

Happy Halloween, Mrs. Macabre

The Mrs. Macabre Chronicles, Volume 4

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HAPPY HALLOWEEN, MRS. MACABRE

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Written by Austin Ray Bouse.

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The Mrs. Macabre Chronicles

Mrs. Macabre

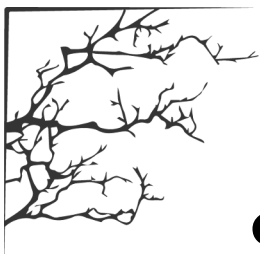
Merry Christmas, Mrs. Macabre

Mrs. Macabre And The Fear King

Happy Halloween, Mrs. Macabre

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To my parents and my Universal Family. Special
thanks to my editor, Francesca Leon, for always mak-
ing my words better.



1. OCTOBER



I would like, if I may, to take you on a strange journey. Granted, if you have read previous adventures of Mrs. Macabre and the twins Jane and Catie Gracey, then you already know just how strange this journey could get. This particular adventure, however, shall not be focused on the Gracey twins.

Instead, the spotlight shall be taken mostly by their dear friend and fellow monster lover, Abraham Vasquez. It is a story that is frightening, magical, and even a little melancholic.

Autumn would not have it any other way, of course.

Seasons were unfamiliar to Bram. That is to say, when one spends their early childhood living in the state of Florida, one does not *experience* seasons so much as *feel* them. Each turning of the annual cycle does not bring with it a change of the leaves on the trees or drops of snow. In Florida, the seasons either consist of humid and rainy in the spring, more humid and rainy in the summer, a little less humid and a little less rainy in the fall, and cool in the winter.

But now that he lived in the northern part of the United States, he was able to truly experience the seasons in all of

their glory. Winter brought the icy chill and blankets of snow. Spring brought the resurrection of green and the reprisal of bird song. Summer brought the warm rays of the sun. And autumn? What autumn brought was above all other seasons. What autumn brought was. . .

Halloween Time.

The leaves became beautiful golden orange, the wind whipping through them, making ghostly cries. Sweaters were removed from closets and fires were lit in backyards or on camping trips. The twilight of the evening shimmered and glowed like spirits of old tales creeping into the modern world. Pumpkins were picked from fields, ready to be carved with grinning faces of ghoulish glee. Corn mazes were raised in fields, beckoning strangers into their long and twisty tunnels. Bundles of hay were hauled onto vehicles for those daring to take a ride in so-called haunted woods. Skeletons of plastic bones were hung on branches. Witches' cauldrons brewed with sweet nectar from the grocery stores. Costumes and masks were raided in stores for devilish disguises.

Bram ate up all of the sights, scents, and wonders of October like it was a bag of candy that would never empty.

It was also a time to be spent with friends. In Bram's particular case, it was with the Gracey twins.

Being an only child, there is a certain aloneness that is essential to having no siblings. Not loneliness exactly but a strange island of You that one is born on. Having moved from one state to the other was an unmooring experience to have, but to also have that same experience be one that does not come with the reward of many friends? That feels more like being stranded on an island than anything beforehand. Luckily,

Jane and Catie found his emotional message in a bottle one day during lunch hour and they had been the closest of companions ever since. Bram had felt a kinship with the girls that he'd never felt elsewhere. Their love of the spookier side of life matched his own and filled his heart with warmth like a lit jack-o-lantern.

The Gracey twins also had a secret.

Jane and Catie were not just girls who loved monsters, they *knew* monsters, as well. They were dear friends with a witch named Mrs. Macabre who would take them on adventures in the Hallowland, a place that Bram thought was like Oz by way of Edgar Allan Poe. A magical dream world of monsters of all variety and foggy nights filled with the sounds of bat wings and the howl of werewolves. It was an absolute revelation for him. All of the things that he had read obsessively for as long as he could string sentences together were here! In the flesh! He could see any beast or monster he wished. A dreamland that was no longer contained to his imagination alone. It was *real* and it was *true*.

Even in the Real World, he and the twins would find their fun where ever they could outside of the Hallowland. They would swap books from their favorite spooky authors, tell ghost stories under the brilliant beam of a flashlight in graveyards. They would even preform their own version of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* in front of the TV, mimicking every dance move and silently mouthing along to the songs on screen. Like the Hallowland, there was something that felt forbidden to these adventures. As if they were all getting away with something. They were, of course, getting away with being themselves.

Bram, more than any of them, knew the heavy price of being himself.

When he was smaller, Bram's favorite story was *The Adventures Of Pinocchio* by Carlo Collodi. After his parents would close the book after the billionth time reading it, he would shout, "de nuevo! De nuevo!" Causing his bed to rattle as he hopped up and down under the covers. He loved the excitement, the magic, the strangeness, and the mischief of the living puppet. But most of all, he shared a kinship with the wooden hero of the story because they shared the same dream. They both wanted to be a Real Boy. As he grew older, Bram's dream came true, not by the kiss of a fairy, but by the medicine of a doctor.

With this medicine came the slow changing of his body. He was also given short haircuts and most recently a binder to hold his developing chest. Every morning, he woke up feeling free from the cage of the gender the world assigned to him at birth.

Still, like Pinocchio, there were people out in the world who meant him harm. He thought himself lucky to not have any physical threats come his way. But he was acutely aware by the whispers and looks that he would get from time to time.

Especially from the school bully, Courtney Clearwater.

With her bright blonde hair, her bleach white teeth, and her perfectly pink lips, Courtney was always looking for ways to hurt him with her words. Just this past week, she had shot an arrow at his heart. He and the Gracey twins were walking to their next class when Courtney flew over to them, circling her prey.

“Hey, Bram, what are you going to be for Halloween? A boy?” She asked, then looking him up and down with her eyes of blue fire, came the punchline, “Then you should get a better costume.”

“Your zits are showing,” Catie slung back at her while Jane hissed like a cat. Bram appreciated the twins’ efforts to defend him, but the wounded Courtney would always come back for more. Hungry for the shame that was evident on his face.

“Ignore her,” Jane told him once.

“She’s just jealous because you’re cooler than her,” Catie would smile and wrap an arm around him. The damage to his heart would heal ever so slightly by his love for the two girls.

Their words were a balm, but something was off about them. Not wrong, but not quite right, either. The Gracey twins were bullied by Courtney just as much as he was, and they certainly got strange looks from others, but that was mostly due to a weirdness that was tolerated by the rest of the world.

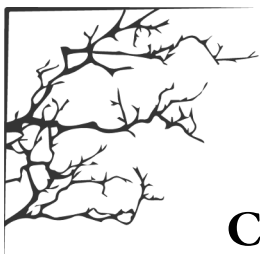
Bram was accepted by his friends and his parents, but they would never know what it was like to be considered *unnatural* by certain people in the world. People who thought that you were *confused*. People who thought you were *sick*. People who thought you were making the rest of the world worse just by being yourself.

“People are so strange in your world,” Mrs. Macabre told him once while handing him a cup of swamp water from the kitchen. “All they care about is what the *outside* of a person is like. We here in the Hallowland only care about the inside. That is where all the warm and gooey parts are, anyways.”

He smiled back at her and a small part inside his heart wanted to spill out all of his grief to her. But he had learned

very quickly early on that, if you wanted to keep yourself safe, you had to be silent. He would speak what was on his mind on occasion, but he always kept himself in check. His fear of being attacked built an armor around him that he thought was wise, but if protecting himself meant not saying what he was feeling, then what was the point of even being a person?

Since finding his family outside of his own, he felt a strange sense that he was a supporting character in the Gracey twins' story. Jane and Catie could be fully themselves, so why shouldn't he? Ah, but he knew the answer to that. The deepest, darkest voice in his head knew it and told him often when he couldn't sleep at night, giggling like Courtney would. Because it didn't matter if he was fully himself. To people like Courtney, he would still just be a boy made out of wood. Not even Halloween could change that.



2. CRY OF THE BANSHEE



Adventure called. Bram's phone buzzed on the nightstand, waking him. Usually, he was quite annoyed whenever his sleep was interrupted, but he always made an exception for this particular caller.

"Hello?" He asked, knowing full well who it was.

"Ready?" Jane's voice came from the other end. She did not even have to clarify what she meant. It was as natural to Bram and the Gracey twins as breathing.

"Be down in a second!" Bram hung up and leapt out of bed as if it were Christmas morning. He quickly put on a pair of clothes. The weekends were reserved for adventures with Mrs. Macabre, so Bram had already laid out attire. He brushed his hair, grabbed his testosterone kit, and opened the second floor window.

He climbed down, as he had become very adept at doing so, and landed on the damp night grass with little more than a

whisper. The three children began to walk down the street towards the gate.

“What do you think of this year’s decorations?” Jane asked him, pointing to a ghost flapping in the breeze as it hung from a neighbor’s tree.

“I think they’re fine,” he shrugged. “But they could be better.”

“Why don’t you have any in your yard?” Catie asked.

“We’re not into that kind of thing,” he mumbled. “Or, at least, my folks aren’t.”

“I like your Day Of The Dead skeleton by your front door, though,” Jane smiled.

“Yeah,” Catie agreed. “I wish *our* parents would decorate the house.”

“Why don’t you?” Bram asked. “I thought if any house on the street would have Halloween stuff it would be yours?”

“Mom and Dad only allow Christmas decorations,” Jane rolled her eyes.

“They said that setting up for Christmas takes enough work as it is. Besides,” Catie chuckled, “if we had it our way they said the house would be Halloween all the time!”

The three of them laughed a bit, but Bram could not help but feel a twinge of jealousy towards the two sisters. In their family, Halloween was just another holiday, one where decorations could be taken for granted. For Bram, autumn really only belonged to the Day Of The Dead. Given that both his mother and his father thought that Halloween’s celebration of evil spirits and demons was a bit too blasphemous, they were only comfortable celebrating a spooky-related holiday that had a deep connection to their religious roots.

This was most certainly the case after his Abuela had passed a couple of years ago. Unlike his parents, Abuela was far more relaxed when it came to his love of horror and monsters. Whenever she would visit, she would tuck him into bed at night with creepy tales of La Llorona or legends of the Chupacabra. She even gifted him a vampire hunting kit that she found at a flea market, much to his parents' dismay.

He was allowed to go trick-or-treating, but only dressed up as something "normal" like a doctor or a knight. Other than that, the beginning of November was reserved for praying at their little altar in the kitchen. Decorated with lit candles, sugar skulls, photographs of departed loved ones, and marigold flowers, it was a gorgeous holiday to be sure, one that he cherished.

But something was missing from that special day of days. Something that he was missing out on. Which was one of the many reasons why he loved these trips to the Hallowland so much.

He saw the gate up ahead, a huge black curtain of night at the end of the street.

"Wait a second," he said, thinking of something, "can anyone in the neighborhood see the gate?"

"I don't know," Jane shrugged. "What do you think?" She asked her sister.

"I just assumed that you can only see it if you believe in it."

"Why don't you ask Mrs. Macabre?"

"Don't want to ruin the magic, I guess," Jane smiled and walked through the gate along with Catie.

Bram sighed as a nice chill went down his spine. It was the same chill that he got when watching one of his favorite

scary movies or looking at a bright Christmas tree. The chill that comes with the mystery of magic. He walked in and he was surrounded by darkness save for the faint glow of street lamps from outside. "Got the straw?" He asked.

"Got it!" Jane pulled out the thin piece of straw from Mrs. Macabre's broom. They all held hands and Bram smiled at the thought of such a powerful thing being so small. They closed their eyes and thought of their destination.

If you were standing there with them, you would quickly be confused by how everything was supposed to work, given that nothing of real excitement had happened. But then you would hear the faint moaning of wind, like they did now, as it blew through the darkness. The moaning slowly growing into a wolf howling at the moon as it whipped through your hair. Thunder crashed from somewhere above. Bolts would shoot down around you in crooked tree branches of green lightning. The howl of the wind was now the shrieking of thousands and thousands of bats as it whipped around you, a tornado of terror, until finally. . . .

You were there.

There were two houses on the farm. One was clearly Mrs. Macabre's manor, recognizable by its coffin shape, and the other a regular farmhouse. Regular by the Hallowland's standard in that its style was Victorian Gothic. Everything was bathed in the blue-purple glow of nighttime. He breathed in the misty air and it tasted like home. It was good to be back.

They walked up the steps of the manor's porch and rang the doorbell. A scream echoed through the house as well as a familiar voice saying, "I'll get it!" The children smiled at one another

as various bolts, chains, and locks could be heard clicking from the other side of the door.

“Darlings!” Mrs. Macabre cried out to them as she swung the door open. She was noticeably dressed differently tonight than her typical dress and hat. Now she wore a black jumpsuit like a mechanic along with matching work boots and gloves. Her first name *Lenore* was stitched on the front. A belt was tied around her waist with various tools made of iron and shakers of salt in its pockets. Her long dark hair was tied to the back of her head.

“Why are you dressed like that?” Jane asked after they all hugged her.

“Dressed?” The witch’s brows furrowed. “Oh! Yes, this! I’ll explain in a moment. Come in! Come in!” She ushered them all inside and closed the door behind her.

The inside of the manor never failed to amaze Bram. Its foyer was tiled with black and white marble filled with skeletons, boxes of oddities, statues of creatures, and other curiosities that one would find in a museum of the weird. A large staircase spiraled up and up and up to the point that it made his neck sore if he gazed up at it for too long. Every floor, every room in the house held a delightful secret or a monster from Mrs. Macabre’s travels. It was the best house in the universe.

“The children are here!” Mrs. Macabre called out, cupping her mouth with her gloved hands. The other members of their spooky family followed from various directions. They all wore similar uniforms to Mrs. Macabre. A very thin one to fit Jack Lantern’s scarecrow body. Eight boots for Arachne’s eight legs. Mrs. Mirth walked over, her cane made of iron and her blue hair practically glowing against the darkness of her jumpsuit.

The only one who wasn't dressed for the occasion was Frank, a nightmare dog who would have flatly refused if asked to. They all greeted the three of them warmly as they always had.

"We're going banshee snatching, my loves!" Mrs. Macabre told them with her hands up with excitement. One of the many things Bram loved about her was the way she used her hands when she talked. It reminded him of the acting that he would see in old black and white horror movies, filled with a flair for the dramatic and theatrical.

"Banshee snatching?" Catie said. "Why?"

"That's why we are all the way out here in the country. A hobgoblin by the name of Cork sent us a letter of employment. Seems as if a whole swarm of them have been buzzing around his property as of late."

"That's why you have all that stuff on your belt," Bram pointed out. "I read that iron and salt were thought to be a banshee's weakness."

"Top marks to you, my good sir!" Mrs. Macabre applauded him, which always gave him a warm feeling of pride. "Care to join us?"

"Do you even have to ask?" Jane smiled.

"Where are we going to get one of those uniforms?" Bram asked.

"Oh, I'm sure I can find something. Follow me!" Mrs. Macabre said quickly and then lead them to the lift off to the side. Once she had closed the gate, she pressed one of the many buttons on the panel and with a hum of its motors, they were sent smoothly upwards, the other companions getting smaller and smaller as they continued to go up.

“Mrs. Macabre,” Catie said “why can’t we use one of your straws from your broom?” She remembered the spell that they had used on previous adventures involving magic straw to change their clothes.

“Where do you think those costumes came from, my dear?” She smiled, her black lipstick giving her mouth a dark crescent moon grin against her pale face.

They got out of the lift and walked down the corridor lined with doors labeled everything from GIANT RAT ROOM to CRYSTAL BALL COLLECTION. They stopped at a door marked WARDROBE and she opened it.

Inside was an endless room filled with endless apparel. The children did not only see the costumes that they had worn before, but many, many, *many* others. Suits, dresses, capes, hats, scarves, jewelry, shoes, slippers, boots, gloves, jackets, coats, sweaters, vests, glasses, rings, necklaces, brooches, collars, helmets, skirts, pants, watches, chains, earrings, wigs, hair clips, purses, wallets, bags, ties, on and on it went.

“Promise we can spend *at least* two hours in here afterwards!” Catie said, holding a coat lined with donated werewolf fur against her cheek.

“I’ll give you three!” Mrs. Macabre said, “but first, duty calls!” She reached into one of the racks and pulled out three jumpsuits that were so smooth, as if they had just been tailored and pressed that instant. Each one of them was embroidered with the names *Jane*, *Catie*, and *Bram* on the upper right chest. They happily zipped up their suits, tied their boots, and clipped on their belts to bust some banshees.

Once they were back downstairs, they all went out of the manor, across the field to the farmhouse. As they walked up

the steps to the front door, Bram noticed that Frank was sitting atop Arachne's thorax. He smiled, thinking that the dog with the human baby head on the half woman- half spider was a fitting image somehow. He then heard the soft rustling of Jack Lantern's straw next to him. He looked and saw that the scarecrow was trembling.

"Jack," he whispered to him. "You could have stayed back at the manor if you wanted to. I'm sure they wouldn't mind," he as well as the others knew that Jack was both very sweet and very frightened.

"I-I know," Jack's voice hesitated, the candle in his pumpkin head glowing with every word. "I just thought I'd try to-to broaden my horizons, you know?"

"Okay," Bram shrugged. "But, if things get too freaky, I've always got your back." Jack turned his head to him and, even though he had a permanent smile carved into his face, Bram knew that he meant it.

Mrs. Macabre knocked on the front door and it opened. The hobgoblin who answered it was a stout, hairy man with horns growing up from his head. He scratched his chest behind his overalls and frowned at them with a corncob pipe in his mouth. "You Mrs. Macabre?" He grumbled.

"I am, indeed! Please to meet you, Mr. Cork," she stuck out her hand but he instead glanced behind her.

"Who are they?" He eyed them with an unkind gaze.

"These are my associates!" Mrs. Macabre smiled as best as she could. "The sisters Gracey, Jane and Catherine. And this—"

"How much do I owe you?" Cork said, cutting her off.

"Nineteen pentacles," the witch dropped the false smile, annoyed by his rudeness. "Please."

Cork reached into one of his pockets and pulled out a handful of coins with pentagrams carved on to each one. He was mumbling something under his breath as he counted the money that was indistinguishable between a cough and a curse. "There you go," he finally said, handing her the coins.

"Thank you," Mrs. Macabre pocketed the money quickly and then placed her hands in front of her. "Now, the letter that you wrote mentioned a banshee problem that you've been having as of late?"

"Yep," Cork croaked. "Ever since my ma died, they won't leave me alone."

"I'm sorry for your loss," Mrs. Macabre said gently.

"I'm not," Cork placed his thumbs in his pockets. "I'd never thought she'd kick the bucket."

"Hey, bub!" Frank piped up in his gruff New York-style accent. "That's your mother you're talkin' about! Have some respect!"

Cork snorted smoke out of his nose and raised an eyebrow.

"Don't mind him, Mr. Cork," Mrs. Macabre laughed nervously. "Frank has a tendency to speak before thinking," she quickly shot a glance behind her. Frank scoffed and Arachne patted him on the head.

"So are you going to get to work or not?" Cork asked.

"What time do they usually materialize?" Mrs. Macabre asked, looking at a pocket watch. As if on cue a chorus of screams as sharp and bone-chilling as glass breaking shrieked through the air.

"They'll be them!" Cork yelled over the noise covering his ears. He shut his eyes and winced as if a massive headache had

just come upon him. He slammed the door shut without another word.

Our friends looked over and saw what they assumed to be a swarm of white birds coming their way. But as they grew closer and closer, they saw that they were not birds, but women flying in the air. There were five of them, each one clothed in long and torn white sheets. They were gaunt and skeletal with curtains of hair like spun silver. But the most striking thing about them was their eyes, red and bloodshot, as if they had spent years and years crying.

“Quick!” Mrs. Mirth cried. “Put these on!” She reached into her belt and pulled out a bag full of black earmuffs. Bram recognized them when he and the twins had to cover their ears from an incident involving Mrs. Macabre playing very loud music on a very loud organ. The shrieking of the banshees was reduced to a mere whisper.

“Glad that’s over!” Jane’s voice came in clear to them all. “My teeth were rattling!” She clutched her jaw.

“I’m surprised the whole house hasn’t gone down!” Frank said with the hair on his back relaxing, Cork’s house was shaking from the sound.

“All right, then!” Mrs. Macabre cried out with her broom held firm. “We’ve got a job to do!” She marched off the side of the porch and to the back of the house where the banshees were headed towards.

When they all arrived they were standing in a garden filled with dead grass and rotting vegetables, a forest was just several feet ahead. A poorly established grave marked MA sat in the middle of the garden. As the banshees continued to cry out, the

cabbages and other plants began to wilt and the boughs of the trees drooped down with melancholy.

“*Stop!*” Mrs. Macabre yelled to the women, thrusting a shaker of salt towards them.

“WhO DaReS To InTeRfErE WiTh ThE BuSinLuSs Of ThE BaNsHeEs?” The leader of them said in a horrible, trembling voice that, were they not wearing earmuffs, all of their blood would have frozen solid in their veins.

“It is I!” Retorted the witch. “Mrs. Lenore Macabre! Me and my compatriots have been hired to demand that you flee from this property immediately!”

“We ArE ThE MoThErS Of MeLaNChOIY!” One of them cried.

“ThE GuArDiAnS Of GrIeF!” Another one frowned.

“We WaIL FoR ThE DeAd WhEn ThE LiViNg HaVe No WoRdS To Be FoUnD!” Said the leader.

“Be that as it may, the bereaved wishes no help from you. If you would like my personal opinion, he has found plenty of words, all of them vulgar,” Mrs. Macabre could not hide the small smile on her lips.

“WhAt AuThOrITy Do YoU HaVe OvEr Us, WiTcH?” One of them retorted, eyes blazing.

“Because I’ve had my fair share of grief in my time and I know what it looks like on others.”

“ThEn WhY DiD We NoT WaIL FoR YoU?” The leader grinned.

“Because my grief was stronger than any power you hold.”

The banshees stared at her with silent shock. Even the others looked at one another, except for Mrs. Mirth, who gently held her wife’s hand.

“EXPLAiN!” One of the banshees screamed.

“The details are irrelevant,” Mrs. Macabre said. “What matters is that my grief took hold of me so much that it destroyed myself, the person I love the most in this world, and the innocent. My grief even took a life of its own.”

“THE WEpInG WiDoW,” The banshees said in unison, a small shudder ran through them.

“You’ve heard of her, I see.”

“WhO HaS NoT?” The leader said. “A GhOsT So TeRrIbLe In HeR SorRoW ThAt EvEn We FeAr HeR GaZe.”

“Well, then. Now that we all know each other better, let’s make a deal, shall we?”

The banshees briefly huddled together whispering. They parted and turned to them once more. “PrOcEeD.”

As they were talking, Bram caught something at the corner of his eye. He looked into the woods and saw a small speck of blue light hovering between the trees. It did not speak, but somehow he knew that it called to him.

He looked back and saw his friends still talking to the banshees, but something was off. The sound had been completely erased from the scene, as if he was watching a silent movie. The light of the moon felt dim and the only thing that shined was the strange blue specter far away. He took off his earmuffs and followed the beacon.

As Bram grew closer and closer, the trees parted their branches, making way for him. All thoughts began to slowly disappear from his mind as the blue glow called him further into the woods. His eyes grew as wide as they could, to the point where he saw nothing but blue. Images of the sea, a cloud-

less sky, and glittering blue diamonds danced in front of him.
Merging together into one bright blue essence.

The world was blue.

Life was blue.

All that mattered was blue.

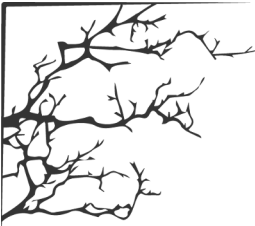
The earmuffs slowly drifted away from his fingertips and
fell onto the forest floor along with everything else.

Drifting. . . .

Drifting. . .

Drifting. . .

Until Bram himself was entirely gone.



3. THE HALLOWBREED



He awoke with a start. It was the same feeling that you get when you are drifting off to sleep, then suddenly you feel like you are falling and you are caught by your bed. Only Bram was not caught by his bed, but the ground. And he was not in his bedroom, but in a corn field. He lifted his head up, surprised that it did not hurt. He got up and looked around.

The sky was the gray overcast of the Hallowland with the moon peaking out from behind the gray as if it was behind a screen, so he was pleased to know that he wasn't back in the Real World. He looked in front of him and behind, seeing that a path had been made out of the field and he followed it.

"Guys!" He called out. No voice replied. There was no sound at all, in fact. Just the soft whisper of a breeze. "Jane! Catie!" He cried again, but only the corn answered in hushed tones. He followed the path left and right, then he was brought to a dead end. He went back and made a left and another left,

until he reached another dead end. It occurred to him that he was not just in a corn field, but in a maze.

“Great,” he sighed. Bram had never been good at puzzles. Whether it be a crossword or even a jigsaw, puzzles or riddles were not his forte. He wished Catie was there with him. Jane would not have been offended if her sister was called the more cerebral of the twins. Where Jane was bookish and emotional, Catie was more observant and pragmatic. This made him miss them even more and he had no other option but to call for help yet again.

“Anybody there!”

The wind continued to blow through the field and he gripped his shoulders, shuddering. He heard something several feet away, a rustling in the corn. But this sound was not caused by the wind, something else was in the field with him after all.

“Hello?” He asked the patch of stalks, feeling slightly embarrassed by such a thing. “Can you help me?” He inched closer to it, not sure if it was a person or an animal causing the sound. Without warning, his answer leapt out of the stalks and onto him.

Bram hit the ground with a thud and yelled out as the thing stared at him. It had a head like a grasshopper and the body of a child. The thing sprung back off of him and Bram quickly got to his feet, ready for anything. He realized that the bug head on the creature was simply a plastic mask tied with string to the back of the boy’s hair. He appeared to be around his height and wore overalls and underclothes that reminded Bram of a photograph of a family he saw during the Dust Bowl in history class.

“Hey- hi,” Bram coughed the words out from shock. “Can you help me?” The grasshopper-boy continued to look at him, sitting down on the ground with his arms and feet poised like the insect mask that he wore. The head tilted sideways.

“I don’t know where I am and I need-“ but before Bram could finish, the boy hopped off to the side and into the corn field. Bram ran after him.

“Wait!” He called after him. “I just want to talk to you!” As he ran through the field, stalks whacked him left and right in the face. He lost all sense of direction. He did not know where in the field he was going and was certain that he was more lost than ever. For the first time, he heard a cry from above and looked up to see two children flying his way.

They were a boy and a girl, related perhaps, dressed in jeans and T-shirts. Their wings were black scalloped capes that they wore around their necks, which was appropriate on account of the plastic bat masks that hid their faces. They swooped down and picked him up.

“Well, well, well!” Said the brother. “Look what the corn brought us!”

“Is it harvest season already?” The sister asked him with the same mocking tone as her sibling.

“Must be! Hail to the Pumpkin God!”

“Hail to the Pumpkin God!” The sister screeched with laughter and her brother joined in, making them sound like screaming bats.

“Let me go!” Bram thrashed around, having no clue what the two were talking about.

“You hear that, sis?” The brother asked. “He said we should let him go!”

“Suit yourself!” The sister said and they both let Bram loose from their grip. He fell through the air and their laughter followed him.

He landed in the field, thankful that the stalks broke his fall. He rolled over onto a path, breathing heavily. He looked up and saw the bat siblings making their way down next to him and was soon joined by the grasshopper boy along with some others.

There were five of them in total. Each wearing various clothes from various time periods along with different plastic masks. A bug, bats, a ghoul, and a devil loomed closer to him. Exhausted from the strange events that had just unfolded, Bram was too weak to run, he could only crawl away at a snail's pace.

“Stop,” a voice said from behind the kids. The group looked behind them and immediately parted as if they were the Red Sea. Their Moses made his way down the path. He was dressed in dark denim jeans and a jacket wearing a white T-shirt. Worn out Converse collected dust as he strutted towards Bram with a casual coolness that made him one with the breeze. His jet black hair was slicked back and matched the cat mask that he wore. Once he reached Bram, he pulled out a switch blade knife and flicked it open. He bent over him. Bram closed his eyes as the silver steel gently touched his neck.

“Trick or treat?” The Black Cat asked him.

“Wh-what?” Bram asked, opening his eyes, confused.

“Trick. Or. Treat?” The boy asked again with diction as sharp as his knife.

“Uh. . . Treat?” Bram mumbled, hoping it was the right answer.

The boy pocketed the knife and stood up. "Treat," he said, holding out his hand. Bram reluctantly took it and was pulled up by the boy. "Sorry about that. Security, you know?"

"Sure," he said, getting his senses back. "I'm Bram."

"My name is Cat," the boy said, taking off his mask. Bram nearly had the wind knocked out of him again. In front of him was the most handsome boy he had ever seen. He appeared to be a couple of years older than Bram, but he had an aura about him that suggested a life beyond his years. His eyes were amber colored and were as sleek and confident as his walk. This boy had a sense of mystery about him that Bram found irresistible.

"This is Bug," Cat continued, he pointed towards the boy with the grasshopper mask. He took his mask off to reveal a blonde haired freckled face. He gave a friendly chirp.

"The twins, Bat Boy and Bat Girl," the siblings removed their masks and smiled at him with naughty grins. Their black hair reminded Bram of the Gracey sisters.

"Ghoul," a girl removed her mask. Bram thought she might play softball, judging from her height and stature.

"And, finally, Devil," Another girl took off her red mask and Bram saw her equally red pigtails. She smiled, her teeth shining with braces.

"We are the Hallowbreed," Cat ended the introduction. "We're the first Trick-Or-Treaters."

"Cool!" Bram said a little too loudly, unable to contain his enthusiasm. "Where are we?" His voice grew softer from embarrassment and compensation.

"Follow us," Cat cocked his head with a smirk. The Hallowbreed went down the path and Bram followed. "So, are you from the Other World, Bram?"

“The Other World?” He asked, the hair on his neck bristling at Cat’s voice using his name.

“Yeah, the one that we’re from.”

“Parts of us, anyways,” Bat Boy said and a chuckle ran through the Hallowbreed like the wind through the field.

“Oh, uh. . . yeah. I am,” Bram said with a nervous laugh. “Did you make this?”

“The cornfield? Sure did. We’ve been here a *long* time now.”

“Plenty of time to grow corn,” Devil said and another chuckle ran through the group.

“I know we’re in the Hallowland,” Bram said, still not understanding what was so funny. “But *where* in the Hallowland are we exactly?”

“Here,” Cat said, reaching the end of the field along with the rest of the Breed. “The Autumn Forest.”

Bram was at first alarmed by the woods in front of him, thinking that the trees were ablaze with fire. But after several moments, he understood that the trees weren’t burning, they were *glowing*. Every leaf on every tree was vibrating with a red-orange light that looked like autumn trees in the Real World, but heightened in only the way magic could. He breathed in the air, tasting the pumpkin spice in it. The breeze continued to blow gently, beckoning him to come closer, to have the forest wrap its arms around him so that he could be cozy and warm in its gentle embrace. The woods lived up to their namesake. This forest was not like autumn, it was the season itself.

“Pretty cool, huh?” Cat asked him as they walked through the forest, admiring Bram’s awe and wonder.

“Yeah. . . I wish my friends could see this,” Bram said, thinking of the Gracey twins. He made a mental note to ask Mrs. Macabre if she had visited.

Cat scoffed. “Who needs friends when you have *us*?”

“Well, I just met you. I wouldn’t really call you friends.”

“Why else would He send you here?” Devil asked.

“Who?”

“The Pumpkin God, of course!” Devil rolled her eyes.

“I don’t understand what you’re talking-“ He froze, stopping along with the rest of the group. In front of them was an enormous jack-o-lantern. Cracked, rotting, and covered with vines, it grinned back at them in rigor mortis. He could just barely make out the candle inside of it. In front of the pumpkin was an ancient stone table covered in runes.

“This,” Cat said, gesturing to the jack-o-lantern with reverence. “Is our alter to Samhain, the Pumpkin God.”

“Praise be to Him,” the Breed said in unison.

Bram thought for a moment and realized what Cat had meant. He had always seen the word written down, but never spoken aloud. *SOW-in*. It was the name of the old Celtic festival celebrated at the beginning of November to mark the end of the harvest season. “Halloween,” he whispered with delight. “Your god is the god of Halloween.”

“He has many jobs and many titles, but that is one of them, yes,” Cat continued. “He birthed each and every one of us. Only granting such a gift when the full moon glows orange.” He pointed to the moon in the sky, Bram supposed that meant the Hallowland equivalent of October 31st.

“And you think that’s why I ended up here? To become one of you?”

“Why else would you be here?” Bat Girl said.

“I wasn’t sent here, I just followed a blue light and-“

“It doesn’t matter *how* you got here. All that matters is *why* you are here,” Cat waved his hand, casting Bram’s words away like smoke.

Bram took a step back. He was unable to grapple with all that had happened to him, what was being asked of him, and where the Gracey twins and the others were. “This. . . .this is all so sudden. I really want to see my old friends again. . . I don’t think I can decide on anything right now.” He added sheepishly, not knowing how to say what he felt.

“Sure,” Cat shrugged. “As long as you decide between now and the end of the week when the eclipse occurs, you can take as much time as you need. In the meantime, let me show you where you’ll be staying.” He sauntered off and the rest of them followed their leader. As Bram walked by the alter, he wondered what Jack would have thought of it.

They soon reached a barn, and the Breed opened the large wooden doors that moaned like ghosts. Bram and the others walked in and he was taken by just how much was in the place. Cots lined the walls of the barn on both the first and second floors, some of them clearly occupied by the current Breed, others left abandoned to gather dust and cobwebs. Rubber bats, skeleton streamers, and orange lights flickered on strings. A large wooden table was placed in the middle of the barn decorated with plates, bowls, and cutlery painted purple, black, and white. It was if the barn had been set up for a Halloween party and they were waiting just for him.

“Make yourself at home,” Cat said, placing a hand on Bram’s shoulder, his yellow eyes sparkling. Though he had his reservations, Bram did his best to do just that.



4. TEA LEAVES



By the time they noticed that Bram was missing, it was too late. Now that they had resolved the issues with the banshees—the hobgoblin had agreed to them wailing only six out of the thirteen months of the year—finding Bram became the most important of tasks. While the hobgoblin only gave them a gruff “not my problem,” and a slam of the front door, the banshees were kind enough to help them look through the forest. The group called his name over and over, but to no avail. Mrs. Mirth found his pair of earmuffs that he had dropped.

“Where could he be?” Jane asked.

“We should have paid more attention,” Catie lamented.

“We may have lost him for now, but blaming ourselves will guarantee we’ll never find him, girls,” Mrs. Macabre said reassuringly, but the twins detected a faint quivering in her voice.

“ThErE ArE WiLl O’ wIsPs In ThEsE WoOdS,” one of the banshees said.

“What are those?” Jane asked.

“They’re living lights that lure travelers and transport them where ever they wish,” Mrs. Macabre sighed. “Mischievous little creatures.”

“Can’t we just talk to them?” Catie asked. “Ask them where they took him?”

“Unfortunately not, Catherine. They have no language, or at least, any that we can understand. Even if we could converse with them, we would be pulled in by their magic. Speaking of, I think I’ve found a solution. Follow me.” She went straight to the manor and our friends followed her.

“I hope he’s okay,” Jane whispered to her sister.

“Me too. Usually we’re the ones that need to be rescued. Never knew what it felt like when the shoe was on the other foot,” Catie met Jane’s eyes and they instinctively knew that they both shared the same thought. Even in the darkest moments of their previous adventures, the twins deep down knew that the other had their back. Growing up with a sibling, especially one that looks nearly identical to you, comes with a certain safety net in your mind. A sort of rope that you have with another as reassurance that they will always be there for you and you for them.

But perhaps you, like Bram, do not have a sibling. While your parents and friends are there for support, there’s always a lingering sense that you only have yourself to guide you through the woods of the world. That is what concerned the twins at that moment. The idea that their only friend from the Real World was lost somewhere alien and had no mental rope to hold on to. He was not only lost in the Hallowland but lost in himself.

They reached the kitchen and Mrs. Macabre was rummaging through cupboards left and right with Mrs. Mirth helping her.

“What are you two lookin’ for?” Frank asked.

“Tea!” Mrs. Mirth said as she threw boxes over her shoulder.

“But you have plenty of tea,” Arachne said, catching a box of bog water tea with her webbing.

“No, we need *divination* tea!” Mrs. Macabre called back. The group looked at each other confused. “A-ha!” The witch cried holding an old metal tin. She blew the dust off the lid.

“What’s the difference between that and regular tea?” Jane coughed along with the rest of them as the dust hung in the air like ghostly flies.

“What’s the *difference*?” Mrs. Macabre sat down at the kitchen table with the tin, shaking her head in confusion. “This tea allows us to look into the future, that’s the difference, my dear. The things they don’t teach you in your world!”

“But we don’t need to tell the future. We just need to find out where Bram is,” Catie said.

“Not if we ask the tea the right question!” Mrs. Mirth smiled as she handed her wife a teacup from a cupboard. “We don’t need to find out where he is, but where we’re *going*.”

“Thank you, darling,” Mrs. Macabre took the cup from her and set in front of the tin. “Now, it’s been a tick since I’ve done this, but I’m sure I can manage.” She shook her hands for a moment and then removed the top of the tin. In the box were a number of small linen bags. Mrs. Macabre carefully lifted one of them and opened it. Even more gently, she turned the bag over into the cup and what appeared to be leaves that had been

burnt black by a fire came tumbling out of the bag and into the cup.

“That’s it?” Frank asked, unimpressed.

“Ah-ah!” Mrs. Macabre wagged a finger to him. “I must need absolute silence while I concentrate. Could you hand me a spoon, love?” She opened her hand towards Mrs. Mirth.

“Oh, of course!” She said, trying to contain her excitement. She opened a drawer and gave her a teaspoon.

Mrs. Macabre set the teaspoon next to the cup and closed her eyes. She took a deep breath and let it out. She raised the teaspoon in the air and, using it as a type of wand, drew the shape of a pentagram above the cup. She began to stir the leaves in the cup, mouthing words that they could not hear.

The lights began to dim and the house trembled. The shadows around them grew branches and tendrils, coming out of the walls, all of them reaching towards the cup. As she stirred, the leaves turned into a bubbling black liquid. Steam began to rise from it as it hissed within the cup. Mrs. Macabre continued to chant something to herself. The Gracey twins were finally able to make out what her lips were forming. It was the question, the right question: *Spirits of the earth, speak through the tea, where should we flee?*

The boards of the manor began to moan and creak with every second. The shadows grew and grew. Jack trembled with fear, keeping a hand over his mouth. Mrs. Macabre stirred faster and faster, her question turning from words to vowels to consonants. The cup whistled like a kettle. The shadows grew darker and darker until all that was left was the small flicker inside Jack’s head. Jane and Catie held their hands tight.

Silence.

The whistle died instantly. Then. . .

FOOSH!

A great burst of orange-red fire came out of the cup, lighting up the kitchen, all of their faces wide with terror like a photograph of flame.

The shadows retreated. The amber glow of the manor's candles returned and everyone breathed a sigh of relief. Most of all Mrs. Macabre, who wiped sweat from her brow, looking as if she had just ran a marathon. She threw the spoon down on the table with a clang of exhaustion.

"Let's just guess next time, shall we?" Jack piped up as he stood up from the fetal position in the corner.

"What do the leaves tell us?" Mrs. Mirth asked, looking over into the cup.

Mrs. Macabre briefly peered into it. Her eyes grew huge.

"What is it?" Jane asked.

"It. . . it *can't* be," Mrs. Macabre whispered. She picked up the cup and looked at it again, just to make sure. She placed it back down again with trembling hands.

The rest of the group quickly gathered around the table and looked into the cup. The leaves had melted into a sort of mud forming a face that they couldn't make out. Then it finally became apparent, it was in the shape of a jack-o-lantern.

"Why, that looks like me!" Jack replied as brightly as the candle in his head.

"No," Mrs. Mirth placed a hand on Mrs. Macabre's shoulder. "I'm afraid it doesn't mean you, dear. It means that Abraham is in the Autumn Forest."

"Have you been there before?" Catie asked.

“Yes. Many times. I hope I’d never go back there again,” Mrs. Macabre said with a thousand yard stare.

“Is it dangerous?” Jane asked, wondering why the two witches were so frightened.

“The forest? No, it’s beautiful. What’s dangerous is who *lives* there,” Mrs. Mirth answered.

“The Hallowbreed,” Mrs. Macabre whispered.

“Who are they?” Frank asked.

“Never mind that now,” Mrs. Macabre came to her senses and stood up from the table, racing to the elevator. “What matters is that we get there by the end of this week.”

“Why?” Catie chased after her along with the rest of them.

“Because if we don’t get there in time for the autumnal eclipse,” Mrs. Macabre said, opening the gate. “Abraham will surely die.”



5. SCARECROW



Unlike the Gracey twins, Bram was a bit more cautious when making new friends. He assumed it was a deficiency that an only child is born with, like a lack of vitamins, given that his only friends were a pair of misfits and monsters from another world. Though the Autumn Forest was indeed beautiful, it still had the wooly, itchy feeling that comes with the Unfamiliar. It was the same feeling that he had when he was much younger and the world thought he was a girl. But as time passed, that feeling ever so slowly began to unravel, with each minute spent with the Hallowbreed, he felt a little bit more like himself again.

The Bat Twins would tease Bram and he would tease them back. Though, deep down, their teasing did give him a small sting of pain as it reminded him of Courtney Clearwater. They would pick him up and up and up, sending him flying way above the forest on their wings of silk. Their laughter and teasing also reminded him of a version of the Gracey sisters. It was like looking at Jane and Catie through a funhouse mirror. They both had that strange almost psychic bond that the twins had, a

bond that he was envious of if he was honest with himself. But these twins had a perpetual playfulness that was lacking in Jane and Catie. Not that they weren't playful, but they had their ups and downs, their fears and anxieties, just like everyone else. But these two never had any shifting moods. Even if they were angry with each other, it was done out of a sense of jokiness. They were like two performers, a comic act that took to the world as their stage.

Bug was the quietest of the group. Though he could only speak in chirps, he taught Bram many things about the natural world. The two of them would hunch low to the ground, so low that they could see every blade of dark grass, every grain of dirt on the ground. They would watch insects of unknown species, to Bram at least, crawl and slither around. He attempted to ask questions, but Bug would quickly place a finger to his lips, as if not to disturb the tiny creatures with their voices. The fun of this game, Bram realized, was that it was not about studying the insects or learning anything about them, it was about *looking*. The very act of looking at nature and letting it be itself was enough enjoyment. No theorizing, no guessing, no creating a story around the grubs. Just watching nature go by was a game of its own.

Devil was the most mischievous one of them all. At first, Bram was not very fond of her. While the others were more welcoming to him, she was less inviting. Not that she was a cold person, he could see a burning glee in her eyes even if she didn't show it. Devil was just harder to grasp than the others. At one moment, she would be inviting him to go on an adventure, then the next she would be asking him why he was following her. She would dance with him around bonfires along with

everyone else and then go to her cot in the barn as if she didn't want any part of it. The strange back and forth confused and annoyed him, but upon asking Cat, the leader just shrugged and said, "that's her for ya." To which Bram let it roll off his shoulders and continue dancing.

Ghoul was the teddy bear. Her heart was as broad and wide as her shoulders. She would greet Bram with an enormous hug, sometimes feeling like she could crush him at any moment, and had a huge smile that showed all her teeth and gums. Her laugh was so loud it rattled your bones.

Once, she challenged Bram to a game of bobbing for apples and when he won, she roared with laughter and smacked him on the back. He smiled and laughed with her trying not to give away the dull pain of a bruise forming on his shoulders.

But Bram's favorite member of the Breed was Cat. His hair was as shinny and slick as black licorice. He cheek bones were as sharp as rock candy. His mouth was a cupid's bow of blood cherry red. His eyes were as sun kissed as lemon drops. He walked with a grace that made time itself bow to his whim. There was no hurry or slowness whenever Cat roamed the Autumn Forest, there was just whenever Cat felt like it. He could run up trees as fast as you could blink. His voice could be as smooth as silk and as menacing as a distant thunderclap. He was quick and still at the same time. Mysterious and friendly. Calm and unpredictable. Strong and gentle. He was, as far as Bram was concerned, the very ideal of a Real Boy.

That night, Bram was wandering through the forest, letting the glow and the heat of the trees warm his skin, when he heard a rustling sound in the cornfield.

“Bug. . ?” He asked, waiting for a reply. Nothing came. Only another gentle rustle of the field.

He briefly thought it was the wind, but quickly came to the conclusion that this was false due to the lack of swaying from the tops of the stalks. The rustling came from below, as if an animal was making its way through. He decided to investigate further, looking behind him for a moment to see if anyone came out from the barn. As he made his way through the corn, the rustling continued to flee from him. He gained speed and so did the alien object. He could make out a form of some sort, but it was still unclear as to what it was.

After what seemed like fifteen minutes, he stumbled upon a scarecrow in the middle of the field. This was unlike his good friend Jack, it was shorter for one thing, and was wearing a farmer’s costume with a burlap sack on its head. It hung in a crucifix form on some wooden planks hastily nailed together.

Bram moved closer to it wondering where it came from. He did not remember seeing it when he arrived the other day, but then again, the field was very large. He looked around for the source of the noise when he thought he saw something move at the corner of his eye. He turned and noticed that the scarecrow had turned its head to look at him, its button eyes sparkling at him like the stars in the sky.

“Hello?” He asked the scarecrow. The thing moved again. It lifted its right arm off the post, then its left. Landing on the ground with surprising agility. The scarecrow then produced a scythe from its back and moved towards him.

“Help!” Bram screamed as he quickly moved backwards, avoiding a swipe from the weapon. He fell to the ground. “*Help!*” He cried louder, hoping that his voice would travel to

the barn, but he heard no rustling in the corn that could save him.

The scarecrow swung its scythe again, missing Bram's hair by an inch. The creature swung it across the ground in a rhythmic pulse.

SHIRK!

SHIRK!

SHIRK!

It cut through the dirt, sending plumes of dust in the air. The sharp thing keeping time with his heartbeat, Bram thought for a moment that this cornfield would be his grave. Then the scarecrow laughed. Not a menacing, evil laugh, but one that was giddy and filled with naughtiness. As if it had just been caught sticking its hands in the cookie jar.

The scarecrow took off its mask to reveal a grinning Cat covered in beads of sweat. "Relax," he said, catching his breath. "I was only joking!"

"You. . . you could have *killed* me!" Bram said as he took Cat's hand, hoping he didn't notice the sweat on his palms.

"Could have, but didn't," Cat grinned at him. He dropped the scythe and helped him wipe off the dirt from Bram's pants.

"You are such a jerk," Bram chuckled, partially from nerves and partially happy to see him.

"Sounds about right," Cat shrugged and pulled a husk off of a stalk. He opened it and on the cob was not yellow corn, but the colorful shade of candy corn. "Want some?" He asked, picking off a piece and eating it.

"Thanks," Bram replied, taking a few and eating a mouthful. He breathed in the air. "This place is full of surprises."

"I want to show you something," Cat said, without a hint of a smile and walked through the field.

Bram followed him and they soon entered a clearing that he hadn't seen before. It was near the very edge of the forest and was dotted with about seven pumpkins. Each glowing with a different face carved into them looking like masks made of glowing light in the dark. They sat on a nearby log and continued to eat the candy corn cob.

"What are all of these?" Bram asked.

"Gravestones," Cat replied. "There were thirteen of us. Clown, Alien, Ghost, all of them just like you. Each one plucked from your world and turned into Hallowbreed by Samhain. Then. . . they were gone. This is our way of remembering them."

"What happened to them?" Bram took the last piece of candy corn, riveted by what he was hearing.

Cat continued to stare at the pumpkins, his eyes reflecting their light. He looked wistful and sad, his brows furrowed in anger, and then they relaxed. Instead of answering Bram's question, he decided to pose one to him. "Did you have friends where you came from, Bram?"

"A couple. They're twins," he was about to add *and a few from here too*, but Cat finally looked at him.

"I didn't," he said, flatly. He gestured to the pumpkin patch. "The ones back at the barn are the only family I have."

"What about your parents?" Bram inched closer to him.

"Never knew them. Went through a few foster families, juvie, then. . ." he made a pop sound and pointed his finger to the ground. "Ended up here."

"How did you get here?"

Cat shrugged. "Don't know. Those bits I just told you are the only things I can remember from my old life. Once you turn Hollowbreed that stuff fades over time."

"That must have been really hard. Losing all your friends."

"Hardest thing anyone can go through," Cat shook his head and sighed. "I was forgotten by everyone back home, then when I finally make some friends, someone snatches them away from me." His voice was steady, but his hands curled into trembling fists.

"I get that," Bram said. "Back home, some people. . . some people treat me like I'm less than a person."

"Ain't that the truth," Cat scoffed.

They both stayed silent, looking at each other. The flames of the pumpkins twinkling on their faces in diamonds of fire. The leaves gently swaying above them in a quiet chorus. Their hands touched on the log.

"Trick or treat?" Cat finally asked in a whisper.

"Um. . ." Bram smiled, thinking what his last answer was to the question and decided to risk the opposite. "Trick."

Cat kissed him quickly on the mouth and smiled. "Treat." Without another word, he jumped up into the tree above them and was gone, leaving Bram feeling warm in the cool night air.



6. AUNTIE SWEET- TOOTH



The house was delicious. Its walls were dark gingerbread, the windowsills lined with red and white peppermint. Its roof was assembled of slanted bars of rich chocolate. The stairs leading to the toffee door was solid cookie dough. The chimney was built of bricks of graham cracker cemented with marshmallow. A small gate of saltwater taffy beckoned them to enter.

“Who lives here?” Bram asked, breathing in the scents of cinnamon and cocoa filling the air from the chimney.

“A mad old witch named Auntie Sweet-Tooth,” Cat replied, crouching behind a tree near Bram along with Bug, each of them held an empty pillowcase.

“Is she the same witch from *Hansel and Gretel*?” Bram peaked from behind his tree at the house, wishing that the Gracey twins were there to see it.

“Hansel and *what*?” Cat shook his head, annoyed. “Look, she’s a witch that grows candy to lure kids as her victims.”

“Then why are we here?” Bram had so many questions buzzing in his head ever since Cat woke him up early that morning. After last night’s surprise kiss, he was willing to wake up at such an early hour without hesitation.

“To rob her candy garden, of course!” Cat held up his pillowcase. “It’s still early enough, she’s probably still asleep.”

The morning air held the chill of the previous night and a faint mist hung between the trees, the leaves glowing like light-houses around them so as not to lead them astray.

“Okay, so what’s the plan, then?”

“Plan?” Cat said with his Cheshire smile. “Plans are for squares.” He sprinted towards the house along with Bug and Bram followed suit.

As they ran behind the house, Bram couldn’t tell if he was excited or scared. He decided that it was a mixture of both, the terror of the unknown and the thrill of what might could be. It had seemed that Cat’s gleeful roguishness had rubbed off on him a bit.

They reached the back and Bram saw the strangest garden he had ever seen. Leaves of peanut-butter brittle were growing like cabbages, candy canes stuck out of the ground like carrots, jawbreakers hung from branches like tomatoes, licorice snaked through the ground in vines of black and red, large pumpkins made of pie sat here and there. All of the candy that had made up the cottage was growing from the soil right before his eyes, their scents nearly blinding him.

“Bram!” Cat called to him. “Snap out of it!”

Bram shook his head, breaking the spell, and opened his pillowcase along with the others. They spent several minutes

plucking the candy from the ground, the sweet perfume filling their noses.

“Have you done this before?” Bram whispered to Cat as he took a gumdrop off of a branch.

“More times than I can count. That old biddy sleeps like the dead. Later, we can hear her cursing us at the barn and we just laugh till we cry!” They both chuckled. Bram smiled as he thought about how hard he would laugh with his newfound friends. The infectious energy igniting the room with electric gaiety.

He moved over to a peppermint plant, its red and white discs practically shimmering like jewels. The smell intoxicating, his mouth watering the more he stared at it. He was almost about to give in and eat the thing right out of the dirt, until a hideous voice cracked through the air.

“There you brats are!” Auntie Sweet-Tooth called from inside the cottage. She sounded like some horrible crow that learned how to talk. Cat and Bug ran out of sight behind the trees. Bram tried to move, but he was glued to the spot.

“Come on, Bram!” Cat cried out to him. “*Run!*”

“I can’t!” Bram yelled back. “I’m stuck!” His feet and one of his hands were sticking to the dirt like it was made of bubble gum. “*Help!*”

The backdoor of the cottage slammed open and out walked a living skeleton. Auntie Sweet-Tooth looked well over a hundred years old. Her skin was so thin and so tight, you could see the outline of all of her bones. Her eyes were lined with dark circles and were bulging with hunger. Her hair clung to her scalp in cobwebs of gray and her nails were as long and sharp as knives.

“There you are my, pretty, pretty, pretty!” She hissed at him, hunching over and limping towards him in stitched up rags. “It appears my new gum soil has done the trick!” She rubbed her hands together with relish.

Bram looked behind him, terrified, but Cat and Bug had hidden from him.

“I was expecting more of you, but no matter. One child will make a hardy breakfast!” She smiled at him with black and yellow cavity filled teeth.

“*Help! Someone! Help!*” He screamed with only the trees to listen. The witch removed a pouch from her rags and reached into it. She took out a handful of sugar and blew it on his face. Bram’s screams died down, his muscles relaxed, and he fell into a deep sleep.



Bram woke up to the sound of a bubbling cauldron. He was in a giant bird cage that hung on the ceiling by a chain. He looked around and saw that the majority of the cottage consisted of an enormous kitchen. Cutlery was thrown all throughout the room, cabinets were open, bowls and plates were stacked high in the air. A furnace droned menacingly in the corner. The wet, stale stench of mildew hung in the air. All the furniture was made from bones. Chairs were assembled from ribcages, tables of pelvises, legs, knee caps, candle sticks of vertebrae. At first he wondered what these things were made out of. Then a more chilling question came to him: *Who* were these things made out of?

“Wakey, wakey, my pretty!” Auntie Sweet-Tooth giggled as she stopped stirring the cauldron with a ladle. She took a sip from it with a smack of her lips. “The stew is just getting warmed up!”

“Please-please don’t eat me!” Bram stammered, trying to look for any way to get out.

“Oh, I’m not going to eat you, my pretty!” Auntie Sweet-Tooth wagged one of her spider-legged fingers at him. “No, no, no! Not YET!” Mania sparkled in her eyes.

“What are you going to do to me? Stuff me with food first?” His brain went back to the old fairy tale where the witch fed the poor Hansel as much as he could eat so that he was ripe for cooking.

“Feed you, yes, my pretty. Feed you, but not with food. With *fear*, I will. Yes, yes, my pretty, fear makes the muscles soft. Despair makes the soul steamy. Hopelessness makes the heart tender! I’ll feed you fear for days and days and days! Until you cannot bear it any longer! Then and only then will you be ready to *fffffeast!*” A thin streak of saliva dripped out of her mouth as she thought about how good he would taste.

She scurried about in the kitchen, muttering nonsense to herself, looking for something. Bram’s eyes wandered as well, looking for anything sharp within reach, but he was too far away. Auntie Sweet-Tooth returned with a box and opened it.

“Let’s seeeeeeee. What can stir the sadness, stir the sadness, yessss, yessss, my pretty,” she mumbled as she rummaged through the box. “A memory of a family heirloom, perhaps?” She

held up a gold wristwatch towards the cage, which garnered no reaction. “NO! NO! NO!” She screamed, furiously,

annoyed. She went through the box again. "The sweet softness of a childhood toy?" She pulled out a small teddy bear with a button eye missing, but Bram merely recoiled from the strangeness of it all. Auntie Sweet-Tooth flung it over her shoulder. She pulled out a baseball, a teacup, bits and bobs from her previous meals.

Bram heard something high-pitched and sharp fall on the floor. He quickly looked down and saw a key! Bright and brass and shining! Perhaps that fit the lock on the cage. He thought and thought, until a vague sense of a plan came to him. Vague was better than none.

"You must be starving," he said after taking a hard swallow.

"Huh?" Auntie Sweet-Tooth's head bolted upright, her eyes moving left and right like a confused animal.

"I said you must be starving. What with all of this stuff lying around. Why not just eat the candy?"

"Candy no good, my pretty! Only fresh child meat will satisfy my stomach!" She cawed at him like a grackle.

"How long has it been since you had. . ." He shuddered at the very thought of it. "Kids to eat?"

"TOO LONG, MY PRETTY! TOO, TOO LONG!" For the first time he saw actual pain and sadness in her face. Nightmares of hunger pangs and dreams of food.

"I can get you all the kids you could want," Bram said slowly.

"How, my pretty? Tell me *how*?" She shook with furious anticipation.

"Have you forgotten already? I'm with the Hallowbreed," he smiled, but a knot was tied in his stomach. He wasn't actually going to give them to her, was he? What was he going to

do with her? He didn't want to kill her, maybe he would tie her up or something? The details didn't matter. What mattered was getting out of that cage.

"Those brats that steal my treats! Yes, yes, my pretty!" She grinned and rubbed a hand to her chin in contemplation.

"I can take you to them!" Bram leaned forward, making the cage sway back and forth. "And you can have not one, but *seven* children to eat!"

Auntie Sweet-Tooth's eyes grew wider and wider with every word. She looked down at the key on the floor and bent down ever so slightly. . .

"Wait," she stood back up and stopped the cage from rocking. "How do I know you aren't lying?" She said with a level of sanity that made Bram nervous at the sudden change.

"You-you think I want to spend the rest of my life with *them*?" He thought quickly. "I've been with those losers for *years*! There's nothing out there for me now!" More sweat formed on his brow, feeling like a tightrope walker fifty feet above the ground.

"HMMMMM," Auntie Sweet-Tooth turned around. "My pretty makes an interesting bargain, yes he does. Either eat one child or let my pretty go and have him lead us to more children. Yesss... . yes. But what if my pretty runs away?" She let out a shrieking laugh, which made the hair on Bram's neck stand on end. "We'll make sure that my pretty does not! If the brat tries to run, we'll eat him right then and there! RAW AND SCREAMING! Yesss, yesss, we'll eat him like the fox that chases after the rabbit. We'll hear him cry and cry as we bite into his flesh. Yes we will, yes will!"

She turned back around, smiling as if he couldn't have possibly heard what she had been saying. Bram did his best to keep his knees from shaking as he thought about what would happen if he tried to escape. His heart banged in his chest as the old witch slowly bent down and got the key. As she stood up, her back popped at least five times. She placed the key into the lock, turned it, and. . .

A windowpane of sugar glass shattered from a rock that had flown in, knocking Auntie Sweet-Tooth in the head and onto the ground, along with the key.

Bram looked out the window and saw the Breed coming to the rescue. Bug hopped through the broken pane. The Bat Twins swooped down onto the roof, breaking apart the chocolate with their teeth. Ghoul ripped the front door off of its hinges and threw it across her shoulder. Devil came skipping in, her pigtails bouncing up and down, with slingshot in hand and a rock in the other, aiming at the witch. Finally, the wonderful Cat waltzed in as if he were taking a stroll in the park.

"Need some help?" He smiled at Bram.

"The key! It's down there!" Bram pointed it on the ground, beaming.

Cat rushed over, about to snatch the key, but the newly awakened Auntie Sweet-Tooth swatted it away. Cat hissed at her and, to Bram's surprise, claws grew from his finger tips and he slashed at the witch's face. Auntie Sweet-Tooth screamed as she covered her now eyeless socket, red dripping down her fingers.

"Take care of her while I help, Bram!" He called to the others as he unlocked the cage, helping Bram out. Although Cat's idea of *taking care of her* was very different from his own.

First, Devil struck the witch again on the forehead, leaving another fresh bruise, causing her to fall again. Bug jumped up and down on the old woman's stomach, her breath coming out in wheezes like old bellows. Ghoul picked her up and tossed her against the wall and some of her bones broke with the sound of cracking eggshells. The Bat Twins grabbed her and flew about the cottage in circles, the rest laughing and cheering for them to fly faster and faster. Auntie Sweet-Tooth's mouth grew into a terrified O as she went around and around like a carousel that had lost control. The Twins dropped her and she crashed onto a counter, causing pots and pans to topple over her.

"Uh. . . guys?" Bram said, unnerved. "Maybe we should stop?"

"Stop?" Cat laughed. "The fun is just getting started!" He pulled out the switchblade from his pocket and flicked it open, moving towards Auntie Sweet-Tooth.

Bram no longer saw an evil witch, what he saw was a sick old woman cowering in the corner of her own home. Her hand holding the wound as her one eye gazed wildly with fear at Cat. As he inched closer and closer, there was nothing she could do. Broken, beaten, and humiliated, she was more like an abused, hungry, animal than a monster from a fairy tale.

"*Wait!*" Bram screamed at him.

"Don't tell me you're getting soft, bud?" Cat turned around, confused. "She was about to *eat you.*"

"Leave. . . leave her alone," Bram pleaded. "She's not worth it," he said, trying to appeal to his ego.

Cat turned back to her and turned his head sideways. "Trick or treat?" He asked her.

“W-w-w-?” Auntie Sweet-Tooth could barely muster a whimper.

“Trick or treat?” He asked again, patiently this time.

“T-t-t-*treat*?” She squeaked.

Cat closed the blade and put it back in his pocket. He held out his hand to her, Bram let out a sigh of relief. Then Cat looked beside him and saw the open oven, the coals crackling on the enormous fire.

“Trick,” he grinned, and grabbed Auntie Sweet-Tooth’s hand. He then thrust her up and threw her in the oven, slamming the metal door closed and locking it. Her screams muffled from the inside.

“*No!*” Bram cried out, but it was drowned out by the cheering of the rest of the Breed. They all ran out as if they were about to get caught.

“Let’s go home!” Cat said to Bram, moving towards the entrance.

“We can’t just let her die!” Bram shoved him.

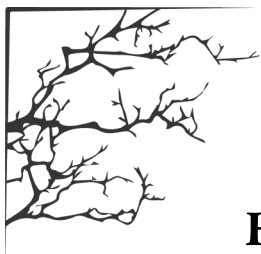
Cat caught his balance. “If we don’t, *you* would be dead,” he stared at him with those piercing yellow eyes, almost nose to nose.

Bram stood just as still, never breaking eye contact. His blood ran as hot as the oven feet away from him, but his gut sank as he thought about how he was going to end up as dinner just moments ago. Not to mention all the children that would have been eaten if Cat hadn’t intervened.

“There’s always another way,” Bram finally said, moving around Cat and leaving the cottage. He thought about what Mrs. Macabre and the others would have done. They would have talked to her, listened to her, tried to work things out. In-

stead of just reacting on an awful, ugly impulse to be cruel to someone who did cruel things.

As he walked back to the barn, he covered his ears as the screams of Auntie Sweet-Tooth flew with the wind and brushed against the leaves of the Autumn Forest.



7. HEADLESS



Jane and Catie did their best not to panic the entire trip. As the manor lumbered on its enormous bird legs to the Autumn Forest, the twins went through every possible scenario that they could think of.

“Maybe he ran away from them!”

“Maybe he’s playing along until we rescue him!”

“Maybe he’s already been rescued!”

Maybe, maybe, maybe began to sound more like *please, please, please* the longer the journey went. A prayer for his safety. Mrs. Macabre had told them that on the eclipse, the Hallow-breed sacrifice a child and their soul is replaced with something else. Something darker, something immortal, something that is both the child they used to be and something that is not. Other than that, their witch friend remained quiet and focused, taking the helm of the house with an obsessive drive that they had rarely seen from her.

The next person that could only give them comfort was Mrs. Mirth, but even she was at a loss for words. “Oh, my dears,” she said holding them in her arms, “I’m afraid Bram

has gotten himself into a horrible situation that only hope can save.”

Hope.

A word that had given them strength and resilience, that had gotten them through their most dangerous adventures and had now been turned into something just out of reach. Hope was like a shadow that kept fading as the sun descended, melting into the rest of the night and becoming just another patch of darkness.

The best they could do now was sit in the kitchen along with the others. Jack leaned up against the refrigerator, one of his legs hammering up and down with nerves. Arachne and Frank sat together at the table along with the twins, each sharing a plate of ghost powder cookies and swamp juice. “Cookies help soothe the soul,” Mrs. Mirth had told them, taking the hot pan out of the oven. In this case, she was right, but only just.

“This reminds me of the time when one of the sword swallows hiccuped and swallowed one of his blades,” Arachne said, speaking of her carnival days. “His neck was ten feet long, but in about a day, it would go down to his stomach if they didn’t pull it out in time.”

“What did you do?” Jane asked, rubbing some of the sugary powder off of her hands.

“What we could do,” she shrugged. “Wait. We were all on pins and needles, I was making webs like crazy. Nervous habit. Anyway, his hiccups came back and it popped out of him. Voice is a little shaky, but he’s back to normal.”

Jane thought of her journey through the Nightmare Jungle and smiled. She had once thought that she was gone for good as well, but everything had turned out all right in the end. Still,

no matter how many therapy sessions she had since then, there was still that small dragon made of fear inside of her waiting to grow up and burn all of her happy thoughts to the ground.

Frank kissed Arachne's cheek, which caused Catie to ask, "Are you. . . are you two *dating*?"

"Yeah?" Frank replied with a cocked eyebrow. "What's it to you?"

"Nothing," Catie held her hands up in defense. "I'm just. . . surprised."

"Surprised *and* happy," Jane added quickly.

"What can I say?" Arachne smiled. "I'm a fool for fur," she scratched Frank's back and he thumped one of his hind legs in approval, making the table shake.

They all laughed for the first time since they went on the road, feeling a weight being lifted. Then the manor's gears and pulleys groaned from way up above in the attic and everything came to a halt.

"Finally," Jane sighed and they all walked out of the kitchen as they heard the motor of the elevator coming down.

"We've gone as far as the manor will take us," Mrs. Macabre said as she slid open the gate. She walked over to the front door and pulled out her broom from the umbrella stand. "Now we must place our fate in much older hands," she opened the front door and our friends stared at what was outside.

At first they had to squint due to the heavy mist that hung in the air, but their eyes quickly adjusted to the gloom of the thick dark trees that hung around them in canopies of twisted branches. The road was still there, but several feet away from the manor stood a structure that reminded the Gracey twins of stone henge. Large slabs of granite stood in circles, moss grow-

ing on all sides of them. Carvings of creatures and old gods were barely visible along the sides of the stones, withered away with time and loneliness.

They followed Mrs. Macabre out of the manor and into the center of the stone circle. There were no birds or insects to be heard. Only the soft sound of their footsteps. Mrs. Macabre held the broom horizontal to her as if she was offering it to the woods. "I call upon the wind and the dark," she recited to the trees. "I call upon the earth and the sky. I lay my weapon to thee," she placed the broom on the ground in front of her. "I call upon the Dullahan to carry us farther than the sea."

All was still. A breeze slowly drifted through the woods, the branches swaying, almost whispering, *yes, we will answer your call*. The sound of pebbles falling on the ground echoed around them. As the sound grew closer, they realized it was not pebbles, but hooves.

Clop. . . .

Clop. . .

Clop. . . .

The slow steady funeral march of the hooves sent shivers down Jane and Catie's spines. The mist parted in front of them and steadily materializing from thin air was a hearse driven by six horses and a headless driver. The carriage was long and would have blended in with the darkness if not for the candles that flickered through gold skulls that were attached to each corner. The wheels were iron and lined with spikes. The horses were massive black stallions that wore leather bridles and their coats were smooth as velvet. The driver himself wore an impeccable cloak of ink around himself and carried a skull under his arm while his gloved hands held the reins, The skull's eye sock-

ets glowed with fire light, black smoke snaking its way out of the sockets.

“You have called upon the Dullahan,” the skull spoke in an accent that the Gracey twins knew as Irish. “What is your purpose?”

“We ask humbly to grant us safe passage to the Autumn Forest,” Mrs. Macabre said, keeping her head down. “A friend is in grave danger.”

“Foolish witch!” The Dullahan’s skull glowed with anger. “What gives you the right to say who is or who is not in grave danger? Only the Dullahan decides who is in most need of my chariot!” The stallions blew steam from their nostrils and the air suddenly grew warmer.

“I lay down my weapon as a sign of my humility,” Mrs. Macabre gestured to her broom.

The Dullahan reached to his belt and pulled out a whip made of a human spine. “A weapon? I see only a broom.”

“I swore an oath many years ago to never kill or intentionally harm a soul. Living or dead.”

The Dullahan let out a cold, raspy laugh that reminded Jane of the Weeping Widow. “Pathetic! Only the weak subscribe to such sentimental philosophy!” He cracked the whip and it rolled like thunder.

“Clearly you have not killed many,” Mrs. Macabre said in a shuddered tone, testing her luck. “Or you would have agreed with me.”

The Dullahan paused, staring at her, trying to figure something out. “Are you. . . . the one they call the Raven Witch?”

“Some have, yes. That was my title once before,” Mrs. Macabre said after a long pause, almost on the verge of tears.

The others looked at one another, confused. Everyone, that is, except for Mrs. Mirth. She stared at her wife with such longing, as if she was trying her best not to run and embrace her.

“Very well,” the Dullahan holstered the whip. “Had I known that you were a master in the art of death, I might have been less. . . *assertive*. You are worthy of my assistance. Forgive me,” He said this with less of an apology than an obligation.

“You are forgiven,” Mrs. Macabre said for the first time lifting her head. She took the broom off of the ground. “Let’s go,” she did not look back at them.

As the others made their way to the back of the carriage, the Gracey twins briefly looked at the skull who continued to stare into space as if they were not there.

“Um. . . Mrs. Macabre?” Jane asked quietly, so that the Dullahan wouldn’t hear her. “What was that all about?”

“Yeah,” Catie joined in. “You were kidding about killing people. . . right?”

Mrs. Macabre exchanged glances with Mrs. Mirth and then sighed. “I suppose it’s about time I tell you the truth about me, girls. I’ll explain inside.”

The Gracey twins looked at the others and each shared the same cold, sinking feeling that you might get when a loved one tells you that they would *like to talk to you about something*. The same feeling you get on the first day of winter or when a dark tornado suddenly blots out the sun. The feeling that somehow the world you thought you were living in was about to change.



8. MASQUERADE



The barn was dressed for the Day Of The Dead. Paper banners of red, orange, and purple adorned the rafters. Candles in crucifix form were clustered all around on alters. Food was prepared on long tables off to the sides. Hundreds of orange flowers decorated everywhere, filling the air with its fresh scents. A mariachi band of skeletons played in the corner. All of Bram's family, living and dead, were chatting and laughing along with the Hallowbreed. The Gracey twins were there along with Mrs. Mirth, Jack, Frank, and Arachne.

Bram looked in the mirror and his eyes stared back at him through a sugar skull mask. He wore a matador costume of scarlet and gold trimming, the cape was relaxed over his shoulder. The music of the band stopped and he turned his head once again.

The attendants of the festival parted ways and standing in the center of the barn was Cat. He wore a mask that was far more decadent than his usual one. It was lined with real fur and only covered the upper half of his face. He wore a beautiful tailed suit with glitter and sequins that sparkled like stars in the

candlelight. He wore a white ruffled shirt that cascaded over his vest in a waterfall of fabric. His hair was smooth, straight back against his scalp. He held out a hand to Bram and smiled at him with dark lipstick.

Bram gently took it. His Abuela handed Cat a lit candle in his free hand. The skeleton musicians began to play a waltz and they both started spinning. The goal was to complete the waltz without having the candle flicker out. They turned and turned, every face smiling at them with such sweetness, such pride. Bram stared into Cat's amber eyes, outlined with black and shadowed with purple and glitter. They floated around the barn, flying through oblivion as the guitar and trumpets played on. The candle dimmed and burned brighter, dimmed and burned brighter, dimmed and burned brighter. Bram was smiling behind his mask, giggling and feeling lighter than air. Their boots were lifting them off of the ground when the music finally stopped.

The candle was still burning.

The entire audience applauded, Bram's parents wiped tears from their eyes. Cat took off his mask with a flourish and smiled at him with diamond white teeth. Bram did the same, his heart still keeping time with the waltz. They grew closer and closer, their lips about to touch. Just one breath away and they would be together. . . .

The barn grew dark. All of the candles were snuffed out. The air was ice cold and still. Standing nearby was a member of the party he hadn't seen before. A tall woman in a dress covered with black feathers. She did not wear a mask, she had the head of a raven and carried a large staff of obsidian.

Bram looked around at the guests, their eyes wide with fear. His Abuela grabbed his arm and whispered in his ear: “Cuidado con el oscuro!” Before he could ask who she was talking about, the stranger pounded her staff on the floor and the candles erupted into a fiery blaze. The flames crackled and leapt all around the barn, smoldering the banners to cinders, wilting the flowers to dust, and breaking the wood to splinters. The entire building came crashing down around him. The woman moved her hand in an arc and the fire cascaded down onto the guests in waves. His family, his friends, the Breed all screamed and writhed as the flames consumed them, burning them to nothing but ash.

He could do nothing but stand and watch. The woman’s tiny black eyes shimmered with horrible satisfaction. Glistening with red-orange light from the fire. He was still holding Cat’s hand when he looked at him.

He was no longer the boy he loved, but a hairy feline humanoid. “Trick or treat?” The beast growled and slashed at his face with razor sharp claws.

Bram woke up gasping for air. He touched his cheek expecting to feel blood, but he only drew back sweat. He looked around, the pale glow of moonlight illuminated the barn, the rest of the Breed slept soundly below him. The creaking of the wood seemed to say *you are safe, it was only a dream*. He fell back on to his bed, letting out a sigh of relief. He rubbed his eyes and thought about how horrible the fire and the screams were and was grateful to be alive.

“*Bram?*” He heard a whisper in the dark. “*Bram?*” It asked again, closer and more panicked.

“Yeah?” He sat up again. “What’s up?” Cat came rushing towards him, his face was covered with tears.

“Can I sleep in your bed?” He asked, terrified, as if something was out to get him. “I had a nightmare.”

“Um. . . sure?” Bram said, getting his senses together. The image of the Cat-beast in his dream flashed in his mind, but he put it away. He scooted over and lifted up the covers.

“Thanks,” Cat said with relief, wiping his face. He put his back towards Bram. They laid there in silence for a few moments. “Can you. . . can you hold me? I’m really scared.”

Bram hesitated for a moment, but something in Cat’s voice ached inside of him. It reminded him of when he used to be scared of thunder when he was little and asked his parents to hold him, to keep him safe, to be there for him. He wrapped his arm around Cat. “I had a bad dream too.” He whispered into his neck.

“What was it about?” Cat whispered back.

“You first,” Bram wanted to know more about Cat than he wanted to know about himself. Especially after today’s incident.

“It. . . it was about Auntie Sweet-Tooth,” Cat said, dipping his toe into vulnerability.

“Did you dream that she came back?”

“No. I just kept seeing that face. She looked really sad and scared. She looked like she didn’t know what was going on. What we were doing there,” he sniffed. “And then she started screaming. I’ve never heard anything like that. So loud and high. Like a little girl or a dying rabbit. She’ll never look at the moon again or brush her teeth or sleep or make candy or-or. . .” He broke into sobs, covering his face with the pillow.

“Shhh,” Bram rubbed his arm. “It’s okay! It’s okay!” He thought, trying to think of what to say. He thought about what Mrs. Macabre would say in a time like this. Something wise and darkly funny. She always did. After a few moments, Cat’s sobs quieted down. “Why did you kill her?” Bram finally asked.

“I don’t know,” Cat wiped his nose. “Because I’m a bad person.”

“You’re not a bad person.”

“You haven’t known me for very long.”

“You’re not a bad person. I know you well enough to know that.” A voice in the back of Bram’s mind whispered: *Do you?*

“That’s nice. You’re really nice,” Cat sniffed again, smiling.

“We all make mistakes. Even big ones.”

“I never thought I’d feel sad for a witch,” Cat chuckled, sounding more like he was talking to himself than Bram.

“Why?”

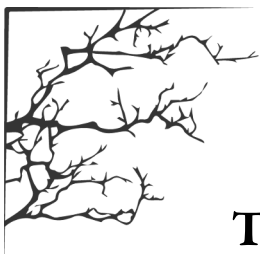
Cat said nothing for several moments. “Can we go to sleep now?”

“Yeah,” Bram agreed to drop the subject. “Good night, Cat.”

“Good night,” Cat mumbled, halfway to dream land.

As his breathing went in time with Cat’s, Bram stayed awake for awhile. He liked the feeling of his black hair tickling his nose. He liked it that Cat was letting him keep his hand around him. He liked that his mouth was so close to the back of Cat’s neck. How out of all the Breed, he chose him- the *New Guy*- to search for comfort in his arms. How he trusted Bram to care about how he felt after a bad dream. When Bram finally drifted off to sleep, he thought about how he’d never felt like this about anyone before.

He called this feeling love.



9. THE RAVEN WITCH



It was the eve of the eclipse. As was tradition, the Breed gathered around to tell each other scary stories. They closed all the doors and drew the curtains of all the barn windows and sat around the long table at the center. Cat produced a device that was a metal cylinder that had shapes cut around it. The leader of the Breed lit a match and opened the lantern to light the small candle inside of it. He then wound a knob on the side of it and the lantern slowly began to turn, casting silhouettes of a crescent moon, a witch in a pointed hat on a broom stick, a dancing skeleton, and a feline with its back arched in fright flickering on to the walls of the barn. It gave the place an eerie resonance that was perfect for tales of terror.

“And once the town had chosen the winner of the lottery. . . *they stoned her to death!*” Devil completed her story with her trademark mischievous smile.

“The Prom Queen killed all of her bullies with her mind!” Ghoul bellowed, stretching her arms out, as if sending telekinetic powers from her brain.

“The little girl let Santa Claus into the house. . . “ Bat Boy began revealing the twist of the story.

“But it was actually the escaped serial killer from the asylum!” His sister finished, making them shriek with delight.

Bug played with his hands, a shadow play about a man who was buried alive in the walls of a wine cellar.

Even Bram told a story, the old legend of El Isla De Las Munecas, an island where villagers hang dolls on trees to appease the spirit of a girl who drowned in the river holding her favorite plaything. At night, you can hear the dolls whispering to you as you walk by.

It was all very fun and chilling, but once it finally came down to Cat’s turn, a somber hush went over the Breed.

“What’s up?” Bram whispered to Devil.

“Shhhh,” she said quickly. “He’s going to tell the story of the Raven Witch.”

Bram abruptly shut up and gazed up at Cat, the candlelight and the shapes of the lantern making him glow.

“Once upon a time,” he began, “there were a group of children that lived in this very forest. They had lived there for many, many years. They were happy with their time alone in the forest. But something was missing. Since all of the children had lived in the forest for so long, they had forgotten what it was like to have a mother. They prayed and prayed to their god to send them a mother, but their prayers always came unanswered. Then, one day, a raven flew into the woods and transformed into a beautiful witch.

Hello, the Raven Witch said. *I have come from miles away to bring joy to children in need!* She gave them treats, she took them flying through the sky on her broom, she even invited them to play in her walking house filled with endless rooms. Just when the children thought all hope was lost, they had finally met the mother they never had. The sky seemed brighter, the air softer, and the world bigger than they could possibly imagine.

But the Raven Witch had to leave eventually. After all, there were other children in need of her magic out there and so, the children of the forest bid her farewell with an ache in their hearts and tears in their eyes.

Life moved on. . .

Season after season. . .

Year after year. . .

Until the Raven Witch returned! But this time, something was wrong with her. The joy that she had brought with her previously had vanished and was replaced by a darkness. Her eyes had turned as black as her heart and her voice was filled with venom. With a swipe of her hand, she destroyed each of the children. As their screams echoed through the forest, some of the children found a hiding place in a field of corn that they had played in for so long. The Raven Witch searched for them, stalking her prey like the monster that she had become. She was almost upon them, until their leader took out his blade and slashed at her. The Raven Witch screamed in pain and flew back from whence she came.

When the children returned, they found the bodies of all of their friends. Killed by the witch's evil magic. They buried them all in an empty place and carved jack-o-lanterns in their

memory. They pleaded with their god, why, oh why, would He allow this to happen? Why would He, the Mightiest of Mighty, let His children die? He spoke to them and said that it was not their business to know such things that were beyond their understanding. But He did promise them that they would return. One day, a child would come to them and that child must be sacrificed as all of them had on the eclipse. That child would be transformed into their kind and, in return, He would resurrect the dead and their grief would end. And so they waited.

And waited. . . .

And waited. . .

Waited until a child would come to set them all free.”

There was no response to his story. Only silence and few tears from the Breed. It was as if every time the story was told, the funeral was relived again. Bram could do nothing but sit in shock. He couldn't believe that Mrs. Macabre could be capable of such awfulness, and yet, here was the story and the suffering around him was evident enough that it was true.

“Do you think I'm that child?” He finally asked, it was the only thing his throat would allow him to say.

“Of course!” Cat responded quietly, passionately. “You are our last hope. Why else would you be sent here?”

It was a strange coincidence to be sure. Not to mention his personal connection to the so-called Raven Witch. But, then again, what is magic if not making the ordinary extraordinary? He didn't know what to think. He knew that to mention Mrs. Macabre would certainly mean that Cat would banish him. He couldn't imagine how painful it would be to feel that love for him suddenly disconnected, like a fish swimming off of a hook just as it was about to be pulled out of the water.

But what would it mean if he became one of the Hallow-breed? He would live forever as the age that he was now, but he could still be killed. He would never see the Gracey twins, Mrs. Macabre, Mrs. Mirth, Frank, Arachne, or Jack Lantern again. He would lose his parents. He would lose the life that he once had.

On the other hand, wasn't that what he always wanted? A new life free from judgement and isolation? Mrs. Macabre and the others could only do so much, after all. With the Breed he would have eternal security. He would never worry about bullies or dirty looks ever again. He would live happily ever after with Car. He would finally be a Real Boy.

"Can I think about it some more?" Bram sighed, shaking his head loose of the thoughts.

"Yes," Cat said, snuffing out the lantern. "But you'll have until tomorrow night to decide."

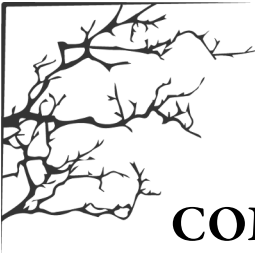
As the Breed packed up the lantern and got ready for bed, Bram felt like he did at school when they timed his tests. He only had a finite window to make such an enormous decision. He could feel every grain of sand in the hourglass drop one by one. Time can pull you out like a wire and make you feel like you're about to snap in two.

He thought about the nightmare. The Raven-Witch burning the barn down. The screaming. Cat slashing at his face. His Abuela whispering to him before her demise:

"Cuidado con el oscuro."

Beware the dark one.

But which person was she talking about? Which one could he trust? He did his best to sleep as the wire of time tightened around his neck like a hangman's rope.



10. CONFESSION BY CANDLELIGHT



Sparks flew as the horses' hooves galloped down the road. Fire breathed from the nostrils of the six stallions, like locomotive engines to their destination. The carriage swayed and rocked violently, as if it would tear away from its wheels at any moment. *Inside* the carriage, however, was a different story.

Its interior was far bigger than its exterior lead on, a fact of magic that the Gracey twins had grown comfortable with during their stays at the manor. It was lined with velvet and draped in satin curtains of violet. Candles hung on the walls, barely reacting to the commotion outside. If you were sitting with our friends now you would even feel comfort by how stable the ride was. Comfort was needed for the gravity of the conversation at hand, after all.

"My dear family," Mrs. Macabre sighed, holding Mrs. Mirth's hand. "I have told you of my greatest regret of being a witch, yes? The moment I could not save a boy from the Real World from dying?"

They all nodded. The Gracey twins had know it ever since their first adventure with her. Jack, Arachne, and Frank had been told in other fireside chats late at night. The type of vulnerable, intimate conversation that only the stars can pull from us.

“I died as well that day, in a sense,” she continued quietly. “I was consumed by grief and shame. It twisted inside my heart like a knife and it spilled out darkness throughout my soul. Not even the soothing words of my beloved could save me,” she briefly glanced at Mrs. Mirth and they both shared a small sad smile. “I went mad. Truly, deeply mad. There was no joy in my life, only sorrow. A raging Shadow cast over me and I went on a rampage, destroying all that I could. It became too much for our Mrs. Mirth and she left me. Understandably so,” her wife kissed her gently on the temple. “My madness only grew from there. I sought to kill, to snuff out any source of happiness that I could find. Deep within me I remembered some of the first children I had ever cared for: The Hallowbreed. The first trick-or-treaters, abandoned children from your world who sacrificed themselves to the god of Halloween in exchange for everlasting life. But that life came with several prices. One was that their souls would be replaced by something more darker and more twisted than they bargained for. The other would be the curse of loneliness. To live forever, but never having to grow into the person that you are meant to become is a horrible fate, indeed. Life is no longer a series of adventures and stories that one lives, but an endless desert of Time.”

The Gracey twins exchanged looks and they silently agreed that yes, that life would be a waking nightmare, even though it did sound fun. They thought of a lot of the vampire movies that

they had seen and how that was the lesson at the end of them. An endless life is no life at all.

“I felt pity for them,” Mrs. Macabre went on. “So I traveled to the Autumn Forest and became their friend. We stayed that way for so long. The Raven Witch, they called me,” she smiled nostalgically. “We had so many adventures together. They were by far the spookiest children I’ve ever met. Next to the two of you, of course,” she added quickly to the twins, giving them a knowing wink. “But I left them in order to help other children. I was a young witch, then, I had recently completed the Witch’s Sabbath, a ritual that one must go through to complete their training, and I was eager to use my magic for good. A bit too eager, perhaps. In my state of blind madness, I returned to them. I’m still unsure why I chose *them* of all the people I’ve met on my travels. Perhaps they reminded me of the child I lost, perhaps some other reason entirely. Grief, if not cared for, can disguise itself as anger. You should have seen their faces. Those smiles and wide-eyed joy that could make bats sing,” she wiped at tears that were forming in her eyes. “Then those faces changed as they noticed that I wasn’t the same person anymore. If you have never seen such a sight I pray that it never happens to any of you. To see people who’ve *trusted* you, people who’ve *loved* you, to see them slowly realize that you want to hurt them. . . it’s simply unbearable,” Mrs. Macabre began to weep, but pulled herself together as Mrs. Mirth placed an arm over her shoulder. “Some of them ran to places I couldn’t find, secret places that only they knew if they were under attack. It’s all a haze, but I remember. . . I remember their screams. My god, the screams. . .

The leader of the Hallowbreed, Black Cat they called him, faced me. He was always the bravest of them. A bit too hot-headed, but loyal to the bone. The Pumpkin God could never take that from him. He would do *anything* for his friends. Black Cat slashed at me with his blade, the pain awakening me suddenly from my self-induced spell. I looked around as if I came from a deep sleep, seeing the horror that I had done. I was once again consumed by grief. Leaving the others to pick up the pieces that I had broken. I had caused too much pain in the world and to myself. I had to do something. There is a mantra that a witch learns during their training: *As within, so without. As above, so below. As the universe, so the soul.* It is to remind us that everything that we do is connected. Every word spoken, every action taken, every thought imagined, has an effect on the world around us. With my madness, I was poisoning the universe. So, I made the decision to exorcise that madness. And exorcise it I did. With all of my strength, I performed a ritual that was very long and very painful. Many have died from it. I barely survived. And what came out of me was that Shadow. But that too had a price. The price of the Weeping Widow.”

“But we defeated the Weeping Widow,” Jack said, remembering with a shudder the horrible ghost being eaten by a giant sea monster.

“You cannot kill something that is not alive, my darling. She is still out there.”

“Why didn’t she attack the Hallowbreed?” Catie asked.

“I have asked myself that same question,” Mrs. Macabre shook her head. “Why hasn’t she come after any of us? Perhaps she’s bidding her time. Forming a plan.”

The Gracey twins looked at each other and silently thought about how they felt about this. To think that Mrs. Macabre could be anything other than kind and good was astounding. But perhaps, that is the problem with meeting someone who has changed. You don't consider that there was a time before you met them. That they might have had practically an entire life before you came along. We only see the butterfly, not the violent process the caterpillar took to become the butterfly.

"Surely we can talk to them," Jane said. "We can get them to understand how it wasn't you- the *real you* I mean- that killed the others."

"What's done is done. The Breed may forget their old lives over time, but they certainly will have not forgotten this."

The carriage came to a sudden halt. The horses neighed and they all slowly made their way outside. They gazed at the glowing red-orange leaves of the trees around them.

"This is as far as I'll take you," the Dullahan's skull said.

"Thank you," Mrs. Macabre bowed to him. "We are eternally grateful for your service."

"You haven't the slightest idea of what eternal means, witch. May the devil have mercy on your soul," the Dullahan slapped the reins and the carriage whipped around so violently, they all had to leap back. It thundered down the road and disappeared into the fog.

"So, what do we do now?" Frank asked.

"We search for the Breed. I have a plan. It involves you, my dear friend," Mrs. Macabre smiled at Jack. They huddled together as they discussed how they were going to save Bram as the evening light died and the trees carried its torch.



11. THE PUMPKIN GOD



The bonfires were lit as the evening light died. The barn had been decorated with freshly carved pumpkins. Meals of giant turkey, chocolates, pies, and candied apples were served all day long. The cacophony of giggles and joy was not unlike waking up on Christmas morning. The tears of the previous night had dried, the sorrows abandoned, today was uninhabitable to grief or bad tidings. For tonight was the day of the eclipse, the night of good fortune, the night the Breed counted on every single year.

The energy of the day had loosened the grip on Bram's soul. He played along in their games and ceremonies. The images of his past and the fears of his future burned away with every lit candle. How could either of those prospects ever compete to the bliss of the present moment? The euphoria of his newfound friends blew over him like an October breeze. What if this lasted forever? What if his life actually got better? What if he was

exactly where he needed to be? These questions allowed him to exhale and time with it.

“So, have you thought about it?” Ghoul asked him at the table for dinner.

“We think you’d make a great addition!” Bat Girl added.

“Speak for yourself,” Bat Boy grumbled, but then gave Bram a knowing wink.

“We’d have so much fun!” Devil flipped her knife in the air and caught it with her teeth.

Bug chirped in agreement.

“Join us! Join us! Join us!” They all pounded on the table.

“Yeah,” Bram smiled. “I think I will!” There was a strange feeling in his chest, as if the answer came out too soon. But he pushed the feeling down as hard as could. Swallowing it like a piece of gristle.

They applauded and whistled. Cat hopped up onto the table and extended his hand to Bram. He took it and he was pulled up onto the table. “We accept him!” The leader cried out, lifting Bram’s arm above his own.

“Gooble, gobble! Gooble, gobble! One us! One of us!” They chanted, continuing to pound on the table like a drum. *“We accept him! We accept him! One of us! One of us!”*

As the beat and chanting went on, Bram’s heart joined in along with the clattering of kitchenware, glasses, and dishes. It felt like a dream. His eyes glistening with excitement as he looked on at his new family. He looked up at Cat’s perfect face with his perfect smile and his perfect hair, thinking about all the adventures that they would have together for lifetime upon lifetime upon lifetime. There would be no growing old together, only staying together. Forever. The way they all beamed

up at him. This, he thought, is what it feels like to be the main character in a story.

The doors of the barn suddenly blew open.

The night breeze drifted in, sending a shiver down everyone's spines. They all looked and saw three figures standing outside. A tall, thin, rake of a man and two small girls. Bram couldn't help but think of the nightmare from the other night and winced.

"Who the hell are you?" Cat said, letting go of Bram's arm and moving down the table. He pulled out the switchblade from his pocket.

"It is I!" The tall figure spoke in a voice Bram recognized. "Your Holiness, your Eternal Father, your God. . . SANDWICH!" Jack Lantern stepped forward into the light with his arms stretched out in a theatrical flourish.

"Samhain!" Catie Gracey followed quickly. "He means Samhain!"

"And we are his companions!" Jane stood next to her sister. "From the Real World!"

"*Jane!*" Bram cried out. "*Catie!*" He couldn't contain himself, running down the table-past Cat- and jumping down. He flung into their arms and squeezed them as tightly as he could.

"We've missed you so much!" Jane whispered in his ear.

"Play along," Catie added into his other ear.

"You know these people?" Cat asked with furrowed brows, pocketing the blade.

"Of course!" Bram let go of the twins and beamed at him. "These are my friends! And. . ." He glanced at Jack, who gave him a slight nod. "This must be Samhain!"

The rest of the Breed looked at one another with confusion. Cat stepped off the table and slowly moved towards the talking scarecrow as if he was going to bite. "Prove it," he said.

There was a flicker in Jack's head that suggested panic, until Catie stepped in front of him. "Jane and I hadn't heard from Bram back in our world. So, we went looking for him."

"*But*, Samhain found us first!" Jane added. "He brought us here, knowing that Bram was with you!" She smiled as convincingly as she could.

"Samhain hasn't shown himself to anyone before," Cat walked around them like a lion stalking its prey. "He's only appeared through the alter outside. And he only speaks to *us*. What makes you two so special?"

"Well, since there hasn't been a new member of the Hallowbreed in a long time, and sensing that Bram was the newest with my, uh, pumpkin-powers, I thought why not bring *two* other members with me?"

Cat stood in silence for a moment with the skepticism of a lawyer examining a witness. "Breed. Huddle," he finally said. He turned around, facing the table and the other members gathered around him, whispering.

As they deliberated, Bram turned back towards the twins and Jack. "How did you get here? Where's Mrs. Macabre and the others?"

"It's a long story," Catie said. "This is a rescue mission. We're a distraction."

"A distraction? From what?" Bram asked. The twins both pointed upwards and he followed their fingers. He nearly gasped as he saw Arachne crawling across the ceiling holding

Frank in her arms. He also saw the figures of Mrs. Macabre and Mrs. Mirth in the skylight who waved at him.

“Look,” Bram turned back to them in a hurry. “There’s something about Mrs. Macabre that you all should know.”

“She told us, already,” Jane said. “It’s not what you think. Or, at least, it’s not *exactly* what you think.”

But before she could continue any further, the Breed were done deliberating. “Okay,” Cat shrugged. “So, you’re him, are you? Tell us about yourself, oh Lord Samhain.”

“About *me*?” Jack asked, a bit shocked. “Well, I uh, I come from far, far away!”

“Go on,” Cat walked towards him, along with the Breed.

“And, I, um. . . most appreciate your faithfulness. . .” The scarecrow continued to ramble made-up declarations of godhood. As he was doing so, Bram and the twins slowly made their way to where Arachne and Frank were crawling their way down.

“What are you doing?” Bram whispered up to them.

“We’re here to save ya from these bozos, kid,” Frank said.

“I don’t think you understand,” Bram said, though deep down it was so good to see them again. “These kids are really cool. I think. . . I think I might actually join them.”

“You *what*?” They all asked in unison, a bit too loudly.

“Shhhh. I’ve spent time with them and I really love it here to be honest. Just wait till you meet Cat over there. He’s really. . .”

“I’m really what?” Cat suddenly appeared next to them, holding Jane with one arm and the switchblade to her neck. “You didn’t tell me you had other friends, Bram. We were just about to have some pumpkin pie too.” He cocked his head and

Bram saw the Breed aiming spears at Jack, who was quivering in the corner.

“Don’t hurt them!” Bram pleaded. “Please!”

“You better get your mitts off of her, bub,” Frank growled. “I bite.” He bared his teeth at him.

“And I sting,” Arachne lifted two of her sharp legs at him.

“And I cut,” Cat said, drawing a drop of blood from Jane’s neck. “Who sent you?”

Catie, who was standing as still as she could, looked up at the skylight where Mrs. Macabre and Mrs. Mirth were still watching, shocked at the scene below.

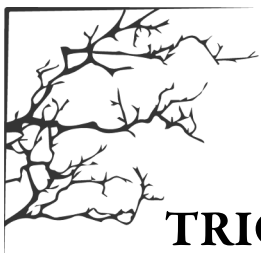
“Well, look who it is, gang!” Cat gave a cold laugh. “It’s our old pal, the Raven Witch! Long time, no see!”

“Let her go, Black Cat,” Mrs. Macabre said in a chilling tone. “We can settle this without bloodshed.”

“But what would be the fun in that? Besides, you arrived just in time. We were about to make our newfound brother here one of us. Isn’t that right, Bram?”

Bram couldn’t speak. His mouth was too dry, his throat was closed. He could only stare at everything in fear and confusion.

“So come outside! The night is young and the moon is on the rise! After all,” Car smiled, “it wouldn’t be Halloween without Mrs. Macabre, now would it?”



12. TRICK OR TREAT



The moon stared in the sky, cataract by the eclipse like an orange-red pupil, watching the ceremony unfold below. It watched as Mrs. Macabre and her friends were escorted out of the barn by the Breed. It watched as they gathered around the alter, the Breed still holding spears towards them. It watched as Cat instructed Bram to lay on the ancient stone table in front of the giant jack-o-lantern. It watched as Cat moved behind the table, getting ready to address his audience and commence with the sacrifice that had been missed for so long. It watched this with cold, unfeeling detachment, waiting for what was to come.

Thunder boomed in the distance, commencing the sacred ceremony.

“My Hallowbreed!” Cat called out to them with open arms, still holding the switchblade in one of his hands. “Tonight is the coming of the autumn eclipse, and with it, we pay our deepest respects to the Almighty Pumpkin God, Samhain!”

“Blessed is His Voice! Blessed is His Will!” The Breed cried back to him.

“For this night and for this night only, we take off our masks to reveal our true selves! The true faces that He has blessed us when we were sacrificed in His name and given our everlasting souls!” Cat’s eyes and smile widened with fierce zealotry. “Masks off, my dear friends!”

Bram lay there confused because he did not see any masks that they were wearing, they had left their plastic ones back in the barn. But his confusion soon evaporated with horrifying clarity. Each of the Breed pulled at their necks and ripped off the skin of their heads. Their faces and hair were gone and underneath stared back the terrible visages of monsters.

Bug’s true face was emerald green with huge fly-like eyes, antenna twitched on top of his head. Tiny mandibles clicked and chirped with pleasure. The Bat-Twins each shared similar faces: caved in noses, leathery dark skin, and long ears. They screeched with laughter. Ghoul’s eyes were misshapen and lumpy, her face a glow-in-the-dark yellow. Devil’s skin was crimson which matched the two sharp horns that stuck out of her forehead. She removed her braced-teeth like dentures and smiled her pearly whites as sharp as knives.

Cat’s was the most shocking of all. The face that looked back at Bram was the same from his nightmare: feline with pitch black fur. White whiskers shined from his nose and his triangular ears moved back and forth. His nails grew into claws.

“Here be the faces He gave us oh, so long ago!” Cat continued his sermon. “The masks of our former selves we wore every Hallow’s Eve! Returning to the world from whence we

came once a year to knock on our neighbors' doors, begging for food! They receiving tricks, we receiving treats!" They all laughed with malicious glee. "We are now myth and legend, for which we are eternally grateful for! Now we gather to sacrifice another to Him so that our brother Bram may know the wonder and power of Samhain! What say ye, my Hallowbreed?"

"We accept him! We accept him!" They chanted.

"Then with the power invested in me, I Black Cat, leader of the Hallowbreed, release Bram from this fleshy prison and grant him the power of the Pumpkin God!" Cat raised the blade over Bram's chest high in the air. As the blade plunged downwards, Bram's eyes shut tight, until-

"Take me!" Mrs. Macabre's voice cut through the night.

Bram opened his eyes and saw the switchblade was only inches away from him.

"What?" Cat growled.

"Take me," she said again. "Not him. I'll be your sacrifice instead."

"Nonsense," Cat hissed. "You are too old to become Hallowbreed."

"That's all well and good, since that is not my intention. I am not sacrificing my soul, but my life."

Silence went through them all. A silence of fear and shock. Cat's ears and nose twitched.

"The only way to get back the Breed whom you killed is by sacrificing him. We've waited so long! It's the only way to get them back! *He* promised!" He pointed to the jack-o-lantern behind him, its face barely visible from the candle within.

"But how long have you waited to kill *me*?" Mrs. Macabre moved forward, keeping an eye on the spears. "How long has

your desire for revenge gone unfulfilled? Surely you've thought about killing me more than you have about bringing your friends back? There will always be children to sacrifice, but only one opportunity to kill your worst enemy in front of the people she loves the most in this world." Tears brimmed in her eyes.

Cat thought about it for a few moments, he shook his head as if he was arguing with himself. "Fine!" He finally spat out. "I accept your offer!"

"But, Cat," Bat Boy said, "It could be years till-?"

"*Silence!*" Cat screamed at him with blood lust. "Get up!" He looked down at Bram.

"I don't understand," Bram whispered in terror. "I thought you-?"

"Get. Up." He spoke with the same cold tone as he did when they first met. Bram was just a stranger to him now and that might have scared him most of all.

As Bram slowly got up from the table and Mrs. Macabre was sharing tearful goodbyes with her family, the pumpkin behind him suddenly illuminated. Fire engulfed it in a blaze, as if you had turned up an oven on high.

"*YOU DARE BREAK THE SACRED OATH!*" A booming voice echoed from within the pumpkin.

The others jumped back in fear while the Breed immediately went down on their knees. "But my Lord," Cat trembled, "this witch is the one who has murdered the others!"

"*YOU THINK I, THE ALMIGHTY PUMPKIN GOD, CARE FOR SUCH TRIVIAL MATTERS?*" Samhain's voice blasted out of the frozen face of the jack-o-lantern. "*THAT IS NOTHING COMPARED TO YOUR CRIME. YOU, WHO BROKE A TRADITION THAT HAS BEEN PASSED*

DOWN FOR CENTURIES. YOU WHO FORFEITS THE SACRED SACRIFICE FOR PETY REVENGE!"

"Have mercy on me, my Lord!" Cat raised his hands in protest. "I only wanted what was best for the Hallowbreed! Please spare us your wrath!"

"SPARE YOU MY WRATH? CERTAINLY. YOU ARE FAR TOO LOW TO EARN SUCH A PRIVILEGE. BUT YOUR DEAD?" Samhain chuckled. In a low, rolling tone. *"YOUR DEAD HAVE SUCH SIGHTS TO SHOW YOU. YOU WANTED THEM BACK? THEN TAKE THEM! TAKE THEM ALL!"*

The ground began to tremble. "Look!" Devil cried out, pointing to the graveyard far away. They all turned and saw that the pumpkins that had served as tombstones were changing. Each one twisting and growing into shapes that were unrecognizable. That is until their horrible clay hardened to reveal that each pumpkin had been turned into their respective Breed members. They all looked like their living selves in the most basic of appearances, save for vines that wrapped around their body and through their skin. Their eyes were rolled over white, no longer themselves, but shells of who they once were. Puppets of the Pumpkin God. All of them lumbering towards the Breed in stiff, jerky movements.

"Get to the cornfield!" Cat commanded, forgetting who was friend and who was foe for the moment. *"Now!"*

They all scattered away into the corn maze, hoping that the night and the stalks would protect them. Bram grabbed the Gracey twins hands and went through the field as softly as they could. Bending the stalks so quietly it sounded as if they were walking through grass.

The trio ended up on a path along with Bug, who chirped nervously, holding his spear.

“Glad to see you too,” Bram whispered, out of breath. The stalks behind Bug stirred and out of them came Alien, a girl wearing a spacesuit, moaned as she got closer to them. They each moved back as fast as they could, Bug hopping, but not fast enough. Alien spewed pumpkin guts out of her mouth. It came out steaming, orange, and gooey, hitting Bug directly in his face. His chirping turned into what insects must sound like when they’re screaming as it burned through his head like acid.

He fell to the ground with a thud.

The Gracey twins and Bram let out a cry and ran in the other direction. As they made their way through the field they heard more screams. Once, they looked up and saw the Bat-Twins flying just above their heads. But pumpkin guts came spewing out of the field like firehoses, hitting their wings and burning them mid-flight, sending them crashing down.

The three of them turned left and right, but they still could not find a way out. Bram cursed himself for not remembering how the maze worked. Devil leapt out of the field crying.

“Please! Please!” She clung to them for dear life. “You’ve got to save me! *Please!*” A Pumpkin-Breed dressed as a clown grabbed her by the leg. The trio held onto her as hard as they could, playing tug of war with the creature. “*Don’t let me go! Don’t let me go! PLEASE!*” But Clown pulled her in with one final tug. They heard her screams and the horrible gurgling sound of the pumpkin guts.

“What are we going to do?” Jane asked as they ran.

“Maybe we can find Cat or Mrs. Macabre or . . .?” But Bram couldn’t think straight. Try as he might, this was all too much

for him to process. From the arrival of his friends, to Cat's cruelty, to whatever this current nightmare was, all he wanted was to go home.

They heard a rustling noise behind them. It grew louder and more furious as it moved closer at a speed faster than any one member of the Pumpkinbreed. It must have been all of them. The trio held each other tight and closed their eyes, preparing for the end.

What came out of the stalks surprised them all. Mrs. Macabre was on her broom along with Mrs. Mirth and the Bat-Twins who were nursing what was left of their tattered wings. "Hop on!" She cried to them.

The broom extended and they each jumped onto it as quickly as they could. They went zooming through the field, ducking so that the stalks wouldn't hit them. They saw Ghoul wrestling with a Pumpkinbreed dressed in a white Ghost sheet with black holes for eyes, dodging the guts with blunt accuracy. Mrs. Macabre grabbed her and threw her behind the Gracey twins. She looked around stunned, but happy to be alive.

Arachne was webbing a Pumpkinbreed dressed as a witch while Frank was biting the creature on its ankles. Once the Pumpkin-Witch was trapped, they joined them as well.

"We coulda found our way out without ya," Frank scoffed, but after receiving a look from Arachne, he sheepishly said, "Thanks."

Jack was being terrorized by a Pumpkin-Bigfoot, both of them running in circles. Mrs. Macabre caught them mid-run and Jack let out an enormous sigh.

"I think I know how to end this," Mrs. Macabre called back to them.

“*How?*” All of them said in unison. Another clap of thunder sounded above, much closer now.

Before Mrs. Macabre could answer, Cat launched at them out of nowhere, sending them off course. They tumbled out of the field a few yards away from the alter, each landing in various directions.

“You think you can redeem yourself for what you did?” Cat said, standing over Mrs. Macabre.

“I just want to help,” Mrs. Macabre choked, catching her breath.

“*LIES!*” Cat gripped Mrs. Macabre by the collar and lifted her up with one hand until they were face to face. “I’ve waited so long to play with *this little* birdie,” he sneered and lifted his other clawed hand towards her.

“Let her speak!” Bat Girl said from feet away.

“Are you serious?” Cat asked, turning towards her. “After all she did to us? If it wasn’t for her, none of this would have happened!”

“She just saved us!” Bat Boy pleaded. “And we’re all about to die, you self-righteous jerk!”

Cat looked around and saw the Pumpkinbreed making their way out of the cornfield. He looked back at Mrs. Macabre who stared at him with sad and terrified eyes. “Do it,” he huffed and got out of the way.

Mrs. Macabre got up from the ground and quickly pointed her broom up to the sky. She closed her eyes and whispered, “May the fire of the sky bless me and fill me. May the fire of the sky bless me and fill me. May the fire of the sky bless me and fill me.” As she repeated her spell over and over again, dark storm clouds began to swirl above her. Thunder boomed and light-

ning ignited, striking the broomstick like a conduit. It went skating down and around her body. She cried out with pain and twisted around, but she firmly got a hold of it as if she were riding a bull. With trembling hands, she pointed the broom towards the giant pumpkin.

“*Get down!*” Mrs. Mirth cried to the others and they each ran several feet away and hit the dirt.

The lightning shot out of the raven skull and struck the pumpkin, shards of orange broke like glass and fire erupted up into the air. A horrible scream emitted from it, the flames forming a gaping maw. The Pumpkinbreed melted into steaming piles of guts. The great fire roared and then was extinguished. A thin trail of smoke was all that was left of Samhain in this form, sending the deity back from whence it came.

“I hate gods.” Arachne said under her breath, getting up from underneath Frank from whom she was shielding.

“Mrs. Macabre!” Jane ran over with Catie in a panic. “Are you all right?”

The witch slowly got up, coughing, regaining her balance. “Yes, I think-I think so. Where’s Abraham?”

“Right here!” He called as he came closer, happy that it was all over.

“You see what she’s done?” Cat yelled at him. “You see what your *friend* brings with her? She kills everything she touches!” He pointed to the destroyed remains of the altar.

“Cat,” Bram sighed. “Come with us. I . . . I love you.”

The feline-boy stared at him, confused, as if he was speaking an unknown language. “Don’t lie to me.”

“I’m not lying to you!” Bram pleaded. “You can let go of all of this! All of that hate and anger that you’ve been hold-

ing on to for so long. You, the Bat-Twins, and Ghoul can come with us and have adventures for as long as you want. You've always wanted your old family back, so why not make a new one? A better one? A family that doesn't depend on sacrifices and moons? A family that can just *be* a family," he held out his hand to him. "Trick or treat?"

Cat looked at his hand for a moment, his ears and nose twitching. He lifted his own hand and hovered it above the open palm, then he slashed it across Bram's cheek.

"Trick," he shuddered with tears streaming down his dark fur.

The others moved closer in protest, but Bram held them back with his free hand. "No," he said holding his bloody cheek. "I think we've done what we can here. . . Let's just go home."

Bat-Girl stepped towards them, but Bat-Boy held her shoulder, giving her a stern look. She stayed, looking down at the ground.

The rain slowly came in drips and then in a flood of weeping, making the glowing leaves of the trees shimmer and flicker.

Cat continued to hurl insults at them as they walked away.

"That's right, leave, you cowards!"

"You were never cool enough to be Breed, anyway!"

"Hope you enjoy being friends with a killer!"

On and on it went, his words grew fainter and fainter until they were indistinguishable from the pouring rain.

Mrs. Macabre summoned the Dullahan and as they were making their way into his carriage, Bram took one final look at the Autumn Forest and silently mourned what was left of the Hallowbreed.



They returned to the manor in silence. Once they had all dried off, thanks to the help of the broom, Mrs. Macabre whipped up a homemade remedy using some of Arachne's webbing, wolfsbane, and moon dust to help heal Bram's cuts. As she placed the warm sticky stuff to his cheek, a pain went through his chest like a blade made of ice.

Don't lie to me, Cat had said. He remembered the look in his eyes. That wounded confused look, as if he was hurt by even the *idea* that someone could love him. Not to mention that that someone could be Bram. It occurred to him that it never crossed Cat's mind if he had feelings for him or not. The kiss, the night of sharing secrets, never did he feel the passion and ache for him as Bram did. Cat hadn't been pretending, the dream of romance had been Bram's dream and Bram's alone. He had only been in love with thin air. This hurt more than the claw to the face. It filled up inside of him and he burst into tears.

"What's wrong, my darling?" Mrs. Macabre asked, placing a hand on his shoulder. The others gathered around the kitchen table where they were sitting. "Am I hurting you?"

"I just- don't- understand," Bram wept. "I keep trying and trying, but-but nothing I do ever makes a difference! They tell me to be myself, but whenever I *am* myself, everything just falls apart! All I want is to be loved by someone else. All I want is to be who I am without worrying about *who* I am. Everyone is enough. You, Mrs. Mirth, Jane, Catie, even some of the not so

good people we've met- they're enough. They get their happy ending. . . Why don't I get a happy ending too?"

They all sat in quiet sadness as Bram continued to shudder as he cried.

"Let me tell you one thing that I've learned, Abraham," Mrs. Macabre said softly. "I don't believe in happy endings."

"What do you mean?" He sniffed.

"I mean that endings don't exist. Not real, absolute endings, anyways," she sighed and continued. "When I. . . when I did those things to the Hallowbreed all those years ago, I thought that was the end of me. There was no returning to the person that I once was. Which was true. But that version of myself didn't end. She's still haunting me as the Weeping Widow, she's still existing. I thought that removing her from myself would finally be rid of everything that was hurting me. But the scariest part of it was that I kept on living. Day turned into night, rain came and went, life continued with or without that version of myself. And I found new ways of hurting and new ways of loving. There are no endings, there only stories. Stories that evolve with everything that we do. Even death isn't an ending. Our bodies become a part of the earth and our souls go wherever souls go. You are a story, Abraham. Just like everyone else. And every story is different. There is no sense in comparing your story to mine or theirs," she gestured to the others. "We all experience love and loss, but in different ways. Your story will not end. It only goes on. And I promise you it will not only surprise you in the most painful ways, but it will surprise you in the most loving ways you cannot even imagine. Enjoy your story. Live your story. Be your story. Because it's the only

thing that you are. And what you are is, has, and *always will be* enough.”

Bram couldn't articulate all that was running through his mind. The heartache, the joy, the love, the release, the anger, the sadness, the fear, the grief. He could do nothing but embrace her as hard as he could. The others joined in, all holding one another. At that moment, he was certain of one thing, these were the only friends he needed.



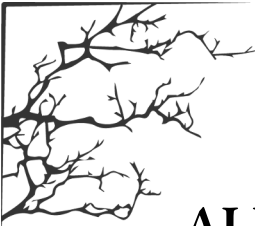
They had crossed the gate once more into the Real World. The Gracey twins hugged Bram and went off to their house. Mrs. Macabre escorted him back to his bedroom window.

The silence of the night wrapped over him like a warm blanket. He was back where he belonged, with all of its fears and joys to explore. With his parents to take care of him and love him, with Courtney's words to burrow under his skin at school, with his spooky family to always be there for him. It was just so perfectly imperfect.

Before Mrs. Macabre flew off, Bram told her, "Happy Halloween, Mrs. Macabre."

The witch smiled at him kindly. "Happy Halloween, Abraham." She kissed him on the top of his head and she was off.

For one brief moment he didn't know if he was dreaming or not. He smiled to himself and he thought that it didn't matter because this moment was enough.



13. ALL HALLOWS' EVE



The remedy and the wound on Bram's cheek had vanished by morning and with it his grief. It was still there to be certain, still the slightest bee sting within his heart, but with it came a peace that only sleep could bring. He now understood that he did not need anyone else to define what a Real Boy was besides himself. With rose-colored glasses, every red flag is the color of romance, so he forgave himself for falling for Black Cat so easily. He was, after all, looking for something that no one else could give him but himself. The love that he desired, the love that he craved from the leader of the Hallowbreed was just a reflection of the love that was inside of himself. He thought that, perhaps, everyone is neither a trick or a treat, but both. There were things to admire about Black Cat, but at the end of the day, he wasn't the right person for him. There were some things that Mrs. Macabre did that were awful, but she dedicated every day of her life to do better. Everyone wears a mask, he just needed to be careful not to confuse a mask for their face.

The best day of the year had arrived.

He had made a costume with the help of his parents, looking nearly identical to the matador costume that he had worn in his dream. He walked out of the house along with his plastic bag for candy and down the street. The sun was setting now, casting a golden glow on the houses as the lights and spooky decorations came on, twinkling on and off in orange, yellow, red, and purple. Kids in costumes were running down the streets shrieking like banshees, cackling like witches, and scheming like devils. He could not help but think of the Autumn Forest, but the October winds gently brushed his shoulders, encouraging him to go on. Helping him to move forward.

Up ahead he spotted the Gracey twins and as they grew closer, he noticed that they were not wearing two costumes this year, but one. They were in an oversized dress that looked like it came from the early 1900's. Their black hair was covered with long wigs and they each wore a feathery boa across their shoulders.

"Who are you supposed to be?" He asked, briefly lifting his sugar skull mask up.

"We're Daisy and Violet Hilton!" Jane smiled, lifting her arms in a theatrical gesture.

"They were conjoined twins a long time ago! They had their own sideshow act!" Catie explained.

"Cool!" Bram put on his mask and they continued to walk down the street. He marveled at the things Jane and Catie thought up. It seemed like he learned some new strange fact from them every day.

"Are you okay?" Jane asked, placing an arm on his shoulder. "We haven't really talked about what happened."

“Yeah,” Bram sighed. “I’m okay. Or, at least, getting better. A lot happened.”

Catie hesitated to speak, but finally decided to do so anyway. “When you told Black Cat that you loved him, did you. . . mean it?”

“I don’t know,” Bram shrugged. “I think so. Or maybe I loved who I wanted him to be. Not who he was.”

“I’m sorry,” they both said in unison.

“Thanks. But I think he just didn’t understand me. He *couldn’t* understand me. I’ve met enough people here to get that sometimes people just will not *get you*. They’re too angry, afraid, or sad about themselves, so why would they understand anyone else? But I’m glad that I have you guys, Mrs. Macabre, and the others back in the Hallowland for that.”

“Us too,” they said again in unison, but this time gave each other a little punch on the shoulder.

Our friends walked up the stairs of the first house and rang the doorbell. “Trick or treat!” They announced as the door opened. Bram smiled underneath his mask as he held out his bag, waiting for whatever came next with open arms.

The Mrs. Macabre Chronicles will continue.

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About the Author

Austin(They/Them) is a writer and practicing witch living in central Texas. They are the author of *The Mrs. Macabre Chronicles*. They are non-binary and have a form of cerebral palsy. They plan on keeping it that way.

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