended. My fingers involuntarily clutched her body more tightly again.

She was not indifferent as she spoke but her emotions were muted. If anything, she seemed content. "You really don't realize what you did?" she asked.

She looked me over as if she were evaluating me. I clutched her tighter, not knowing how else to respond.

"I was terrified of you," she explained. "How could you not see it?"

"You were terrified of the monsters," I insisted.

She nodded. "Yes, when I did not understand," she said, "But I also feared *you*. You are obsessed with me, even now. You followed me to try to win me. Even after I had rejected you, you came looking for me."

She was being so unfair. "Only to protect you!" I said, feeling completely justified in my outrage.

She stared at me without movement or words for many seconds. Then she said, "You do not understand real love. You came because you wanted any excuse to pursue me again. My safety was not your real concern. You may have convinced yourself of that but even you must admit that a silly assertion now."

I looked down at her body. She died while I was gone. How was I to know that would happen? I never would have left if I had known.

"You left because you knew," she said. "How do you think I died?"

There was pain in my fingers. I looked down and saw that I was holding her so tightly my knuckles had turned white. I could not relax them.

"Look at my throat," she called to me.

I buried my face in her hair. I wanted to escape. In my fantasy, she would wake up and we would be happy and run away together. She would be my Amelia again. The woman judging me was not the one I remembered.

"You never knew me," she said. "You imagined what you wanted of me. Your mind was set before you ever said hello." She paused. "Look at my throat."

I hesitated. I did not want to know.

"Look at it," she pressed. She did not yell but her voice was increasingly stern as she ordered me to examine her corpse.

The wind upon the plateau felt piercing against my wet cheeks as I pulled the body away from me.

Her face was so serene. I wish she had been sleeping but there was nothing of slumber in how she looked now. I lifted her chin so that I could see her neck.

My stomach flipped and twisted as I saw the series of small bruises. I ran my fingers along them, the similarity in placement and size did not escape my notice and my fingers froze.

"I heard you yelling at me when I pushed the boulder in front of the entrance," I whispered.

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"Perhaps as I echoed in your mind," she said.

I looked up at her, expecting hatred given what I had done. I deserved it. How could I have done such a thing? How did I not remember? Even now, thinking back, I cannot remember it as it was.

She did not hate me. She seemed entirely resigned as we stared at each other.

Finally, she said, "You have interfered in the natural order. You have interrupted the cleansings of several souls, you have caused the death of Myyga, and you have brought a great darkness upon York. The Myyga can no longer trust you to correct this situation on your own."

I was grabbed from behind. I struggled but the two Myyga who had grabbed me were too strong and I was outnumbered. I watched helplessly as Amelia and her Myyga companion walked away.

Thank you for recalling all that, though your memory has proved somewhat faulty. You know what happened now.

I'm glad you do but I am still in the dark.

You know what you did and now we can work to rectify the mess you created.

The mess that *I* created? It was you Myyga that ruined everything. If it hadn't been for you, everything would have been alright.

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Do you still honestly believe Amelia would have loved you?

She, well, she might have done. But I didn't get a fair chance. With you things all around, how could I show her my best?

Amelia did not and would never have loved you.

Maybe that would have changed if you hadn't taken her from me.

You are the one that hunted her and you are the one who killed her. We had nothing to do with it.

Then what about the Myyga in the Dales? Why were they there? Why did you have to start going after people? What are you?

We were simply doing what we have done since the beginning of time. It is our job.

That tells me nothing!

We are the cleaners of souls. When one dies, a Myyga sucks all the negativity from within that person so that the soul is pure enough to move on.

I thought bad people just went to Hell.

If God has his way, they would.

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What about those murdered people? I wasn't the only one who saw the mangled bodies the Myyga went after.

You interrupted those Myyga. Most never see us or the evidence of our work but these went unfinished.

The first man had had too much to drink. He had hit his head on the cobbles and died. The second had had a heart attack and I believe it was the interrupting of the two Myyga with him that caused the most damage.

Because they had to seek out more?

Yes and no. The Myyga feed upon the negativity. It is our food but we are neither negative nor positive. The way our cleansing process works, stopping in the middle is like cutting a blood transfusion short. A weakened Myyga cannot convert the negativity.

There had been two Myyga upon that one gentleman because he had been a despicable man. He had been involved in corruption to the highest levels and had nothing good in his heart. Regardless of your interruption, he would have been a difficult soul to cleanse.

The Myyga that had worked on him became consumed by his negativity. They became desperate and sought out any negativity they could ingest. Even though the two people in the Viking centre were not supposed to die, the negativity of their failing marriage made them too tempting to the dying Myyga.

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You can clean souls and walk with the dead but
you can die?

*Apparently. You are the one who taught us that it
could happen.*

Stop blaming me for this! You are the ones who
did all of it.

*We are the one who chose you to test but that is
where our fault ends. We mistook your approach to life
as indifference. You did not care about anyone or
anything but we were sure it was not due to any hatred.*

*As the populations of the world increase, we need
more and more Myyga. Those who can be indifferent to
death are best suited and the ones we choose.*

*Unfortunately, we overlooked a very strong hatred
within you and as you proved with Amelia, you are
capable of very dark things.*

*Once you were marked at the fair, you began to
live in both worlds; that of the living and that of the dead.
But it was your failures to see the truth of the matter that
lead us here. You were not indifferent as we had hoped
and you interfered with the first death you encountered.
Your negativity and your obsessions disrupted our work
and have created a problem we have never before faced.*

That thing at the crime scene?

*Yes. It is born of all the negativity the Myyga
would have cleansed. Once unleashed, it needed to feed
upon more and the world is not wanting for negativity.*

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York has been decimated. The governments are insane with theories of biological terrorism and epidemics. The beast will only continue to expand and will not remain within York for much longer. We must fix this problem immediately.

If you cleanse the negativity from souls, why can't you just send all the Myyga to take care of it?

Why do you think we created more? That is what the Myyga showed you. They showed you that we were forced to make more, without tests, without the proper path. We tried but we could never have won.

Why should we be blamed for what you caused? Why should we have to send every last Myyga to the worst of deaths to fix what you created?

Even if we wanted to go that far, it would be impossible. The beast has bred too much negativity. It is too strong for a few Myyga and its very presence weakens the doors to Hell. We can no longer risk going near lest we make the situation worse. With each lost Myyga, it grows.

But you can risk me?

Yes.

Thanks.

Unfortunately, I cannot say I have much faith in your abilities.

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Try not to be so encouraging.

But after what I have seen of your pursuit of Amelia, I do have faith in the power of your negativity.

Are you mental? That thing will eat me up like a snack! You really think that my negativity is more powerful than that of some corrupt official and the rest of the worst of York?

That is not quite what I said.

Oh good, because that would be the stupidest plan I have ever heard. I've already encountered that thing once and it was bad enough. I still feel violated from when it touched my heart.

And yet you remain standing. Was the rest of York so fortunate?

Why me?

That is something you will have to find out for yourself. We must return. I will bring you with me. It will only take a heartbeat.

Where are we?

You don't recognize it?

I can't tell. It's so dark.

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We are outside York. The Myyga have been forced to flee. The living have all been consumed.

But there are people down that road. I can see them moving and there are big vehicles, as big as my flat.

Military and doctors. They can go no further. They have lost many already in their attempts.

I thought the beast was going to spread, that it would seek out more negativity to feed it?

Yes, in time it will, but it has been content to remain for the moment.

If all those people have died getting near it, how am I ever going to get there?

You are not of the living world anymore and I have faith in your darkness. The beast can overpower most very easily. You are another matter entirely. It could feed upon you forever and you would survive. It would have no need to spread with you as its meal.

You are sacrificing me to it? That's why you want me to stop it?

It is the only way.

I don't believe you.

That is your choice but whether you go to it is not.

I'm not ready.

I find very little reason to care. Good-bye Oliver.

Those creepy Myyga had ruined everything and they wanted to sacrifice me for something I didn't even know had existed. With no warning, they dropped me in the middle of York.

I was disoriented at first. All the electricity was out, making the streets nearly pitch black. Perhaps the military had cut the power. Could the beast affect electricity?

After stumbling my way down a road and finding a bridge, I discovered the Myyga had put me in the middle of Low Ousegate, only a few blocks from the Viking Centre.

"You needn't go that far," came the deep rumble of the beast.

The low vibration returned and all the air around me felt heavy.

I thought of how wasted my life was; how much pain I had been put through by all the stupid people around me. I would die gasping, having accomplished nothing just as my father had predicted. Even if I lived, the world was a horrible place. What did it matter?

My ability to move became impaired under the increasing weight of the air around me. I tried to run but felt as though I was wading through pudding. It truly was a nightmare. My inability to go as fast as I knew I

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could confirmed that it was all a dream. I would wake up and be back on that wall at the fair.

"Perhaps that is when your nightmare began," the beast said. "The Myyga are nothing but pests. They even look like pests to the living. You barely noticed the small mosquito that marked you."

With its words, the weight of the air increased. It was becoming too thick. I couldn't breathe properly. In the middle of the bridge, I fell to my knees and doubled over. I could go no further. I gasped and wheezed into the paving.

"You could have lived a wonderful life with Amelia if it hadn't been for them," it said.

I could have. I would have loved her forever.

"You would never have let her go."

Never.

"How arrogant of those Myyga to treat you like nothing, like an idiot child. They created three more right in front of your eyes. With so many changes, they honestly think you are dumb enough to believe this has never once happened before?"

I can't be that bad. There are so many dumber people.

"And they have been around since the dawn of time and not once did they know that they could die?"

They know everything and they didn't know that?

"And they send you, who knows nothing about any of this, to defeat us? They want a scapegoat, not a hero."

Wait. Why would that matter?

"They did not tell you?" it asked.

As my confusion, fear, and despair grew so too did the low vibrations. I could feel the beast getting closer. I clutched at my chest just above my heart but it did not matter. The violation returned. The invisible point feasted upon my heart.

I looked around wildly, the need for air seeming inconsequential as I thought of nothing more than escape from the violation. Even death would have been better. I begged for it to kill me.

"God has tolerated them for too long," it said even as it continued its assault. "Their failure will bring him down upon them. He will stop their meddling."

The probing was too much as it caressed and penetrated my heart even further than before. My body shook with my terror. I hated the Myyga for lying to me. I was surely amongst the living for death could not feel this tortuous.

Then the beast touched upon the deepest point within my heart. Images flashed before my eyes even as my eyes squeezed painfully shut.

My hands were around Amelia's throat. Her eyes were wide and pleading. She was gasping. I could smell the fire and the dampness of the cave. I was there once more. She was trying to beg but I held her throat too tightly. My fingers ached and I pressed harder. She wouldn't leave me. I wouldn't let her leave.

I remembered every detail. A wisp of her hair caught around my thumb as I cut off her air. The cave smelled of hot rocks, burning grass, and wood smoke.

Her body bucked as she tried to fight back. With each detail, with each gurgle from her throat, I knew in that deepest part of my heart that was now being probed

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and searched that she deserved it. She had rejected me. She had hurt me, of all people. How dare she!

The violation could go no deeper. It had opened the way for the secret I had held longest. Only one other than I knew the truth at that moment.

The beast lapped at my hatred but my emotions were quickly evolving and it did not realize. Its efforts to eat from me soon felt strangely benign.

I took a deep breath. The air felt light.

I looked down at my chest. I still could not see the beast but it continued its work and I felt the pride of a mother nursing an infant.

In that second, the beast faltered.

I smiled.

"Wait," it said.

"I remember now," I said.

The beast tried to escape but it had too much of me within it. It was weighted to the spot. I climbed to my feet and looked down at it. I could not stop smiling.

"I didn't know!" it cried.

I laughed. "No one ever does," I said. "God was right and once again I didn't believe him."

"Please!" it begged.

I walked to the edge of the bridge and looked out over the water. The sun would be up soon.

"The Myyga have been keeping souls from me for too long," I explained. "That's not how it's supposed to work."

"I can help you," it said.

"Indeed you can and that is exactly what you will do." I let out a deep breath of relief as I turned to face its invisible form.

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"You are not going to consume me?" it asked, confused.

I shook my head. "I am to get the souls owed me. I am to stop the Myyga. I can't do that with you destroyed. That would defeat the purpose of this entire ruse. The apathetic young man to bait them. The Devil to hunt them."

"Anything. I will do anything," it said.

This was the most pleasing to me off all. "Then do what you wanted all along. Hunt."

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About the Author

Tara Kristen Young is a computing archaeologist who spends many of her days helping with the investigations of hunter-gatherer cemeteries in Russia and Japan. Other days are spent twisting her archaeological knowledge into new forms to create fantasy stories. Time not spent researching or writing is joyfully filled with the company of her daughter and husband.

Other Works by Tara K. Young

Shauna's Inheritance (a short story)

Devil's Sacrifice (a short story)

Gods' Masks, Book 1 of the Moirean Tapestry

The Whispering War, Book 2 of the Moirean
Tapestry

Memory's Emissary, Book 3 of the Moirean Tapestry
(coming Winter 2011/2012)

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