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THE DEMON IN THE DARKNESS

Gregar Vallen awoke to the smell of burning flesh and knew immediately it was his own.

The searing pain that had shaken him from his slumber now spread across his chest like wildfire. He struggled to move, but the chains attached to his wrists and bolted to the ceiling locked him firmly in place. He was trapped.

Stretching in the darkness, his toes finally found the floor, just enough to alleviate the massive strain tearing at his shoulder blades. Pressure from the dead weight of his own bulky frame. His eyelids married in a paste of sweat and blood, he forced them open just enough to notice the small fire burning in the corner. The flames that lapped at the wall cast a faint light across the room, he knew this place. This was his basement. These were his chains. But tonight it wasn't him doing the torturing. Tonight, he was the tortured.

“It’s funny how humans beg for their lives when faced with pain, isn’t it?” came the raspy voice in the darkness. “But you know this ever so well don’t you, Gregar Vallen of Armathazia. I’m sure many dastardly souls have perished in the very same

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chains that shackle you now.”

Gregar could not make out the face behind the voice, but he had a good idea who it was. Only the strongest of demons would dare attack him on his home turf.

“They are a funny creation, don’t you agree?” continued the stranger. “Full of greed and want. I have studied them for almost sixteen years now and still I do not understand their ways. But you are a different breed, Gregar. You are a watcher. A protector of the innocent. No amount of torture and suffering would break such a warrior as yourself...or would it?”

The creature let out a small cackle as it threw a handful of powder on the fire, lighting the room up tenfold. Gregar could see his captor now, and though he had never cast eyes on him before there was no mistaking his identity. That deathly white face. The miniature top-hat. The stringy white hair. It could be only him...the Varzoll. Gregar tried to hide his fear but his eyes betrayed him. This demon would show him no mercy.

Approaching the fire in the corner, the Varzoll lifted the aspergillum that rested in the melting pot, his grin widening as he surveyed the boiling liquid oozing from the perforated head.

“2162 degrees Celsius,” he smiled. “The boiling point of silver.”

The Varzoll turned with a snarl and flicked it at Gregar, the contents sizzling as they splashed across his shirtless chest. Deathly screams filled the room as the silver seeped through his skin and deep into his veins, burning him from the inside out.

“I know you protect one of those boys, Gregar,” he continued. “Tell me where he is. Tell me and I promise you no more pain.”

“Fuck you,” came the reply. “You’ll never find that boy. Not on my watch.”

“Oh, but you are mistaken, Gregar,” sneered the Varzoll. “Gravely mistaken. For once the clock chimes twelve tomorrow night I will be drawn to him like a moth to the light. I’d just like a head-start on the other ghouls that have joined the hunt.”

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“You’re the only ghoul roaming these lands, demon,” snapped Gregar.

“Oh, I wish that were true my friend, but there are far worse things than me out tonight.”

“Like your boss?” sneered Gregar. He knew that would get a rise from the creature.

The Varzoll smiled as he flicked the aspergillum at Gregar once again. He was closer this time, the liquid that splattered across his head and neck dissolving entire chunks of his face.

“I do not have a boss, Gregar,” said the Varzoll. “I am the builder of armies. I am the destroyer of worlds. I am the darkness that blocks out the light.”

“You’re an on-looker, just like me,” snarled Gregar through gritted teeth as he struggled to stay conscious. “You are a nobody. Your legend is a farce. You are the Varzoll, slave to the Demon Lord and his bastard sons. You are nothing more than an employee of the darkness.”

“I own the darkness,” roared the Varzoll as he lifted the boiling pot and tossed its contents across the room. “Let me show you.”

And as the blistering liquid streamed towards his face, Gregar Vallen closed his eyes and journeyed home.

2



WAKEY WAKEY

Flagstaff, Arizona - Present Day

“Can you feel it, boy? Can you feel it in your bones? I am coming for both of you.”

The boy’s head twitched violently across his pillow as the voice invaded his dreams, his eyelids pulsating wildly as if a tiny drummer boy was beating them from within. He struggled to wake but he could not, for the visions had taken hold once more. In the beginning it was a single whisper, a solitary tone that plagued his unconscious. But soon the voices multiplied, crowding his repose as he struggled for respite. After a while faces emerged from the darkness, old and haggard souls that were not of this world. Visages of pure evil. In their hundreds they clawed at him, grabbed for him as they chanted his name.

Scott, Scott.

“Scott,” came the shout again, only this time it was a familiar voice. “Get out of that goddamn bed, you’re going to be late for school.”

Scott Parker jolted from his slumber like a firecracker had exploded under his ass. His ears rang loud from the roaring in his dreams as he sat up and rubbed his eyes into focus.

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A bike in the corner, sports posters on the walls, a pendulum that lay still on the dresser. He sighed with familiar relief, his joy soon replaced with pain as the blistering headache that always followed his visions took hold.

When they had first begun they brought only light-headedness, but the most recent ones caused so much discomfort he had to squeeze his eyes shut just for relief.

“I’m up, I’m up,” he shouted to his mom as he pulled the quilt back over his head, a futile attempt to avoid the strong morning sun that beamed in through the blinds. Scott hated mornings, especially weekday mornings. They brought with them only one horrible thought. School.

Maybe I’ll just stay here today. Maybe she’ll give up screaming and let me have a school-free birthday.

Wishful thinking on his part, because birthday or not his education always came first. Elizabeth Parker rule number one. But as he lay beneath the sheets daydreaming of a hassle-free morning, a voice not of his mother’s carried inside the room. It was low at first, almost inaudible as he stiffened up to listen clearer. For a second he thought it was the radio before he remembered he had smashed it off the wall months before. Someone was talking, and only when he laid perfectly still could he decipher the words.

“Do not be fooled by faces anem. They bring only death. Seek out your watcher. Tell him they are coming.”

“What the hell?”

Scott pinched the back of his leg, a tell-tale sign he had devised to decipher if he was awake or not. The immediate pain confirmed he most definitely was, closely followed by the panic when the sheets suddenly hardened around his frame. He tried to wriggle free but his attempt to unravel himself was stifled by the bitter cold that slowly climbed from his feet to his mouth. He screamed for his mother but the sound never made it past his lips. He was trapped and helpless, paralyzed with fear as the silhouette of a man formed in the air on the other side of the bedspread.

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The spectre spoke now, its face so close that its chilling breath caressed his frightened, young face.

"Home is the only safe place. Leave here now. They are coming for you."

Again he shouted for his mom as he flailed his fists in the air, his eyes shut tight in a blind panic. Moments later his knuckles connected with something hard, just as the sheets loosened and he scrambled out of bed. When he gathered himself the room had filled with light once more, but more disturbing was the body that lay sprawled across the floor. It was his mother, wincing in agony as she rubbed her shoulder and stared at him in disbelief.

"Look son, I know it's your birthday and you don't want to go to school, but do you really think punching me in your sleep is the best way to go about it?"

"I wasn't sleeping," Scott snapped. "Something was in here."

"How can you tell?" she said sarcastically, "Bloodhounds couldn't find dog food in this junkyard."

"I wasn't sleeping," he snapped again. "How could I have been? I just shouted down to you that I was awake?"

"That was twenty minutes ago," she scowled as she climbed up from the floor and dusted herself off. "You fell back asleep is all. Now hurry up and get dressed. The bus will be here soon, and I have a little surprise for you before you go."

Twenty minutes ago? Surely not. He was confused. Had time stood still?

He wanted to tell her about his dreams, about the voices and the warning, but he knew she'd think he was crazy. Hell, maybe he was, for he was certain other kids his age didn't dream like this. But whatever had spoken to him was now gone and he had more pressing matters to attend to.

Scott hated school, but unlike most kids his age, he actually had good reason. He and his mum had been travelling all over the country for as long as he could remember, and every year was the same old story. Start a different school, make new friends, finally get comfortable and then without warning, leave again.

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He'd gotten so used to the same old routine he'd long since stopped complaining. Elizabeth had promised him that this time would be different, and Arizona would be their home for good. He'd heard it all before.

A handsome kid with a solid build and a mop of dirty fair hair, Scott had all the attributes to be a confident young man, but all the chopping and changing has made him quite shy and withdrawn. Why should he waste time making new friends when he'd be saying goodbye to them after a few short months? This negative energy had long seeped into his personality, his unwillingness to make any sort of contribution, academically or socially, freely on display from day one at each new school. He knew he came across as arrogant and rude, yet he'd given up caring a long time ago. This attitude had gotten him into more fights than he cared to remember, yet there was always someone else to blame. He would often tell himself he was just misunderstood but deep down he knew the ugly truth. Sometimes he was just a real asshole.



The smell of burnt sugar filled the air as Scott dragged his tattered shirt over his head and made his way down the stairs. It was one of those retro t-shirts with Super Mario exploding through a Game Boy screen. At the bottom of the stairs sat an oversized bookcase, unwelcomely positioned in the most peculiar of spaces. On numerous occasions Scott had pleaded to his mother to move it somewhere else, his personal tally of stubbed toes and banged elbows now in the double digits. He had never seen her read a single book from the monstrosity, yet there it was attacking him every single day. But today the bookcase served a very different purpose, a hiding place for Elizabeth as she used its broad timber sides to lay in wait for her birthday boy.

“Surprise,” she yelled as she pivoted around the corner and

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thrust the cake in his face, the shock so severe he almost crapped his pants.

“Ahhh, c’mon,” he yelled as he jumped back in horror before catching a glimpse of the absolute catastrophe nestled in her hands. Blackened at the edges with a happy birthday inscription, the cake looked like it had been baked with a flamethrower rather than an oven. In Elizabeth’s defense, she’d never been much of a cook.

“I got you” she yelled with glee. “And here I was thinking you liked surprises.”

Scott was surprised alright, surprised the fire marshal wasn’t kicking down the doors to check for survivors. His immediate reaction was to get the windows open and let the smoke out, but his mother blocked his path, unperturbed by the cloud of incinerated food that hung in the air behind her.

“The big sixteen. Blow out your candles and make a wish.”

For the first time in a while Scott smiled at his mother, infected by her joy as she presented her burnt offerings. He hadn’t seen her this happy in a long time. For years he lay awake night after night listening to this beautiful woman cry herself to sleep. When he was younger he would go check on her, ask her what was wrong, but she was always composed by the time he got there. *Go back to bed*, she would say, *your ears are playing tricks on you*. He had given up trying to comfort her long ago, instead just listening as she sobbed into her pillow until exhaustion took over and he fell asleep.

A beautiful woman in her mid-thirties, Elizabeth Parker was a mix of elegance and sass which sometimes got lost in the mundane reality of life as a single mother. She had long, curly brown hair and beautiful deep brown eyes, a stunning combination that concealed a harsher reality. Scott’s dad had died when he was just a toddler, and Elizabeth had raised him single-handedly, travelling all over the country as a sales rep whilst juggling full-time motherhood. Even in the toughest of times she made sure Scott was provided for, a thought not lost

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on him in this very moment as he looked upon her smiling face. She had aged a lot in the last few years yet somehow her beauty had remained intact. Scott would often joke that he couldn't decide whether she was cheese or wine. Either way, she took it as a compliment.

Finally he gave into his mother's badgering and blew out his candles with a wish. This year it was a simple one, to make Arizona home for good. He liked it here, the dry heat a welcome ally after last year's harsh winter in Minnesota.

"I can't believe my little boy is becoming a man already," she said as she rubbed his hair and fixed his shirt, which also looked like it was having its sixteenth birthday. Money was definitely tight in the Parker household.

"No cake until lunchtime now," warned Elizabeth as she peaked through the blinds for the bus. "Are you and your friends doing anything after school?"

Scott told her he wasn't sure and that he'd let her know later, but he already knew. He knew she did too. They'd danced this dance before. The only way anyone at school would know it was his birthday was by alerts on social media. Although to get them, you needed to have actual friends first.



The morning bus journey had never been much of a pleasant experience. No matter how many times they moved, Scott's house always seemed to be the last pick up before the onward journey to school. Those four steps onto the packed bus caused him more anxiety than anything else in the entire world. The daily ritual of eyes, thirty sets or more, trained on him like a sniper in war as he stumbled up the aisle in search of an empty seat. More often than not he remained standing, overruled by a backpack or a student with his feet up. Sometimes he felt invisible, a ghost hitching a ride, but the snide remarks and

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muffled whispers reminded him he was right there on show for all to see.

As birthday luck would have it, today's solace was an empty seat behind the driver, a welcome result which avoided the gauntlet that usually lay in wait behind. His ass had barely touched the seat when the judgement squad began, only today something was very different. In days gone by he would hear his name in whispers, usually followed by a giggle or a paper missile to the back of the head. But today the voices were clear, as if the whispers were on a frequency that only he could hear. He focused on the large rearview mirror mounted next to the driver as he scanned the different groups sitting together behind him. Each time his eyes switched to a different group he could hear their conversations clearly, it was live television and his eyes were the remote. His gaze wondered back and forth as he became part of each and every conversation, drinking in the idle chit chat like a seasoned eavesdropper. It was bizarre, but strangely empowering, as he rested his head against the seat and settled in, soaking up the gossip on this very weird morning. Maybe turning sixteen was the start of something new. Maybe today was the day he would finally regain his confidence.



9:14am and still no sign of her. Strange.

The three P's—Punctuality, Presentation, and Passion for your craft—were the standards Mrs. Johnson set for all her students. Each day she would repeat them over and over until it was impossible to forget. She would often chastise the stragglers that arrived late to her Geography class with one of her little bite-sized phrases. Her favourite was definitely *Arrive on time or be last in line*, although, *Dress to impress on your way to success, dress like a slob if you don't want the job* was also pulled out on occasion.

Punctuality indeed, Scott thought to himself as he twirled his

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pencil through his fingers, anxious at his desk at the front of the class as the room behind him began to turn. One voice grew louder with every second that ticked by, a sound that didn't require his new skills to hear. It was Jimmy Quinlan, the round mound of put-downs. A good four inches taller and at least fifteen inches wider than any other student in the year, Quinlan was a formidable presence in the classroom. The self-appointed president of the class clown association, his cohorts laughed at each and every one of his pathetic jokes, their chuckles born out of fear more than comedic appreciation. He was a bully plain and simple, his victims always the same smart kids in the front row.

"Looks like Mrs. Johnson isn't coming today," he began as he patrolled the front of the class room like a drill sergeant. "Which one of you bookworm assholes wants to teach me something new?"

Scott bit down on his pencil as Quinlan rattled off insult after insult, moving through the row until he reached the bi-focaled girl who sat next to him.

"Hey milk jugs, over here."

The girl in question picked a spot on the blackboard and stared like her life depended on it. She wanted no part of what was coming next.

"Hey specks...are you blind and deaf?"

The pencil snapped in half inside Scott's mouth as the girl feigned ignorance and closed her eyes. He promised his mom he would stay out of trouble this year but the jabbering slob that loomed before him was too much to bear. The girl was a trembling wreck.

"Maybe you didn't hear me milk jugs, but..."

"Of course she heard you," interrupted Scott. "Astronauts on the fucking space station heard you. Just leave her alone."

"Leave her alone?"

"Yeah, leave her alone."

"You wanna take her place, new boy?"

"Thought you'd never ask," snapped Scott as he jumped up

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from his desk and squared off with Quinlan. He was definitely the smaller guy, but Scott had something far more important than strength, something the bully lacked when it came to the crunch...guts. Quinlan edged his head forward with a nervous smirk but Scott stood firm and dead-eyed, unfazed and ready to unload as his knuckles cracked with the squeeze of a closed fist. They were almost nose to nose when a figure appeared in the doorway and addressed the class with a sneer.

“Whomever is not in their seats in the next five seconds will find themselves without one for the rest of the day.”

The authoritarian behind the warning entered the class and walked slowly to the blackboard, scanning the room as the kids rushed back to their seats. An older lady with a pointy nose and thick rimmed glasses, her hair was pulled in a bun so tight it stretched her face out like a wax canvas. Not a word was spoken for quite some time as she stood at the head of the class, her scowling demeanour commanding respect as she surveyed the group before her.

“My name is Miss Walnut,” she began, severely overly enunciating the *Miss*. “Mrs. Johnson is otherwise engaged today so I’ll be taking over her lessons. Now I won’t waste time trying to learn all your names and what not, so instead we are going to play a little game. Tear a strip from your notepads and answer the following. You have ten minutes.”

That unmistakable sound of chalk in motion filled the room as she scraped her questions onto the blackboard with some of the worst hand writing Scott had ever seen.

1. *Full name.*
2. *Place and date of birth.*
3. *Names of your parents and siblings.*
4. *Countries and cities you have visited as far back as you can remember.*

“Mrs. Walnut,” said the girl with the glasses next to Scott. “Mrs. Johnson has been teaching us about the ecosystems in...”

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“I don’t remember asking you a question, dear,” interrupted the agitated teacher. “Quiet now and do what I asked. I will not ask again.”

Scott felt something was off from the very second the teacher had entered the room. Every time she walked past his desk his stomach tightened like a wrench. A sinking feeling of dreadful angst. He couldn’t put his finger on it but something strange was definitely unfolding.

“Okay, time is up. You, chatterbox...” Miss Walnut said as she pointed her bony finger at the girl next to Scott. “Collect the papers and bring them to me.”

The pupils sat in eerie silence as the teacher fervently flicked through their work, watching with curious intent as she crumbled sheet after sheet and threw them over her shoulder with a resounding “No.”

What is she looking for?

When she reached the end of the stack only two sheets remained.

“The following students stand up. Jake Roberts and Scott Parker.”

Scott’s legs almost failed him as he rose to meet her gaze, his insides in a tailspin as she addressed him first.

“Parker, it’s your birthday today?”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“And it says here that over the last five years you have lived in Boston, New York, Oklahoma, Atlanta, and Minnesota?”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“Why is it, boy, that you have travelled so much?”

“My mom is a sales rep for a scientific research company, her work takes us all over.”

“And your mom’s name is Elizabeth, correct?”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“Suppose it’s a pretty common name,” she mumbled almost under her breath, but not quite. “They’d be fools to have kept their real names.”

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“Excuse me, Ma’am?”

“Excused,” came the curt reply. “Take a seat.”

Adrenaline filled every extremity as Scott returned to his chair, the shake in his hands all too familiar. It was the same feeling he’d had when he’d squared off with Quinlan just a few minutes earlier. A fight was brewing.

“Mr. Roberts,” she continued as she made her way down through the desks towards to back of the classroom. “It’s also your birthday today. How lovely.”

“I suppose so,” replied Jake as he smirked to Quinlan and the rest of the clowns at the back. “Not really bothered.”

“It says here, Mr. Roberts, that you are a twin. How fascinating. Tell me more about that?”

“Not much to tell,” replied Jake.

“Oh, I think I’ll be the judge of that,” she replied as she stopped at the front of his desk and pushed her hips tight against the jarrah wood. “Speak.”

Scott’s emotions were haywire as he watched Jake’s machismo dwindle right before the old teacher. He couldn’t decide whether he was sick or frightened, but he knew he needed to get out of there as quick as possible.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” said Jake solemnly.

“I didn’t ask if you wanted to talk about it, boy,” scowled the teacher. “Now tell me what happened to your brother?”

“Brother? I didn’t have a brother. I had a sister. Her name was Claire. She drowned in the lake last summer. Is that enough information for you and your shitty game?”

“For now,” nodded the teacher without an inkling of emotion as the bell rang for the next period. Scott scrambled out from under his desk in such a haste that he spilled the contents of his schoolbag all over the floor. As he stooped down between the sea of uncaring legs to gather his stuff, his uncanny hearing from the bus returned. This time it was Miss Walnut, muttering to herself as she gazed out the classroom window.

“He’s here somewhere. I can feel him.”

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“Feel who?” Scott mumbled under his breath.

“What was that, Mr. Parker?” she replied as she turned to face him.

“No-nothing,” replied Scott as he repacked his bag and broke into a jog towards the corridor.

How did she hear me from all the way down the back of the class? How did I hear her for that matter? He had no idea.

As she stood in the empty classroom with her eyes transfixed on the doorway, a huge grin spread across the old teacher’s face as the glint in her eyes flickered red.

Miss Walnut knew exactly how Scott had heard her.