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SEEDLING

by

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Vanessa lay in her bed, shivering. Her heart thundered in her chest. A cold trickle of sweat formed around her temples and raced down her neck. Gooseflesh dotted her arms.

If sleep took her, she would be alone with -- it -- in the room. It watched her from the darkened corner of the room. She knew it was there. Whatever "it" might be, it was waiting for her to succumb to the Sandman's kiss.

The room was gloomy. Heavy velvet hangings fell across the windows kept out the moonlight, which was always so full and bright. Only a splinter of silvery moonlight fell from the crack where the drapes met. It wound its way across the floor like some mystical, glowing river across the cold stone masonry of the castle floor.

There was no electricity in this entire wing, so her father had grudgingly placed an oil lamp on the nightstand next to her bed. When she asked for it, he had remarked that at fifteen years old, she shouldn't be afraid of the dark.

The small sphere of light that it shed barely held back the approaching darkness. The blackness seemed continuously on the edge of trespassing the halo of dim light the lamp cast. The shadows in the room were hungry, and soon they would feed.

Then it wouldn't just sit there in the corner. It would come for her -- again.

The chamber her parents had given her as a temporary bedroom was her least favorite place in the entire sprawling, Victorian castle. The cell like room filled her with a numbing sense of anxiety, the four walls glaring at her with a palpable malice that was unmistakable. She always felt like she had just walked in on something secret and dreadfully private.

Vanessa's heart hammered in her chest with fright. She wished more than anything that she were back on Anderson Avenue in New Jersey, safe in her tiny little bedroom just down the hall from her parents. In her real bedroom, she had a CD player, a TV and a computer. Thinking of familiar things made her feel better.

New Jersey was all the way on the other side of the world now, though. They had arrived in Sussex, England two months ago, and were scheduled to be here for at least six or eight more.

The thought made her stomach twist and squeeze. It make her feel like she had to pee and throw up at the same time. She didn't think she could take another night of this, let alone *six months*.

What troubled Vanessa so much was that she *knew* this was no dream. She had nightmares before, and knew what they were like. Nightmares withered under the

bright scrutiny of consciousness. The feeling that *something* was in the room with her was not as insubstantial or fleeting as that.

It was *real*.

Her parents couldn't see or feel it; somehow it remained hidden from both of them. It could be that their minds were so closed to even the *possibility* that what Vanessa was telling them was the truth, that they could see no part of it at all.

She really didn't know how these things worked, but she had seen enough Saturday morning horror movies on the SciFi Channel to know it really didn't matter. Eventually it would get her.

Just four nights past, she had woken up from the middle of a deep sleep with the clear feeling of being held down by strong, insistent hands. She had gone from a deep slumber to utter panic in the space of a heartbeat. She hadn't been able to move her body even the slightest bit, no matter how hard she struggled.

Panic washed through her like an ocean of ice water pumped into her veins at high speed. Her fear had brought her fully awake, it was no hallucination. The hands were real, not phantom appendages that vanished when you turned on the light.

It had taken her a moment or two for lucidity to rescue her and remind her that she could still breathe. If she could breathe, then she could scream.

The shriek she let out echoed through the stone corridors and empty chambers of the uninhabited castle. It woke her parents, and brought them running. When they opened the heavy oaken door and practically fell into the room, the feeling vanished at once. So did the presence.

Vanessa had felt it go.

Each night before she fell asleep, she relived that experience. Every one of her traitorous senses happily obliged her with an instant replay every bit as bad as the real thing. It kept her from sleep some nights, regardless of how tired she was.

Squinting, she stared into the blackness, sending her eyes slightly out of focus and trying to watch the entire room at once. If she blurred her vision, perhaps if it moved she would at least see what direction it was coming from.

Nothing.

Still, Vanessa could feel a vacancy when they left a room, always moments after she entered. She could feel it on the other side of the door right before she opened it. She knew that whatever the presence was that remained in this castle, its home was the darkness and shadows, and it preferred to stay out of sight.

Talking with her father hadn't helped at all. He was a realist and had no such room in his methodical, tidy psyche for such silly notions. He dismissed her fears as the wanderings of an unfocused mind with entirely too much free time.

He had told her that no one had lived in Bellingham Castle for over two hundred years. For him, the matter was closed, and any further conversation was a waste of time.

Suddenly a new sensation tore through her like a serrated blade made of pure hatred. *Oh no*, she thought, *its here, its here...its really here!*

She could feel it - the cold, dark presence, there! RIGHT THERE, in that corner. What was it? Why did it come and watch her like that?

Was it toying with her, waiting for her to wet herself with fear before it lunged at her and – and what? Kill her, rip her apart, and drink her blood? If it wanted to kill her, surely it would have done so by now – and what could she have done to stop it anyway?

Then it was gone.

As quickly as the dread washed over her, it was gone. She exhaled deeply. She was alone now, she was certain of it.

Still, she did not move. Her mind and body were on Condition Red and Vanessa knew it would be a while before sleep claimed her.

As she lay there, Vanessa thought about her parents. She knew her father was wrong to reject all the evidence to the contrary that *something* was here other than the three of them. But she also knew better than to argue.

Her mother and father had done enough arguing over the past year. He had been out of work for a long time, and they fought about money more and more as the months drew on.

Her father was one of the foremost experts in the field of ancient languages, particularly cataloging and transcribing ancient texts from thousands of years ago. When the letter from the University came, he was a new man around the house. He was so excited about what he called a “unique opportunity to see what no living man on Earth has set eyes upon for thousands of years.”

Whatever he was doing in this musty old castle, it was important enough that he accepted the offer without discussing it with Mother. Without mentioning the

important detail that they would be gone for the better part of a year, and that Vanessa would be pulled out of school.

The fight they had that night was legendary. She remembered the living room fondly, even though that was where they had their 'high level discussion' about the job offer.

It was home.

If only she didn't need to sleep.

A sudden yawn overpowered her, and her eyelids grew heavy. It became more of an effort not to close them. The terror she felt still lingered, but it blurred with her fatigue, creating porridge of her conscious mind as she tried to focus.

Sleep took her.

Vanessa staggered down a long passageway filled with doors. She cast desperate glances behind her as she ran. Her pursuer was a shapeless horror that kept barely outside the light cast by her small hooded lantern.

She could hear something slick and sticky sliding across the stone floor, almost overtaking her. Its shadowy bulk filled the corridor as it shambled behind her, like a

herald of some dark and primeval God. It flowed, boiling like a fog of pure shadow; the mass of the cloud merely hinting at the shape of the thing within.

Vanessa slowed only enough to desperately try the handle of a door on one side of the corridor. It would not open, so she ran on.

She tugged the iron handle of another heavy oaken door but it wouldn't budge either. She tried another. Like the others, they were locked. Either that or the castle itself was defying her, purposely refusing to open its doors in her time of need.

The thing behind her gained.

It was almost upon her as she spotted a large door up ahead. It was crafted of a black type of wood like polished oak, reinforced with bright steel bands.

Strange, symbols had been carved into the wood of the door and were filled with what looked like a brilliant silvery metal. All at once they began to give off a soft glow, which turned into a dazzling shine. She had to throw up a hand to shield her eyes. As she turned her head slightly, she saw that the light caused the shadowy thing to recoil briefly.

A thin yellow line of light beneath the door told her someone was inside. Mother and Father were the only other ones in the castle; it had to be one of them.

The thing pursuing her was still coming, but moving cautiously. The rank odor of rotting meat filled her nostrils as a thin strand of shadow left the rolling mass and barely brushed against her arm.

Instantly, her shoulder and arm went numb. Searing pain ripped through her body at the unearthly cold of the darkness.

So close!

She grabbed the silver handle on the strange door and threw her shoulder into it. If the door refused to yield to her, then the thing would devour her. It would tear her flesh and crack her ribcage and pluck out her heart, then gobble it down.

She knew it; she could hear its thoughts ringing in her head like some kind of weird echo. It wanted her.

To her relief, the door flew open, and she stumbled into the largest library she had ever seen, just out of reach of the thing in the corridor. It vanished with a shriek of alien anger at being deprived of its prize, and the door closed behind her with a deep thud. Thin, snake-like tendrils of shadow retreated back into the corridor from underneath the door.

The chamber bulged out in a great circle as far as she could see, the heights of the ceiling lost in shadow. Two rows of lengthy, decorative chains hung down out of the darkness above. Affixed to the end of each were small, softly glowing circular orbs.

For a moment, Vanessa wondered if they were skulls. They were too far above the floor to get a good look at, but she was almost certain some of them were grinning at her.

Rows upon rows of bookshelves lined the circular chamber. They grew upwards out of the floor like a forest of oaks, their topmost shelves almost kissing the layer of shadows that hung in the room like storm clouds. The shelves were filled with volumes of every shape, size and color. There must be thousands of books here. Tens of thousands, she thought.

Off near the far end of the spherical room, a set of iron stairs could be seen going upwards, spiraling round and round and vanishing towards the darkness hanging near the ceiling. A single handrail matched the curve of the stairs.

Two rows of writing desks were neatly arranged down the center of the room. Crouching over the desk nearest her with his back to her was her father. The workspace was littered with books, small, thin volumes and large tomes whose age she could only guess. He had several stacks of smaller manuscripts piled next to him on the floor.

“Father?” Vanessa said, her voice cracking with relief as a sob escaped her lips. “Something was chasing me, father. Something horrible!”

He bent over the largest tome Vanessa had ever seen. A large white candle thick as a baseball bat was burning in the center of the table. The spent tallow dribbled down the sides of the shaft like a viscous, ivory waterfall frozen in time.

The scratching of the ancient quill he always used to make notes with sounded like the scrape of a knife across bare bone as it raced across the parchment.

Her father placed the quill in its holder without comment. With an effort, he shut the heavy book and turned slowly to face her. She heard several soft hissing sounds come from near where he stood.

“Father?” Vanessa asked, her voice cracking with fear.

Then she screamed. Her voice echoed madly in the empty chamber as she saw his face.

When he turned, it was not the loving, bookish man who she knew as her father. His face was a clutch of spitting, hissing snakes, all of them snapping and biting and

baring their fangs at her. The sharp, tiny needle like teeth dripped venom which sizzled and smoked as droplets of the gummy, purplish fluid struck the stone floor.

She backed away a step, dropping her lantern. It seemed to shatter in slow motion, the glass hood splintering and the flame violently struggling to stay lit – and failing.

She screamed again in utter horror.

Before the darkness overpowered the dying pool of burning oil on the stone floor, her father bore down upon her.

As one, the cluster of snakes reared back as if to strike, then hissed a single word at her: “Loagaeth!!”

Vanessa woke up hysterical. Her arms were flailing about her face, as if she were fending something off. Her father and mother were both in her room. Her father was sitting at her bedside, while her Mother drew the heavy curtains. As she did, she let the hazy orange of the morning sun slide into the room.

Vanessa backed away from them both, still mad with fright, her heart pounding frantically. Suddenly relief washed over her as she realized she was safe, and it was just another dream. She hugged her father tightly and sobbed into his shoulder.

“There, there, Vanessa,” her father stroked her hair gently. “We’re here; it was just a dream, darling.”

Her mother came and sat upon the other side of the bed and rubbed her back. “It’s morning now, honey. It was just a dream and we’re here with you. My God Roger, she’s shaking all over.”

“Let’s get you some breakfast, what do you say?” her father said with a firm hug. “We can talk about it over some eggs and toast. Everything always seems brighter over breakfast, hmm?”

Breakfast filled her belly, but her mind was still vacant. She needed answers and her parents had given her empty reassurances that she knew meant nothing.

They both meant well, but they were both so busy to really hear her. Her father was occupied with his work for twelve to fifteen hours every day. She wondered if he even slept anymore.

Her mother, on the other hand, was kept busy almost as many hours a day simply taking care of everything else. Vanessa’s home schooling, meals, even helping her father do some basic translations on some of the work he was doing here.

Vanessa knew the sad truth was, both of them were all too eager to pat her on the head and hug away her bad dreams. That might have worked when she was five

years old and had come wandering into their bedroom in the middle of the night, teddy bear in hand looking for comfort.

This was different, and Vanessa wasn't a child anymore. She had learned long ago to rely on herself rather than her parents when push came to shove. They were decent people, but each was too involved in their own affairs to give her much attention. Sometimes she wondered why they bothered having a child at all.

She looked at the clock her mother had hung in the breakfast nook. It was eight o'clock in the morning; she had roughly twelve hours to find the answers she sought before nightfall.

She was determined not to live through another nightmare like that again. For her, dreams always blurred afterwards, becoming indistinct and hard to remember. This dream had been too real, too vivid. She remembered every grisly detail.

The most shocking was the ghastly image of her father and the snakes hissing at her with malice and strange intelligence. She remembered the peculiar word they spoke, and she was sure that it was something important, though she had no idea what.

Where to start? The castle was enormous. She wished now she had paid attention when her father, in his attempts to convince her what a great adventure this would be, had detailed how many rooms and levels the castle had.

She couldn't remember any of it now.

As she sat finishing her orange juice, the comfortable silence her family was so familiar with at the breakfast table seemed oppressive.

Then she remembered something. When they first arrived, her father had told her to stay out of the basement levels. Insisted upon it, in fact.

Why had he been so firm? She figured at the time it had something to do with his work, but since then hadn't given it a second thought.

Until now.

What was it he was really doing here anyway? Transcribing ancient texts, she knew, but for who? If no one had been living here for two hundred years as he claimed, why all of a sudden had the place been opened to them and her father charged with translating its secrets?

Who would have the power to authorize such a thing? Certainly no ordinary University could. This castle was too big, took up too much land, and land meant money no matter what country you were in. It must have something to do with the government, either here or back home in America.

What mysteries did this ancient castle's library possibly hold that would be *that* important, anyway?

Did her mother know? Would she tell her if she did? Vanessa abandoned that line of thinking immediately. Even if she did know, her mother would never betray anything her father decided was secret.

Vanessa felt a pang of guilt as she realized the subconscious source of the questions that tugged on her conscious mind. The nature of what she felt bit her painfully, like one of those snake-heads she saw in her dream last night.

Something was just wrong with the image of her father that she saw in her dream. It was just a dream, yet she couldn't put her finger on it. Something wasn't right. It felt like all of a sudden she mistrusted him.

Was that it? Really? Just like that, fifteen years of being her Dad and all of a sudden she didn't trust him because of a stupid dream?

Her father had always been more than kind, a gentle man incapable of raising his voice to her, let alone ever raising a hand to her. Guilt gnawed away at her heart like a rabid tapeworm.

Vanessa's subconscious argued with her conscious mind. The conscious reminded her of all the virtues her father possessed.

He was a pioneer in his field, and for years provided a comfortable living for the family. He lectured often and traveled quite a bit, that was true, but he always took the summers off. He always made sure they had lots of family vacations together.

The feeling that she was betraying her father turned her stomach. There it mixed with the nostalgic memories and guilt gnawed at her.

The dream had scared her, but he was still her father. That creature she saw in her nightmare was simply that – a figment of her imagination and nothing more.

Wasn't it? Her subconscious insisted there was more to it.

She looked up over her glass at him and caught him staring at her. He looked as if he were trying to figure out what she was thinking, and could somehow do so through the simple force of his gaze. He had a powerful look on his face. It was an expression that Vanessa had never seen before on her father's usually expressionless face.

She excused herself, cleared her place and put the dishes in the sink for her mother to wash. Vanessa told her parents she was going to her room to read. In truth, she set off to explore the castle and find the library she had entered in her dreams.

She had spent most of the morning and the better part of the early afternoon searching, but found only dust and cobwebs in the ancient, empty castle.

There were no chambers that were as large as the library in her nightmare. None on the upper levels anyway. She had hoped to avoid the basement, and was looking for an excuse to procrastinate going down there.

The guilt at suspecting her father of being up to something gave her ample excuse to dawdle. Besides, she had enough true dread associated with actually finding the chamber to keep her search half-hearted.

Well, that and she was hungry.

She went to the kitchen to make a sandwich and on the way through the great dining hall, she found her mother seated at the massive oak table.

Bundles of parchment lay before her, scattered all about the table. She sat in front of a laptop, its plug running into a long extension cord that crossed the width of the room and plugged into one of the few wall outlets installed anywhere in the castle.

Her mother was concentrating on her work, typing away with amazing speed. Vanessa moved up to stand next to her, looking at the scrawled symbols on the parchment. They were in black ink and she was sure these were her father's notes, but they were in a language she didn't understand.

Her mother sensed her presence and stopped typing. She put an arm around Vanessa. "Hi, honey. Having fun today?"

Vanessa shrugged. She knew her mother only half-consciously wanted an answer. Vanessa could have told her she just discovered a dismembered body in her bedroom, and her mother would have just smiled and nodded.

Instead, she said, "What are you doing, Mom?"

Her mother sighed and ran a hand through her long, blonde hair. "Your father never did like this thing," she indicated the laptop with a nod. "So I volunteered to transcribe his notes for him. He's written everything in Latin, of course. You know your Father."

Vanessa smiled weakly. She thought she did.

The tiny little voice – the one that suspected something was not quite right – was back. Why would her father write his notes in a language only he and her mother understood? Was he trying to protect the contents of his notes from her in the event she found them somewhere?

"I haven't read Latin in years, you know," her Mother said, unaware that Vanessa's smile had vanished to be replaced by a deep frown. "It reminds me of our days at University, your father and I. He really was the most handsome man back then."

Vanessa wasn't really interested in listening to that kind of lovey-dovey dribble from her Mother. "Mom, I was going to make a sandwich. Do you want one?"

Her Mother stood. "Let me get it, dear." She closed the laptop's display and kissed Vanessa on the forehead. She turned and walked the length of the hall into the kitchen.

A minute or two passed before Vanessa mustered up the courage to lift the display on the laptop. Quickly, she scanned some of what her mother had been transcribing. She began to frown as she read.

None of it made any sense. Though transcribed into English, she still couldn't understand what it was all about. Spidery symbols seemed to coexist on the same line as characters of a language she couldn't read. It was like Latin meets Algebra.

Math never was one of her strong suits.

She knew she only had a few more minutes before her Mother came back. Feeling a surge of daring, she took the mouse and opened her Father's email program. She knew the laptop was offline, not like at home where they were connected all the time thanks to a DSL line her father had installed two years ago.

She also knew that his old email – both sent and received – was stored on the laptop's hard disk. She was the geek of the house, even at fifteen, and knew her way around the computer better than both her parents. Her father really didn't count, she reminded herself. He hated computers and used them only when forced.

She went immediately to his Incoming Mailbox and began scanning the SENDER column to see if she recognized anyone's name. She stopped halfway down on a name that she didn't know. The subject line caught her eye too. She opened the message.

It read:

----- Original Message -----

From: "Trevor Harrington" <tjh@sstech.edu>

To: "Roger Mulcahey" <roger.mulcahey@njonline.com>

Sent: Friday, July 12, 2001 2:37 AM

Subject: RE: Translation Contract Requirements

Roger,

You are correct. The basement levels were cleared years ago when we took ownership of Bellingham's grounds. It has been locked down tight for about six years now. Our people tell me there is nothing there to be concerned with.

On to specifics. We were unable to decipher the cryptogram needed for entry into the room in question. We are certain your talents here will bring us closer to what we all seek. To be quite frank, we aren't even sure where the entrance is located, they destroyed too many of the handwritten documents outlining how to find it before we caught up with them. Good news is, our people here are pretty confident that once you decipher the key, you'll get the location.

With regards to your last question: the funds are being transferred to Munich on the 20th of this month. The figure is four, and I'm sure you are aware of the number of trailing zeros. Another four will arrive one week after successful delivery of the manuscript.

Good luck, and keep me posted. We will not communicate again until you return to the states. We have people in reservations and security at both Atlantic City Airport and Newark, so be sure to return on a flight bound for one of those ports. The Covenant will contact you to collect the package on your way back through customs.

I must remind you to delete this and all electronic correspondence between us as soon as you memorize the content. You know our adversaries will be moving fast, and they are not as physically restricted as we are.

Yours in Faith,
-TJ

Vanessa re-read the message twice. Her frown deepened as her heart sank. Well this certainly didn't make her feel any better about her father's business here. She felt her throat tighten as her eyes filled with tears.

She could hear her mother approaching. The sound of her heels on the stone floor produced an echoing click-click-click sound she hadn't been aware of until now. Quickly, she closed the mail program and shut the laptop's display. She brushed at the corners of her eyes quickly to dislodge any tears that might have been dangling there.

"Tuna fish on wheat bread with lettuce, tomato and cheese," her mother said, proudly presenting Vanessa with the plate. "Potato chips on the side for when you finish the sandwich."

Vanessa thanked her mother for lunch and ate in silence. Though pretending disinterest, she was watching her mother continue her work and wondering if she were in on it too. Her mother wasn't the type that would stand for anything like what she just read. Secrets and vague innuendos weren't her style. There was also the matter of the fight her parents had before they left.

No, Vanessa decided. She couldn't be part of it. Unless that fight was staged to fool her? All this suspicion began to make her head hurt. These were her *parents!*

"Mom, I'm going to the library to read for a while. It's raining anyway, so there's nothing really for me to do." She put the sandwich back on the plate, and scooped up the chips in both hands.

“Okay honey,” her mother said, not looking up from the laptop, already reabsorbed in her work. “See you at suppertime. I’ll be here the rest of the day if you need anything.”

Vanessa hugged her mother quickly, and left the dining hall.

She entered the main floor’s library and sank into one of the musty couches against the wall. It was backed up against large, sweeping windows that overlooked the grey, fog filled meadows of the castle’s expansive front lawns. She ate the chips and stared out the window.

She loved books, and came here to read all the time. One of the books, a novel entitled *“To Kiss a Stranger”* lay half read on the couch next to her. Right where she left it the last time she came to read. She picked it up in case her parents came in, she could pretend to be reading it.

But all she could think about was the content of that email message. What exactly was the Covenant? What were they paying her father to do? Who were the ‘adversaries’ mentioned in the message?

Most of all, if her father knew there was some danger to them, why had he brought them all here? What could be so important he would risk their lives to come halfway around the world?

Suddenly she felt her flesh grow extraordinarily cold, as if she had just walked into a meat locker. The tiny hairs on her neck stood stiff at attention. An unmistakable sensation of trepidation pulled at her like a fish hook, growing stronger by the second. Dread mutated quickly to terror, coursing shark like through her body.

“Hello,” a soft voice said from behind her.

Vanessa yelped and dropped her book, scurrying back on the couch, away from the speaker.

A pretty young girl stood between tall bookshelves, not five feet away. Clad in an ancient looking dressing gown, she looked as if she were sleepwalking. She was maybe ten or twelve years old. Her hair was long and blonde, and had the look of being freshly brushed for bed. Her skin was incredibly pale.

Vanessa had not heard her approach, but she knew that this girl was the source of her fear. “Who are you?” Vanessa asked. Her voice shook.

“Don’t be afraid of me,” the girl said in a delicate English accent. She was looking around the room as if just noticing where she stood. “I’m here to help you, Vanessa. I’m not the one you should be afraid of.”

“H-How...how do you know my name?” Despite the strange chill, Vanessa felt a heat spread through her chest, as if she were gently easing into a warm bath. It calmed

her and dissipated the fear with uncanny speed. She was rapidly filled with a kind of raw courage she had never felt before.

Had the girl just done that?

She did have a weird luminosity about her that told Vanessa that she was not a physical presence. Could she herself have fallen asleep and this was another nightmare?

“This is the library,” the girl said with recognition in her voice. “Not the *right* one, but the library on the guest’s level.”

Vanessa said nothing. The fear she felt was too real. This was no dream. Who was this girl? How did she get in here? Could she really be...a *ghost*?

“I miss this place most of all,” the strange girl mused. “I would spend hours and hours and hours in this room when I lived here. Books were my most loyal companions, in the end.”

Vanessa shuddered. She was rooted to the spot, but it was not with fear any longer. The strange feeling of calm kept her from running. Despite that, her mind was somehow aware that the serenity she felt seemed to be radiating from the little girl.

She took a step closer to Vanessa. “Your Father is going to do something very, very bad,” the girl said. “We have to stop him. I was sent to help you. We have to go to the library; the one from your dream.”

Vanessa’s head swam. Her father? How did the girl know about the library? She was desperate for answers now. “How do you know about my dream? Who are you? Please, tell me what my Father is going to do. I want to help him!”

“My name is Sarah Cushings. I used to live here a very long time ago,” she said. “Your father must be stopped, not helped. He has already crossed too many lines to turn back now.”

Okay. Fine. Deal, Vanessa, deal. “Sarah,” Vanessa began, unsure how to continue, “are you a...a ghost?” She felt foolish even asking that.

Sarah fixed her with an interested gaze. “I don’t know what I am. I remember that I had a fever in the summer of 1842. None of the doctors could cure it. I remember one afternoon becoming very sleepy...it was impossible to stay awake. Now I am here. I’ve been watching you for a long time now, Vanessa.”

Vanessa sat stunned, realizing she should have been screaming, should have run from the room and not looked back. Again the flood of calm buffered her impulse to run. “At night,” Vanessa said. “You were in my bedroom.”

“That was *my* room first,” Sarah said with a disdainful sniff, turning to examine the bookshelves. “Yes, I watched you sleep, but I wasn’t the only one. Sometimes there was something else there, watching you. Something not very nice at all. I tried talking with you a few times but you always screamed and screamed. You didn’t want to see me then. Now you do, so here I am.”

“Alright,” Vanessa said, trying to be rational. “I can see that you aren’t like me...you’re not...alive. I can feel it, actually. I’m not sure how that’s possible, but I can. You’re definitely dead.”

“Yes,” Sarah said. “It’s important that you trust your instincts. They will never lie to you. That’s why they’re afraid of you.”

“Afraid?” Vanessa was taken aback. “Of what, me? Who is?”

“Our enemies,” Sarah said, turning to stare at her again, her tiny blue eyes cold and serious. “They fear you.”

“What enemies? I don’t have any enemies.”

“Yes you do. You are special,” Sarah said. “Your soul has been kissed by God.”

Vanessa sank back down onto the couch, feeling as if she were pushed there. What was she saying? “I don’t understand.”

“Do you believe in God, Vanessa?” The girl turned and tiny blue eyes – dead eyes – locked with her own. Vanessa felt an icy shiver run through her bones.

Her Grandmother used to say to stare into a dead person’s eyes was like feeling the breath of winter blow right down your throat. Vanessa used to think her Grandmother was just superstitious but now had to wonder how her Grandmother had known that. The breath of winter – that was *exactly* what it felt like.

“Yes,” Vanessa answered. “I do believe in God.”

“Good. God believes in you too. You have been called to make a choice. Tonight, all over the world, others like you are being visited. There are dark days ahead, and some of the events of this evening will shape the future of the world.”

Vanessa swallowed. “What does that have to do with me?”

“Your father is about to perpetrate a great evil upon the world worse than the Sin of Adam and Eve. Theirs was original sin and could not be helped as The Serpent deceived them. Your father knows exactly what he is doing. Free will was always God’s

biggest mistake if you ask me. Makes very smart people do very stupid things more often than not.”

“My father?” She didn’t want to believe it. Her own suspicions were one thing, but to hear it from the mouth of this...this dead girl...

“Yes. He seeks to finish work that *my* father so foolishly began over a century ago. You have the power to stop him.”

“No,” Vanessa said, about to protest. She closed her mouth and began to weep. Suddenly, she knew the creature that stood before her spoke the truth. She could feel it right down to her bones. The words the girl spoke reverberated through her as simply being *right*.

“You can sense the truth of my words,” Sarah cocked her head, examining her. “That’s part of it. God has blessed you with talents that have been labeled magic by some, witchcraft by others. The faithful call them *miracles*. He has gifted you with abilities that have been absent from the Daughters of Eve for a very long time. Until tonight.”

“What do you mean?”

“The gifts you have been given are to be used for the Glory of God, to serve Him in the days ahead. The Lord calls out to the faithful, to those whom He has blessed. You are to champion His cause and help stem the tide of evil that may be unleashed upon the world this very night.”

Vanessa had always known that her instincts were more than simply accurate. Very often she knew what people were going to say before they spoke, or who it was on the telephone before picking it up.

One time when she was eight, she was playing outside with one of her friends and her mother had appeared at the back patio doorway, calling her inside. Vanessa was able to see with her own eyes that her mother was upset, crying. But she knew without being told, in a moment of panic and fright, that her Uncle Bobby had died.

She never mentioned that to anyone, but now felt a surge of strange energy within her, like a heat that set her senses tingling. It was a familiar feeling, one she had before but was not fully conscious of. She had it the day her Uncle died. She had it now.

Everything was amplified. Her body was like a spiritual tuning fork, vibrating with strange, unfamiliar forces. The tingle grew stronger now, turning into a hum within her.

Her mind was waking up.

All at once she could hear her parent's thoughts echoing in her head. Although they were both on opposite sides of the castle from where she stood, she could feel both of their emotions from here. Both of them were anxious.

Her mother had noticed that she didn't finish her lunch, and was suddenly concerned about Vanessa not eating enough. This led to other guilty feelings; she felt horrible about having dragged her away from her friends in New Jersey.

Her mother was also worried that her father was working too hard, and was becoming more and more curious as she continued translating her husband's notes. Vanessa could tell that beyond the simple translations, her mother didn't understand their contents any more than she had.

Her father's thoughts on the other hand, were almost ablaze with an anxious, frustrated sort of anger. He was concerned about Vanessa's dream, the focus of intense internal struggle right on the surface of his mind. He suspected that she knew the real reason he was here. His thoughts were chaotic, a churning mixture of fear, anticipation and an all consuming purpose that he could not turn away from.

Instinctively she probed a little further at the consciousness that she somehow recognized as her Father's mind. He offered no resistance to her probing; she could tell he had no clue she was even probing.

He was worried that she was going to prevent him from finding the *Liber Loagaeth*...

There was that word again! Vanessa snapped out of the dream like state. "What does 'Liber Loagaeth' mean? What is it?"

Sarah looked at her suspiciously out of the corners of her dead blue eyes. "Loagaeth means 'speech from God' in the language of the Firstborn. It is known by many other names, but you may have heard of it as the Book of Enoch. Within it is recorded the secrets of miracles; the language of magic. All that was lost to the peoples of both our times is hidden there, waiting for the day that God chooses to give the secrets back to us."

Vanessa shook her head thoughtfully. "That time is now?"

Sarah nodded. "Yes. Within the Liber Loagaeth there is also a mechanism for decoding the speech and language of the Firstborn – the angels. That is what your father seeks, for if he unlocks that secret, he will be able to read the book and the words contained inside."

Vanessa sank back onto the couch. "I take it that would be bad." It was not a question.

"The book contains the actual words God spoke when he created the universe," Sarah answered. "It contains the true names of all things in Heaven and Earth. If a mortal were to decipher that which God passed on to the prophet Enoch, then they would potentially be the most powerful person on Earth."

A long silence passed between the two girls. Finally, Vanessa said, "Why does my father want that? He was never that type of man. Never power hungry or mean or...he was always decent...always nice. His work was all he was ever interested in. Ancient languages, that sort of thing..."

"Other forces are in motion, Vanessa," Sarah answered. "The Second War is almost upon us, and this time the battlefield is not confined to Heaven alone. The Fallen want the book, they need the power it contains. Most of all, they need the book to stay out of the hands of the faithful. They employ mortal agents – like your father – to do work they themselves cannot deal with directly."

Vanessa frowned. She felt energized with a holy power, a force she had never fully realized until right now, but what it boiled down to was -- her father was on the other side.

"I know you're right," she said, "but it is very hard. I love my father. I don't know what I should do."

Sarah took a step towards her. "In the Book of Enoch it is written that God will raise a prophet in the darkest of times," Sarah said, "to reintroduce miracles to the faithful. This prophet will bring miracles back to the modern world. You are to be that prophet, Vanessa."

Vanessa shook her head, "I can't be," was all she said, though she knew it was true. "I'm not even an A student...I..."

Tears began to roll down her cheeks but the pain that caused them was distant, muffled. It was like it was happening to someone else and she was watching it from the outside.

Sarah shrugged. "You need not do anything, Vanessa. The choice is yours. As I said, free will was the one gift God gave mortals that he forbade the Firstborn. The Host cannot interfere with your salvation – or your damnation. You can choose to ignore His call, or you can do what you know in your heart that you were born to do. The choice is yours."

Sarah continued after a moment of silence. "No matter what you choose, the world is changing. All over the world, the Fallen are experiencing an awakening. They are remembering who and what they are. Even now one of them haunts these halls

much as I do, whispering the darkest of secrets into your father's ear. They will stretch the limits of their power to influence the course of things to come. They feel the pull of the Last Battle, much as you do."

"How do you know what I feel?" Vanessa snapped.

"I was meant to know," Sarah said simply. "Just two days ago, one of the Fallen called Astaroth awoke and murdered fifteen people at a train station in Connecticut. The item appeared on the evening news as a curiosity piece, nothing more. But the creature is clever. He used the mortal media to send his message out: it was a message to those who follow the Fallen that he had returned. It was also a warning to us. He was a creature of utter and complete evil, an assassin among creatures whose power is nearly limitless. He will not stop, and the world will bleed if he stands unopposed."

"And I am supposed to stop him somehow?"

"No," Sarah said. "Even you do not have the power yet to stand against one of the Host. You are to be a conduit; a bridge between the ancient world and the present. Man has become a faithless creation, Godless and lost. But God has not forgotten them, nor will He turn away while they destroy each other – or are consumed in a second war between opposing factions of the Host."

Vanessa turned and looked out the window over the rolling green hills of the lawns. She sat silent for a long time but could feel the ghost's presence still there, waiting.

She could feel another presence inside her too – a deeper, more spiritual presence. It bathed her in a peaceful serenity that her true parents never could provide. It centered her; embraced her and made her feel complete.

After what seemed like hours of contemplation, she finally said, “Do you know where the library is and how to get in?”

Sarah extended her hand for Vanessa to take. “Yes.”

Vanessa stood with the spirit of the dead girl in the library from her dreams. At the writing desk where she had seen that horrible visage of her father she saw the large, leather bound volume. It was at least two feet wide by three feet high, and probably eight or ten inches thick.

A soft light shone down on the book from the darkened ceiling. Strange, Vanessa thought. She could not see the source of the light shining on the book, but she knew it was a marker that only her eyes could see.

“Where on the castle grounds are we?” she asked Sarah. “You lost me after we entered the storerooms.”

A hidden entrance had been built into one of the wine cellars ages ago. Sarah had told her that powerful wardings sealed the portal to prevent entry to any but those marked as God's own.

The portal had opened for Vanessa with a touch.

"Don't worry," the ghost answered, "you'll find your way home."

She became sad then. "That portal we came through. My father hasn't found it yet."

"He knows where the door is," Sarah corrected, "but he hasn't finished deciphering my father's notes on his own attempts to dispel the warding. He has made considerable progress, so he must be getting help from one of the Fallen."

Vanessa felt a pang of betrayal in her heart. She couldn't believe that her father was helping those who thought to bring about a Second War between God and...who? Lucifer? She supposed it was. The thought made her furious. Even more so because she knew without question that it was true.

How she wished this could somehow turn out to be just another nightmare.

She took a few steps forward towards the book. "That's it, then? That's the book that I need to take?"

"Yes," she said. "All you have to do is reach out and take it."

"I'm not even sure I could lift that," Vanessa protested.

"Reach out with your mind, Vanessa. You have the power to alter the book's physical composition. It is a manifestation of part of the essence of God; the physical characteristics are unimportant. It is energy, at its most basic, and energy can be

reorganized if you only know how. Ask for help. All of the eyes of Heaven are upon you now. You will not be forsaken.”

Vanessa closed her eyes and concentrated, asking silently for help. She didn't know what to ask for, only that she wasn't sure how in the world she'd lift such a huge volume and carry it out of here. She wasn't sure what she'd do even if she could lift it. She knew that her father couldn't be allowed to take the book. But how would she hide such a giant thing from him?

When she opened her eyes, she saw that a small book the size of a library hardcover was in place of the hefty volume. It had a bright pink cover, and a small strap with a brass clasp that was meant to lock it shut against prying eyes.

She felt the weight of a thin, metallic chain materialize around her neck, and she knew without looking that at the end of the chain was the key.

“It looks like my journal,” she said to Sarah.

Sarah's voice became suddenly urgent, her eyes wide with a strange expression on her ghostly face. “Take it now, Vanessa! You must take it before...”

She vanished in mid sentence. What could cause a spirit to flee in terror?

An explosion from the top of the stairs sent tremors through the room. A multicolored flash from above with strange, thick smoke sent pieces of wood and metal and clouds of ancient dust tumbling down the iron steps.

She raced forward and grabbed the book that now looked like her journal, and held it defensively against her chest. She heard footsteps clattering down the stairs

through the smoke and dust and saw, to her horror, that it was her father. She hadn't actually wanted to confront him, and felt doubt and fear creep into her resolve.

Following him down the stairs, a tall, figure swathed in a dark cloak followed more slowly. A piece of the night walked slowly down the stairs, its footfalls making not a sound.

Her father held a hooded lantern in one hand, and had a leather satchel thrown across one shoulder, its contents overflowing. Vanessa recognized some of the scrolls and parchments her mother had been translating for him. He had a wild gleam in his eyes and a desperate, victorious grin that terrified her.

The figure following him held nothing that she could see, both its hands were buried in voluminous sleeves. The strange apparition radiated something – a familiar feeling slithered over her flesh, sending a chill through the marrow of her bones.

Hate. Recognition. Evil.

"Vanessa," her father's voice had an edge to it that frightened her, even with her newfound spiritual armor. "Put down the book and step away from the table. Darling, you have no idea what you're dealing with; it's very, very dangerous."

"No," she was firm as she perceived his words for the lies they were. "I can't, and I think you know that. Who is that with you, Father?"

"I am no one," the thing behind her father hissed, but no sound issued forth from the darkened cowl. The words rang in her mind.

Her father shook his head, dismissing her. "You've been misled, Vanessa. I should have warned your mother and you about the castle, it's genuinely haunted as I'm

sure you are aware of by now. I'm sorry about the dreams and everything else, but you understand, don't you Pumpkin? I couldn't tell you, I was sworn to secrecy. There's something in that book that the spirit fears, and I am so close to figuring it out."

Even without her newly acquired abilities screaming in her skull that he was lying, she could tell. She didn't need any spiritual energy for that. She wasn't five years old anymore after all where every word he said was revered as the ironclad truth.

She could feel her father's words sliding like an oil slick into her mind, slithering like a mercurial serpent. The filth of his emotions were right there, floating on top like some sulfurous foam on a polluted river. The outright deception sickened her. He expected her to simply listen and do what she was told.

"You're lying," she said. Her voice was flat, emotionless. Her tone spoke volumes about the certainty of her statement, and that continuing the lie was no longer necessary. She knew the truth.

"Give the book to him, child," the creature whispered in her brain.

Her father bent slowly to put the lantern on the floor and raise his hands in a gesture of supplication. "No, honey. Listen. You don't understand. That book is very, very important. It's why I was hired to come here. You don't understand *how* important. I have to have it, don't you understand that? Do you have any idea what the people I work for will do to me if I don't deliver that!?" He was reaching slowly around behind his back with his free hand.

“He will kill you, child,” the thing said. “Give it to him and save yourself.” It occurred to her then that her father might not be able to see this creature. He gave no indication that he did, and after all, the creature was talking to her, not to him.

Drawing her attention back to her father, she could see the desperation in his eyes. A gun? He was reaching for a gun! She never even knew her father could fire a weapon, let alone that he owned one. Would he really shoot her? Was he capable of murdering her down here where her body would never be found?

Was he that desperate? That he would murder his own child to gain this silly book? She looked at him and saw nothing behind his blue eyes except cold, grey death.

Would he take the book to this creature – one of the Fallen? Turn over the secrets to the dark, rebellious angels that defied God? What would the world be like if they used the power the book contained? What would they do with the very words that God spoke when he created the universe?

She didn’t want to find out, and wouldn’t allow that to happen. And strangely, she knew that she now had the power to stop him. She steeled herself and stepped towards her father slowly.

The creature behind her father hissed in anger, the sound like a thousand serpents drawing back their fangs to strike. Perhaps unlike the image of her Father’s face she saw in her dreams, there really were snakes beneath this creature’s cowl.

Her father pulled the gun out from behind his back and cocked it with one deft motion. In her mind, she could feel the practiced ease with which he handled the weapon fill him with confidence. How comfortable he was with it and how emotionless

he was right now with the prospect of having to shoot his own daughter. She could feel how many times he had killed and the thrill, the rush of power it had given him each time.

Ten? Twenty? Even he had lost count. But he had done it over and over in his fifty three years chasing down this book. Suddenly the roster of murders flew past her conscious mind -- he had killed strangers, friends and even a cousin of his back when he was a little older than she was now. There was no reason to think that he wouldn't kill her too.

"Don't take another step!" he shouted, his face no longer even pretending to display the mask of fatherhood. Now, he was a snarling madman, who saw only an enemy before him. An enemy who had something he wanted. "I'll put two bullets right in your head unless you bend down and slowly put that book on the floor. NOW!"

"When he kills you, you can have my place in Hell, child," the thing hissed in her mind.

Vanessa ignored the creature's taunting. Vanessa figured that if it could physically interfere, it would have already.

To her father, she said, "Shoot me then! Kill me like you killed all those other people. You're going to have to shoot me! That's the only way you'll ever get this book from me, father! You must know I can't let you have it!"

The creature slid back away from her father a few feet. "You are nothing to him," it cackled. "You never could be anything to him, I saw to that. I have been with your father since the day he was born, whispering to him the secrets of the universe.

His soul was particularly weak, and his mind – though quite intelligent and orderly for one of your kind – was a simple thing to break.”

“Liar!” Vanessa shouted at the thing, realizing its words were making her angry.

It hissed something that might be a laugh. “Your blood will stain the stones here forever and ever and ever...”

Her father’s mouth distorted from a threatening grey slit into a vicious snarl. “You were nothing more than an accident, Vanessa! We never planned on having children, but I’m sure your mother never told you that did she? No, I see that she didn’t. My life’s work led me to this moment. My entire life! Becoming a father was nothing more than an inconvenience! How many years I pissed away trying to make you and your mother happy, but it was never enough, was it? THIS was my first priority and took me more than forty years to complete! So you see, I have no problem shooting you dead right here, right now. And after that, I take the book, and the whole world changes.”

Vanessa steeled herself against his words. “Fine. Then what? Do you think evil can possibly last?”

“We have waited forever and ever,” the creature whispered.

“It has lasted thousands upon thousands of years, Vanessa. Waiting and biding its time. Waiting for someone like me to come along and do what countless others before me couldn’t do! I deciphered the key, I found the Liber Loagaeth. And when the world is remade in HIS image,” he shouted, pointing down at the floor, “then He will reward those who prove faithful!”

Vanessa shook her head in defiance. “You’re so blind!” she said softly, but firmly. “You say that I was an accident, yet it never occurred to you in all your years of plotting and scheming that there might have been a reason I was born?”

“The key!” her father gasped, suddenly staring at the key hanging from the golden chain around her neck. She could feel it growing warm against her skin as it filled the library with a purifying brightness.

“Kill her now!” the creature shrieked in her head, throwing its cloaked arms up to defend itself against the strange light. She could feel the alien panic in the creature like a magnetic pulse.

Her father raised the pistol and took aim. “I should have done this a long time ago.”

He pulled the trigger.

The bullet exploded into Vanessa’s chest, knocking her off her feet. The shot sent her airborne before she struck the floor hard, the force causing her body to slide a few feet towards the circular wall behind her.

At first she felt nothing, but then the pain burst within her. Through shattered breastbone and ribs, she felt her lifeblood begin to seep out onto the cold, stone floor. She could hear herself cough and gurgle blood as she tried to keep breathing through ruined lungs.

It rapidly became impossible. Dark specks polluted her vision, rapidly swarming to overtake the light. Somehow she didn’t lose consciousness, though she knew that any moment now she would.

She heard her father's footsteps drawing closer. His footfalls were measured and deliberate. He was in no hurry. He was totally calm. She could still sense him in her mind clearly, though her own conscious thoughts were becoming fragmented; slipping away as if she were trying to hold water in her hands.

The metallic chu-click as her father cocked the gun again and prepared to fire the shot that would surely kill her. It was strange how detached she had become from the entire process. It almost felt as if she were already dead and had stopped breathing.

She could feel the weight of the book grasped in her right hand, slick with blood, but still there. She felt her father's lustful delight at being so close to what he had sought all his life.

She felt the creature's presence leave her mind, but she did not know if it voluntarily left, or if she was losing consciousness.

There was a bright light coming from somewhere. She supposed it was the one people who claimed to have been at death's door and came back always talked about. It was such an impossibly untainted brilliance that she couldn't stare at it any longer. Even with her eyes closed, it burned through her eyelids.

She felt something else besides the glow of the light and the aching, burning agony of the gunshot wound. This was not a physical sensation though – at least not her own. She felt her father's terror explode in her mind; sudden and fierce, like the gunshots he had fired at her.

He started to scream.

She felt the bones in her chest moving, there was no mistaking the sensation. They were beginning to mend with supernatural speed. She felt the bullet wound burn as if someone had funneled gasoline directly into the cavity and lit it afire.

Her blood stopped pumping out of the punctures in her body onto the floor. New flesh grew in milliseconds on both the front of her body where the bullet had entered, and the gaping exit wound out her back. Her breathing evened out, and became regular in the space of two heartbeats.

Her father's screams grew in a crescendo of horrible, torturous pain. Vanessa's mind recoiled from the sound, unable to cope with the noise that a human throat was never designed to produce.

It was a preternatural scream, an instinctive shriek. It was a scream that echoed in her skull as she began at last to lose consciousness.

Vanessa and her mother boarded Lufthansa flight 1341 bound for Philadelphia at 6:00 in the morning, local time. The plane would land nearly 10 hours later and they would take a train from there back to Metro Park, NJ.

Her Aunt Rita and Uncle Steven – relatives on her mother’s side - would be waiting to take them back to Tom’s River. It was only about an hour from Metro Park, but Vanessa was eager to be back in the familiarity of her hometown. Her aunt and uncle were good people, and would help her mother cope with her recent loss.

Her father’s ‘disappearance’ had shattered her mother. She sat in the adjacent seat in a tranquilized stupor, barely able to maintain consciousness for more than a few minutes at a time. Usually when she did, she would be reduced to slow, sluggish sobs.

Vanessa told her mother nothing of what had happened down in the secret library. She would allow her mother to learn to live with the assumption her father had just picked up his things and left them both. It would hurt her for years – maybe forever - but it would be easier to face than the truth.

Down in that shadowy library, nothing more than a wet scorch mark on the stone floor remained of her father. She woke some hours after her father shot her, to find herself alone and the bullet wound in her chest very nearly healed. A few hours later, and she couldn’t even tell that she had been shot at all.

The sinister presence fled when its tool had died.

She still couldn’t understand what happened, or how she survived. Ever since waking, she felt a raw energy, a power flowing through her veins that made her feel – almost superhuman.

She had taken the winding, circular stairway up to the wine cellar, through the wrecked door of iron and brass, and watched as the portal sealed itself behind her. Now, it appeared as it did when Sarah led her there – just another stone wall.

Vanessa had gone to her bedroom almost immediately, and waited for her mother to notice that her father wouldn't be returning.

By dinnertime, her mother was almost hysterical. She had called local authorities on her cell phone. They had resisted opening a missing person's case at first, saying it was department policy not to get involved until someone was missing for twenty four hours or more.

Her mother, however, had kept the detective on the phone for almost twenty minutes in a near hysterical rant. In the end, they agreed to send down a few officers to conduct a search.

They arrived within the hour. One of the detectives speculated that he might have had a heart attack or suffered some other medical emergency somewhere alone in so vast a castle. There were literally hundreds of places a man might lay unlooked for in a place that size.

They searched for hours, but did not find a body.

The detective in charge asked if they were having marriage problems, and her mother got the subtle hint. She didn't answer, or maybe couldn't. She saw the officers to the main entrance and politely bid them goodbye.

Over the next four days they packed up all of their belongings and prepared to head back to the United States. They completed the sweeps of the castle and created inventory checklists of their belongings to be sure they missed nothing. It was during a review of one of the lists that they saw that some of her father's things were missing.

His laptop. One of his overcoats. All of his notes.

Vanessa had taken most of these things and disposed of them before the police arrived that first night. She removed the laptop's hard drive and hid that away among her belongings for later inspection. Everything else got burned in one of the six walk-in fireplaces the castle boasted.

It had taken her three or four fires before the things she had taken from him had been reduced to their base components. Once cooled, they had been stuffed into a double thick Hefty bag and lobbed in the garbage bins with their other trash.

She stored his notes in the pages of the odd little book that she kept with her everywhere she went. Strangely, the "journal" seemed to swallow each piece of note parchment as she put it in, never growing in size.

The only conclusion her mother had been left to draw was that Roger had left them. Though her parents did fight a lot, her mother truly had loved her father, so Vanessa felt sorry for her.

She felt her mother stir at her side as the plane ran into some turbulence shortly after takeoff. Her mother roused to semi consciousness and looked around, surprised. It was as if she didn't know where she was. The tranquilizers, Vanessa knew.

"We're already in the air?" she asked finally. Her voice was thick and groggy.

Vanessa closed the pink book in her hands and put one hand on her mother's knee. "Yes, we took off about thirty minutes ago."

Her mother reached up and pressed the button for the flight attendant. She was trying to fight the sedatives. "Do you want a drink, dear?"

"No thanks," Vanessa said. "You aren't supposed to have any alcohol, Mom."

“What are you reading?” her mother asked, ignoring her comment.

“My journal,” Vanessa said. “It’s private.”

Her mother smiled weakly. “Don’t worry dear, I was fifteen once. Keep your secrets.”

A long moment of silence passed after the flight attendant took her mother’s order for a Bloody Mary. “What kind of things do you write in there, Vanessa?”

Vanessa eyed her mother curiously. She felt a hazy, probing interest radiate from her mother, but nothing more. She knew what her mother wanted to hear. “You know...the usual. Hopes, dreams, movie stars, boys, what I’m going to be when I grow up...you know.”

Her mother closed her eyes, settling back into the plush chair and smiled. It was the first genuine smile she had seen on her mother’s face since they left England. “What are you going to be when you grow up?” she asked, patting her daughter’s knee playfully. “That is, unless that’s too personal.”

Vanessa was silent for a moment or two. The flight attendant returned with her mother’s drink. To answer her mother’s second question, she decided not to just tell her what she wanted to hear. She’d have to hear the truth. “I don’t know. I was thinking about maybe becoming a nun or something.”

Her mother’s bloodshot eyes popped open at that, the thin crimson spider webs that ran through whites the only evidence that she was full of tranquilizers. “Really?”

Vanessa probed. She felt genuine surprise from her mother, but not disapproval. “Maybe not the ‘dress in black have no fun’ kind...I don’t know. I’ve been thinking a lot about God lately since Dad left.”

She risked a glance at her mother. Her eyes were still closed, but she could feel the pain in her mother’s mind at the mention of her father.

“Maybe I could do something that would teach people about God...do some good in the world,” she said. She watched for her mother’s reaction, but none came.

Silence was all that passed between them for a long time. Finally, when Vanessa thought her mother may have fallen back into her sedative-induced slumber, her mother said, “What brought that on? I mean I know you like church and always did well in Sunday school classes, but you’ve never talked about making it a career before. Ever.”

“I know,” Vanessa began, “but don’t you think it’s important?”

Her mother didn’t answer immediately. She sighed unhappily. “I didn’t used to, to be honest with you. A long, long time ago – back when your father and I met - I didn’t believe in anything.”

“What changed your mind?” Vanessa asked.

“You,” her mother smiled a thin smile. “When I became pregnant with you I started to believe in miracles again. Round little chubby miracles that I never thought I wanted in my life.”

“So I guess you’re my first convert then,” Vanessa said smiling.

Her mother leaned back into the chair and closed her eyes. She found her daughter's hand and held it tightly. "Yes, I suppose I am."

Vanessa settled back in her own chair, and reopened what appeared to the world to be her journal. The pages within were filled with strange, flowing verse that she found to be too much like prophecy to make any sense. The rest of it was grids and grids of the strange symbols she had seen her mother translating.

She didn't understand any of it.

A strange call from the book seduced her into re-opening the book every time she put it down though. Somehow she knew that if she stared at it enough, she would begin to understand.

The strange, spidery characters that Sarah had called the 'language of angels' were fascinating. The symbols tugged at her, insistent and desperate for their message to be understood.

Understood and passed on.

She looked out the window at the mountains of voluminous clouds and the brilliance of the blue sky. She would understand sooner or later. It might take her years, but she would figure it out. And then she'd teach what she learned to others.

For now, though, she was tired. And it was still a very long way home. She glanced again out at the clouds, and wondered briefly if this is what Heaven itself looked like.

A very long way home, indeed.

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