

DYLAN THOS. GOOD



VALHALLA FEROX

VEIN PASSAGES - VOLUME ONE

"VALHALLA FEROX"

Vein Passages: Volume One

A novella by Dylan Thos. Good

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To GKS and JAC, for fighting alongside me

CHAPTER ONE

The Isle of Man is a colony of pride and custom, lying forever shrouded in that comforting shadow between England and Ireland. It is a place of temperate deep-green hills, with less than 100,000 people stretching its mere 30-mile length. From the sunny harbor of Ramsey in the north, to the misty, whitewashed buildings dotting Port Erin at the south, there seemed to exist here a soft serenity that was happily lost on the rest of the world. Secure. Idyllic. Serene. All the descriptive words the island will never again be just 24 hours from now.

Tomorrow is Tynwald Day, the isle's national holiday. The day's parliament meeting could be counted on to be suitably reserved, as it's existed in a nearly-unchanged form since the time of the Vikings. However, there were always a few inhabitants who started celebrating early--those types who'd raise one too many pints the night before to their forthcoming day off work. In the revelry, their skewed senses would never notice one or two friends disappearing into the evening shadows. The smell of blood was simply lost in the pungent haze of cigarettes and firecrackers.

Excited gossip and chatter easily covered the sounds of the interlopers. Shadows descended on those who never got to scream, their vocal cords soon fraying under the edges of heavy, nicked broadswords. Others were never even allowed the chance to breathe as their midsections were gouged and torn open right under their eyes.

Stumbling home, stopping only to piss in the bushes or straighten their woozy path as the headlights of a patrol car drifted by, most all were confident in making it to their beds in one piece. All except for those very first ones taken that night.

With a brief nighttime storm pushing breezes across the island's hushed, stony cottages and shaded summer flowers, no one had any reason to think this year's Tynwald Day would be any different. But as bone-white foam struck the shore and cleansing gusts grew heavy in the midnight dark, there was no doubting that there was something malevolent on its way. Something immense and black that seethed a burning tonic of diseased blood and sharpened vengeance. Something right there underneath their homes, and from which there was no escape.

The overnight storm had kept Christopher Mulley awake far past his bedtime, but as the first rays of dawn strained through the blinds to tickle his face, he was bursting with boundless energy.

He was such a chatterbox at the breakfast table, his parents let him have an early slice of his birthday cake just to try and shut him up for a few minutes. It worked. Christopher quietly delighted in replacing the staid oatmeal taste in his mouth with a thick combination of saccharine and dye. He continued the celebration by pushing a few leftover morsels out of the ridges of his back teeth as he whirled for the front door.

After jumping down the stairs of the front stoop, he stopped for a moment. Finally breaking his gaze from the brand-new bike waiting there on the sidewalk, Christopher couldn't help but enjoy what was around him.

Clouds in the lilting gusts were bloated with feather-like edges, and the translucent rays snuck out to warm his face as he looked up into the endless heavens of powder blue. It was still too early for any of the Tynwald Day clamor, so all that filled Christopher's ears was a shifting, far-off rustle of the waves

coming from down the hill, just out of sight. It was the perfect beginning to his eighth birthday.

"What a *beauuutiful* bicycle!"

Christopher knew the voice. He turned back and saw Mrs. Clague sitting on her porch having a beer for breakfast. She was a sprightly widow who had lived next to the Mulleys for years, and she'd spent every single one of them in varying degrees of inebriation. Though the pitfalls of alcohol abuse were something the youthful Christopher Mulley wasn't yet privy to, Mrs. Clague had, nevertheless, served as his introductory example.

"Thanks, Mrs. Clague!" Christopher beamed.

"You're growing up so fast!" she lamented before letting out a very unladylike ripper of a belch. "My! I beg your pardon!" Showing a modicum of propriety, Mrs. Clague sat down her beer on one of the wood slats that made up the floor of the porch. Judging from the hollow sound it made as it hit the plank, it was almost empty. "Oh, you're going to have such fun! I wish you could stay young forever."

Christopher was caught between embarrassment and discomfort, which was a familiar spot to find yourself when you were dealing with Mrs. Clague. But given the good-natured boy's natural inclination to be respectful, he gave a little laugh. "Mrs. Clague! I can't do that!"

Another familiar voice stopped Christopher as he lifted his leg over the banana seat.

"Sweetheart, don't go too far," Christopher's mother, Linda, called after him from the front window. "Bree and your dad will be heading off to the fair field to see Gunnar soon."

"Promise!" he called back as he finally slid onto the seat of his bicycle. The scents of slickened, black vinyl and curved chrome tingled his nose and lips. Those serrated steel teeth on the pedal's edges sank their bite into the tread of Christopher's shoes, helping to keep him safe from all the horrible scenarios his mother could imagine right now--things like oncoming buses, stray pets, and the kamikaze-like vertical dives hidden in a few of the hills closer to the town center.

Linda couldn't help but sigh with an almost imperceptible rush of relief as she watched her son's little fingers tug and twist

comically in getting the shiny orange and red helmet on his head. It didn't quite allay all her fears, though.

"Be careful!" she called after him, her voice cracking.

"I will." Christopher trumped up the confidence in his reply to make his nervous mother feel a bit better. "Be right back!"

The smell of her crisping potatoes drew Linda back to the kitchen. Bree, a decade older than her little brother and twice as sassy, sat in the corner thumbing her smartphone screen as her dad, Ben, clicked aimlessly around the boring holiday offerings on television.

"He put his helmet on?" Bree asked. Like paranoid mother, like paranoid daughter.

"Yeah," Linda nodded as she turned her attention back to the rich, brown sauce just starting to bubble away on the stove top. She was careful not to wipe her hands on her dress.

Ben scoffed over top of his playful smile. "Ah, he doesn't need a helmet! In my day, we never wore helmets!"

Linda's busy hands kept her from scolding her husband directly, so she had to do it back over her shoulder.

"Ben!"

Ben's tone tightened a bit, his voice more a plaintive whine as he volleyed back. "Honey, it's true--you remember!"

"I paid good money for that helmet," Bree muttered. "He had better fuckin' wear it."

Linda's maternal censure slid its way to her daughter.

"Good lord, Bree!"

Bree remained unmoved, crinkling her nose a bit as she looked up from her phone to query her dad's choice of birthday presents.

"Don't you think it's a bit old-fashioned?"

Ben took umbrage at the contempt for one of his most cherished boyhood possessions. "When I was Chris' age, I had a bike just like that!"

"So did Pee-wee Herman," Bree shot back, "that doesn't make it right."

"Linda, will you please muzzle your daughter?"

"Sad. Old-fashioned and sad," Bree continued with a Mona Lisa smile as she tauntingly waved her phone around. "Just like your technology."

"Hey!" Ben jumped from the sofa to rummage through a box atop his messy corner desk. He pulled out the bulky form of a Polaroid camera. "This gives you instantaneous photographs!"

"So does mine," Bree shrugged.

"Right!" Ben defiantly flipped up his flashbar and fumbled for the shutter.

"Oh, let's see how many I can take at the same time," Bree teased as her thumb tapped off a succession of electronic shutter burrs.

"You two!" Linda protested from the kitchen. She flipped a pot holder onto the countertop to cushion her steaming tray of potatoes.

"One picture, dad. One. I took..." Bree checked her smartphone display, "...nine."

"But you can hold this picture in your hand!" Ben squealed.

"Mine, too." Judging from the wonderful smell of browned oil, Bree knew her mother would soon be asking for her help in the kitchen. She relinquished her comfy chair, walking toward her father and his relic. "Let's compare our results, shall we?"

Of course, Ben's picture was still a white flash of spotty nothing.

"Aww," Bree smiled, "you can't see yours yet. Pity, dad." To rub it in, her fingers flashed across the smartphone screen, which featured sharp, repetitive pictures of her dad. Bent over with that Polaroid in front of his face, Bree thought her father looked like some kind of angry, constipated robot.

"Bree Marion Mulley," Linda censured, "quit pissing off your father and come help me with these potatoes!"

Ben clamped the picture up to his shoulder and away from his daughter's smug disapproval. "You heard her--go help your mother!"

Both of them laughed as Bree turned toe for the kitchen. "I'm coming, I'm coming!"

"Now, the gravy will have to go for a while longer," Linda explained, "but let's get the potatoes into some bags for now."

Just as she and Bree were rounding up the chips, a happy Christopher barreled in. A beaming smile was fixed there underneath his whacky, windswept hair.

"So, how was it, daredevil?" Bree asked, trying to tame her brother's hairdo.

"Great! Can't wait to go all over the island!"

Christopher's nervous mother showed up yet again. "Well, I don't know about that!"

"Ma!"

Ben called to his son from the living room. "Hey, birthday boy!"

Christopher turned and was immediately blinded for a split second by the flash of his dad's Polaroid camera. Meanwhile, Linda and Bree were arguing softly in the background about the best way to bag up the potatoes.

"Dad!" Christopher scolded as he wiped his burnt-out eyes before they could focus again. He then noticed the sheet that pushed out of the clumsy, plastic box his dad held with both hands. To the boy, it looked like some kind of miniature computer printer. "What is that?"

"It's a camera from when I was a kid!" Ben explained.

"Really?" Christopher was clearly puzzled.

"Christopher!" Bree called, beginning to snap picture after picture of him with her smartphone. He smiled gleefully as his sister clicked away.

Ben couldn't escape the self-satisfied smile Bree was throwing his way. "You little shit!" he hurled at his daughter from just under his breath.

Turning his attention back to Christopher, Ben lightened his tone and thickened up his sense of wonder. "In just a couple minutes, we'll see the picture of you I just took!"

Ben's efforts were for good effect, as Christopher now found his dad's enthusiasm infectious. "Wow, that's cool!"

Validated, Ben shot a look to his dismissive daughter. "See? 'That's cool.' It's cool, Bree."

With Linda staying behind for now to finish up her holiday cooking, Ben, Bree, and Christopher jumped in the car and headed out to the fair fields to help with some of the preliminary set up. Bree stretched out across the back seat, allowing the birthday boy to ride up front with Ben. She passed the time by picking at a handful of chips she'd pilfered from one of the oven trays, as well as checking her phone for any sign of her new boyfriend.

For the time being, Christopher sat quietly in the passenger's seat as he began to make out his own features in the clearing murk of the Polaroid.

Ben twisted the wheel. The car headed right and rolled down the fringe of town, heading out toward the island's western shores near the town of Peel. "Can you see it yet?"

"Yeah! There's my head!" Christopher laughed.

Ben relished his son's excitement. "Awesome. You can show Gunnar as soon as we get there. The whole thing should be done by then." Ben's eyes drifted up to the rear-view mirror, catching sight of his daughter in the backseat.

"Will you put that thing down for one minute?" Ben chided over his shoulder.

"I'm waiting for a text, dad!"

"Your nose has been in that damn thing all morning," Ben grumbled, jerking the wheel to miss the same pothole that had been there since Chris had been in diapers.

"She's waiting to hear from Jimmy McTavish," Christopher teased.

"You little bastard!" Bree swiped her hand over the passenger side headrest, smacking her brother in the forehead.

"Bree, for Christ's sake!" Ben had to make sure not to lose control of the car as he neared the bend leading to the fair fields. "Stop it!"

"It's true!" Christopher countered, rubbing his forehead.

Ben turned to Christopher with a surreptitious, playful tone.

"Is it true?"

"So what if it is?" Bree mused, half-insulted by all the attention.

"Yeah!" Christopher dished. "He's supposed to be a real snatch hound!"

Both Ben and Bree threw urgent vocal nips Christopher's way, catching him a bit off guard. Eventually, Ben's stern parental curiosity won out over his daughter's umbrage. "Where'd you learn that phrase?"

Christopher couldn't help but giggle. Mercifully, the first sight of the fair fields in the distance--with their bright game booths, stately tents, and manicured greenery--was quick to stifle the chaos inside the Mulley family car.

"Well, don't say that ever again, Chris. I'm serious. At least not in front of your mother."

Out in those Tynwald Hill fair fields, a clutch of handymen was working away to get the final touches taken care of before the crowds would begin to arrive later in the day.

Gunnar Crellin, a burly fellow with a big red mustache, lorded over the team of much-younger workers in his command. Despite the cool nip of the morning air, they all sweated away in stringing up the last of the Tynwald Day tents. Stakes were being hammered deep into the ground, steadying the structures from a series of seaside gusts that twisted and whipped upward from the beach. Even under the chunky clang of the mallets, you could hear the surf pop and wash its way closer to them.

Jimmy McTavish was at the far western edge of the tent, lamenting his undersized mallet. "Fucking hell, Gunnar. We need bigger hammers for this lot."

When Gunnar smiled, it positively ruined his tough veneer. "Only bigger one I got is the furry one between my legs!" A few nearby workers laughed, and even Jimmy couldn't resist a sideways smirk at his boss's banter. "Have Beeman lend you his!"

Jimmy headed towards Beeman, but, after checking that Gunnar and his furry crotch hammer were still busy delegating grunt work to the rest of the crew, he slipped out of sight to catch a smoke.

It was just about then that the Mulley car pulled up through the crunching shale to claim its parking spot. Bree was quick to see him and hastily left behind her brother and father for a shot at teenage romance.

"Wait! You runnin' off already?" Ben shouted after his daughter as an excited Christopher jumped out from his big bucket seat.

Bree looked back, but didn't say anything. Her smile was all the response her father needed.

Christopher flashed a grin up to Ben. "Kids grow up fast, don't they, dad?"

Ben could only shake his head and groan. It wasn't so much that his son was too precocious for his own good, but that his daughter had some teenaged lackey's arm around her neck by the time he realized Christopher was right.

Instead of feeling bad about the passage of time, Ben decided to let the color and beauty of the fair fields light a distracting, yet patriotic, fire in his imagination. "Okay," Ben's story began as they headed toward Gunnar's crew, "so there they were. The Vikings had been driven back."

"Oh, you tell this story every year, dad!"

"There they all stood. Aside the flames of torches, and all around the smell of brimstone!--"

At least Christopher's next interruption posed an honest query.

"What's brimstone?"

"Uh, it's sulfur. You know, that stuff you smell when you light a match."

"Eww."

"Suddenly, there was a great crack of thunder!"

Christopher smacked his hands together at the perfect time. The audience participation made Ben smile, so he decided to amp up the melodrama as he continued.

"The Vikings were driven back to the edge of the sea, the General's sword snapping under the strength of your great granddad's!"

Christopher sometimes couldn't remember all the exact details of his own heritage. Even after hearing the same story on the same day on the same walk out to the same place Gunnar worked every year of his young life. "The General was the only one with a sword, right?"

"The only one with a jeweled sword!" Ben exclaimed, his hands sliding and pulling to give a layman's approximation of its size and strength. "Huge! With dozens of jewels all over the handle! And then, all the Norsemen's axes and spears and shields were no

match for the Scottish Army. The Vikings had been had! And good old King Alexander was able--"

"King Alexander the Third."

"Very good! And King Alexander the Third took possession of our wee island, and it was on its way to becoming the beautiful home we know it today."

"Oh no!" Gunnar cried, "it's the terrible Mulley twosome!"

At first sight, Christopher yelled out Gunnar's name and ran over to him, hoisted up by his neighbor's thick pair of damp and sweaty arms.

"So, this is why we haven't seen you for a month?" Ben smiled as he took in the ambience.

Gunnar shifted Christopher to his wide right shoulder in order to give Ben a chokehold-type squeeze. "You know me, I'm a natural at ordering people 'round!" Gunnar beamed. "Let me guess, Linda's still making her potatoes."

Ben couldn't help but laugh at how predictable the Mulley family had gotten. "Actually, she's almost done, but that's the reward for getting up at dawn." Ben mused a bit more to himself, wondering if 'predictable' perhaps could pass for 'stable'.

"Know what you mean," Gunnar grumped. "I've been up since four to get this done. But, it's just one day a year." A red, fuzzy mustache bristled in front of Christopher's nose as the big man smiled again. Gunnar was always full of smiles. "One day a year...just like your birthday!"

"Yeah!" Christopher cheered.

"See, he didn't forget!" Ben commended.

"Course not!" Gunnar's voice dropped low and husky. "And that's why I want to show you something special!" he whispered.

Christopher looked at his dad, who looked just as inquisitive and surprised as he was.

"Come with me!" Gunnar commanded, whisking the boy off to one of the nearby tents. As they got closer, Christopher's eyes adjusted to the shade and made out the shape of a large trunk.

"Know what that is?" Gunnar questioned, playfully.

Christopher's eyes widened. "It looks like a treasure chest."

"That's because it is!" Gunnar mused loudly as his hand raked back the lid. Inside was a bevy of fireworks.

"Look at that!" Ben cried, suddenly just as interested as his son.

Gunnar took a single prize from his trusty treasure chest and clamped the lid back down. His gravelly whisper came back once more. "Follow me."

The three wound around the back of the tents, finding a small clearing in the field. Gunnar noticed he hadn't seen Jimmy for at least ten minutes, and Beeman was over there taking yet another smoke break with a crew member named Oliver, who always smelled an odious combination of marijuana and farts.

Nevertheless, whipping them into shape would have to wait for a few minutes.

Gunnar's footing slowed at the edge of the clearing, not far from the toolshed his crew had set up earlier that morning. He unloaded Christopher from his shoulder to a patch of wispy beach reeds before taking a small leather pouch from his pocket. The sound of waves was louder now that they were away from the bustle of the workers.

"You know how you light a firework with no fire?" Gunnar quizzed the young boy, his words dipping and zagging in the sharper bends of the wind.

Christopher couldn't help but shake his head and volley back an empty expression. "How?"

Gunnar pulled a small round piece of glass from the leather pouch. "With this."

Despite his wide, inquisitive eyes, Christopher scrunched up his face and turned back to his father. "What is it, dad?" he squawked with a delightful urgency.

"If I'm not mistaken," Ben started, "it's something called a burning glass!"

"Your dad's right!" Gunnar grunted as his bulky frame overturned a nearby rock to expose its smooth side surface. The small square of fireworks was set down atop it. Christopher blinked, clearing his dry, sticky vision as the crisp, convex lens was brought up to his nose.

"Now, what this does," Gunnar explained, "is take the sunlight and squeeeeeze it all down into a little line of light and heat. So small and so hot, you can light something with it. Just like a match!"

"No way!" Christopher laughed. Despite his ridiculing tone, you could tell there was a part of him that wanted so badly to believe it.

Gunnar turned to Ben. "He get his cynicism from you or Linda?"

"Don't look at me!" Ben snapped back. "I still believe in the tooth fairy!"

Gunnar's hand twisted each of the four fuses of the firework into one. His voice instructed specifically and firmly as his fingers slowly worked away. "You run and stand back with your father when I tell you. Can you do that?"

Christopher nodded, the notion of disobeying the big, red-haired man never once crossing his mind.

Ben stood back as Gunnar slipped the burning glass into Christopher's little hand. It took a few seconds of rocking it back and forth, but Gunnar was able to steady the boy's grip once they caught the light. Soon, the heat began to seep through a white pencil of light, and the fuses shook off their first wisps of smoke.

"Steady." Gunnar instructed. "Steady..."

The fuse sparked, the burning coil eaten quickly as it dropped toward the firework. The boy waited for the instruction.

"Run."

Christopher's feet pounded out the short distance back to where his father stood. He whipped around in the split second before that chunky black block began to shake on the rock's surface. It exploded upwards in a whistling screech of flashing white, gold and blue. The air filled with smoke and brilliance as the firework cluster popped and hissed. It petered out to the sounds

of a few crude cheers from Beeman and Oliver, who were still on their smoke break.

"That's a free sample," Gunnar shouted back to his workers. "No more till tonight, so get your arses back to work."

Beeman and Oliver galloped obediently back over to the unfinished tent. You could hear them grumbling about the whereabouts of Jimmy. The laughs that came afterwards certainly didn't help Ben feel any more at ease.

Christopher ran back up to Gunnar. He held up the burning glass in a way that reflected his disbelief, as if casting a studying eye on it could give him a clearer understanding of what he'd just seen.

"That was so cool!" Christopher panted, the words rushing from the boy as if he'd just gotten the wind knocked out of him.

"See, science is fun sometimes, isn't it?" Ben prompted his son, who willingly smiled in agreement.

Christopher took one more look at the little magic sliver in his hand before offering it back. Gunnar took it, plopped the glass

back into its little leather bag, and handed it back to Christopher, who could barely contain his surprise.

Gunnar's kind and shining eyes creased above his fiery, outsized mustache. "Happy birthday."

Ben was just as impressed as Christopher. "Wow, Chris. What do you say?" His prompt didn't turn out quite the way he'd hoped.

"I have a present for you, too!" a chipper Christopher offered, digging into his pocket to recover the Polaroid picture that he handed off to Gunnar for approval. "It was taken with this special camera that dad has!"

Gunnar tried hard not to laugh, giving a sideways look to Ben. The big fellow nodded, and his gratitude fell perfectly into place just in time for him to respond. "Yes! It's a very special camera, isn't it?" Gunnar couldn't resist throwing one more knowing look Ben's way. "I'm surprised he still has it! Well, thank you very much for my present!" he beamed, tucking it into his tattered shirt pocket.

"And thank you for mine, too!" a chipper Christopher tweeted back, his tardy acknowledgment finally filling his father with

pride. Better late than never. "Dad, can I take it down to the beach?"

It was still early and, looking around the grounds at all the holiday finery, Ben was feeling charitable. "Alright, but stay well back from the water." Christopher had already dashed off in a blur before Ben could put the period at the end of his sentence. "The surf's still big from last night!" he called after his son, who was getting smaller and smaller as he headed toward the sloping, green banks.

Gunnar noted the parental tension in Ben's voice and decided to usher in a slight reassurance. "He'll be fine! Still way too early for anyone to be around."

Ben gave a glib smile and smoothly began to chastise his friend. "That's some nifty science you got there, you know? He wasn't half as happy about the bike we gave him an hour ago."

Just to be on the safe side, Gunnar decided to downplay his generosity. "Ah, it's just a glorified magnifying glass for setting ants on fire."

Trying to freeze his solemn expression, Ben couldn't help but giggle. You just couldn't stay angry at Gunnar. It was damn near impossible. "Well, let's break a straw on it--if Chris starts setting fires all over the fucking island, you're gonna be the one who pays the bail."

"It's a deal!" Gunnar grinned.

Ben sighed, finally resigning himself to the real reason he was there. "So, is there anything I can help with?"

Gunnar looked relieved. "Can you start on the chairs?"

"Sure."

"Wonderful." Gunnar rubbed his mustache and narrowed his eyes, surveying the festive spread in front of him. "I want to get this done as soon as possible. After that, it's Sergeant Cain's problem!" he guffawed, referring to the lead of the local constabulary. The next sentence out of Gunnar rumbled up from somewhere near his stomach or his crotch. Probably both. "I gotta finish up so I can find a pint of stout and a wet pussy before we run out of both for the evening."

Ben's chuckle sputtered into a bit of a groan. "Yeah, speaking of which, I have to find my daughter."

Gunnar's eyebrows pushed up. "Bree's here?"

"Yeah." It almost sounded like an apology. "She's run off to be with one of your workers she's seeing."

Yet another smile from Gunnar's virtual arsenal of them snaked onto his face. "Ah. McTavish, eh?"

Ben busied himself with idle bullshit--checking his pockets, looking out over the water, sniffing in the salty wisps that flew around his nostrils--simply because he couldn't really look Gunnar in the eye. "That's the one."

"Don't worry," Gunnar carelessly tossed off, "it won't last."

"Now, how do you know that?" Ben queried with a snide curl in his words.

Uh-oh. The overbearing father was on the rampage again! Just in time, Gunnar quickly opted for a piece of advice that wasn't his

own. "Ben, it's just like Victor Hugo once said--an intelligent hell's always better than a stupid paradise."

Leaving a path of light, ridged footprints behind him, Christopher cut his way closer to the seashore. His father had been right--the morning surf was droning and angry, constantly rising louder to cancel out the sound of his own steps through the brittle beach grass. Christopher's little hand safely gripped the leather pouch tighter as his sloppy gallop increased.

Lower and lower, the grainy tans and whites sloughed off, and soon the clearing gave way to the spectacle of the beach. In the eyes of a child, the west coast's scenery stood as a testament to the beauty and constancy of nature.

But there they were. Something that didn't belong. Not in nature. Not even in a nightmare.

The sand was riddled with enormous holes, opaque and menacing. All of them big enough to swallow a person, or maybe ten all at once. They stretched the entire way up the beach. Miles. Where did they end? Perhaps they didn't. Christopher could feel the

crisp air needling the roof of his mouth, his tongue now starting to dry and swell.

There are things you know in your heart to be threatening and wrong, and one of the reasons for their danger is that they hold a macabre allure. The blackness of the holes stirred Christopher's soaring imagination. The size and multitude of them was fascinating, their dread nothing short of magnetic. As he continued down the bank, the grating sand grains filled Christopher's shoes without him even noticing.

When he got closer, the finer details were the most devastating. It was only when you finally got near the edges of the chasms that you noticed the still, dank airlessness inside of them. A silent, forever shadow that was nothing like the reality Christopher knew.

But even worse was what was around each never-ending, jet-black pit. The rimming sands were shuffled and marred with a sludge of rotted skin, blood, and handprints, as if something fetid, wounded, and hateful had *crawled out* of every single hole.

The smashing sound of waves rang like a siren as Christopher's wide, racing eyes scanned the length of the beach once more. His

disbelief jumped over every void that now seemingly ringed the entirety of their quiet little island.

Whatever was here, it was innumerable, and it had punched a portal straight into their world.

CHAPTER TWO

Ben and Gunnar were two of the last people to hear Christopher's screams. Beeman and Oliver had little patience for the boy, who was a rush of broken babble as he tried to explain what he had seen down on the beach.

Bree and Jimmy crushed out the cigarette they'd been sharing in the toolshed and came out to see what the problem was. Bree was horrified. She had never seen her little brother in such a state--his eyes locked and bulging, the small fingers clutching as he spoke, trying in vain to describe the outsized holes that now supposedly surrounded them all.

Soon, they were all down at the beach. They stood speechless at the first sight of the cavernous black tears in the sand, which had turned the entire coastline into what looked like some kind of sinister, gigantic honeycomb.

Gunnar was the only one who didn't fully buy into the hysteria buzzing around him. Sure, he was headstrong and just a tad cynical, but he could also tap into his inner child better than anyone around him. As someone who understood the desire to raise

a little holiday hell, it was that very same quality that made him tip out a pissy, angry groan.

"I remember when we could do this holiday without a hitch."

Ben was somewhat alarmed by Gunnar's flippant tone. "You think this is a prank?"

"Beeman! Jimmy! Oliver!" Gunnar shouted, with each crew member nearly tripping over themselves to acquiesce.

Oliver trembled visibly, dropping his voice. "What are we supposed to do, Gunnar?" Jimmy and Beeman looked ashen. Obviously, they didn't think it was a prank, either.

"You lot get some scaffolding up near the slope," Gunnar began to dictate with an impatient disdain. "Use the lightweight aluminum stuff. We can enclose it with some of the extra drapery. I'm going to go get the flower display for it, and that way we can block out a lot of the view of the beach until we find out what's going on."

Beeman was shaken by what lay in front of him. "What the fuck are these things, Gunnar?!" His voice raised to a parrot-like

screech. "Who did this?? No one coulda done this without anyone seeing it!"

Gunnar wanted to explode, but instead grabbed Beeman by the shirt with one hand and used the other to curl his finger towards himself. Beeman, very hesitantly, cut his hysteria off and leaned into his boss's face.

"What are you waiting for, applause?" Gunnar seethed quietly.

"Just get it done. And don't upset the kids as you do it."

Beeman leaned back and breathed through his teeth as the grip on his shirt loosened. He banked his glance between Jimmy and Oliver, as if he was searching for some kind of solace from his co-workers. He steeled himself and turned away from what was there on the beach--the holes, the brown smears of blood around each opening, and that smell. That godforsaken *smell*. Beeman steadied himself, gaining some composure, but still wasn't sure of their ability to follow through with Gunnar's demand. "Look, it's probably going to take some time to get all that up."

"Then you should get started," Gunnar affirmed. "We're going to have hundreds of people down here in a couple of hours, so we don't have the time for this bullshit right now, do we?"

Beeman conceded quietly. Following Oliver's lead, he began to head toward the toolshed. Jimmy turned back to offer Bree a helpless glance. In turn, she sank a worried look into her father's eyes.

"You still got your phone?" Ben mused to his daughter under a dark veil of worry.

Bree nodded.

"Good. Let's give the police a call then," Ben instructed, and both he and Bree began to walk back up toward the fair fields.

Gunnar and Christopher were the only ones left on the beach, and the boy couldn't--wouldn't--tear his eyes away from the site.

"No one could do this by themselves, could they?" Christopher's question was meek, and his words seemed resigned to whatever was out there now, waiting for them.

Gunnar opted for the doubt he alone still subscribed to, if nothing else to keep the poor boy from being any more nervous on his own birthday. "Hey. Hey, come now!" he said, taking

Christopher by the little stalks of his arms. Gunnar got down on a single knee and pivoted the child so he could look directly into his eyes. "There are just some fellows with spades out there trying to scare us, that's all. Okay?"

When Gunnar said it aloud, it made his viewpoint sound more believable, and so he was better able to telegraph that same notion to the young, frightened face in front of him.

"We have better things to do, don't we?" He tapped on Christopher's temple twice before pulling a flower from the boy's ear. With that, the wonder finally returned to Christopher Mulley's eyes.

"Will you help me with the flowers?" There was a slight plea back there behind Gunnar's query.

Christopher nodded, smiling through his tears.

Linda wasn't quite ready to take the washing out to the clothesline, but she couldn't resist what she saw out the window. There was Mrs. Clague, out in the morning sun waltzing herself around the side yard that divided the two properties.

The lowball glass she held swished and spat some of its vodka tonic over the sides as she stepped and leapt in three-quarters time.

Sure, seeing Mrs. Clague totally off her tits was indubitably entertaining, but Linda felt her usual pang of responsibility as she grabbed the clothes basket and headed out to the yard.

"Peaches!" Mrs. Clague exclaimed. "How you doing, love?"

Part of Linda couldn't believe her neighbor was drunk already--it wasn't even 9am--so she wisely assumed that it was just a carryover from the holiday eve. "Oh, Mrs. Clague, be careful of your steps. I don't want you to fall."

"Oh, it's the holiday, sweetie! The lord won't let me fall until I'm in front of my bed." She let out a confident cackle that couldn't help but make Linda smile. When you spend fifty years in your cups and you're still able to waltz around your lawn on Tynwald Day, that's a strong argument for some kind of divine intervention.

Linda's words pushed out thinly through her good-natured smirk. "Well, it certainly looks like you're all ready for the party today."

"I'm getting there, peaches. I'm older now, so it takes longer to get where I need to be." Mrs. Clague let out an extra whoop before throwing back another swig of her vodka tonic. Her face sank as she noticed Linda beginning to shake out and pin up a variety of undershorts and socks to the clothesline. "Oh sweetie, you shouldn't be working this hard today! Let me help you." The sweet old crone was serious about holiday leisure--she even set her glass down in the grass before attempting to string up Ben's boxer shorts.

Understandably, Linda blushed a shade somewhere between put-off pink and mortified crimson.

"Oh no, really, Mrs. Clague, you're too kind!" Linda didn't want to entertain the notion that her own knickers would be the next thing Mrs. Clague hitched up on the line, so she playfully batted the clothespins from her neighbor's hands.

Soon, the two women did their usual back and forth of who needed whose help and who wanted to do what and who was too drunk to

stand where, and invariably got so caught up in their own courtesies that they didn't see Gunnar's truck coming up the road.

The truck weaved and backed into Gunnar's driveway. A smattering of dust sighed into the air, floating slowly toward the whitewashed stone barn. Just as Linda and Mrs. Clague were getting to the thrilling specifics of fixed-versus-spring-loaded clothespins, the ladies noticed Christopher waving his hands in the air to catch their attention.

"Ma!" he yelled, standing on tiptoe to somehow make himself big enough to be noticed.

Linda was happy to drop the clothespin debate. "Hi, hon!" she called across the way. "Did you guys forget something?" Mrs. Clague waved to the boy, as well, taking the respite to reclaim her vodka from the lawn.

"Ma, there's big holes on the beach!"

"What?" Linda's face scrunched up in reply. Mrs. Clague's nose was too far into her glass to get a hold on Christopher's specifics, either.

"Holes! Big holes. Out on the beach!" Christopher's fingers pointed west as he shouted. "You gotta come see them!"

Gunnar came around from the driver's side of the truck. Dedicated to not worrying the boy, his mother, or Mrs. Clague any further--though Gunnar assumed Mrs. Clague was already too drunk to worry--he decided to interject a little bit of soothing clarity. "Nothing to fret about, ladies! Probably just some pranks. Me and Ben are checking it out."

"Oh, okay!" Linda blurted, still not exactly sure of what her son was going on about.

"Get those potatoes ready!" Gunnar closed in chipper fashion, shuffling Christopher off to the barn.

The ladies waved goodbye to them as they rounded the corner.

"Oh, I almost forgot!" Mrs. Clague gasped, hitching up her house dress. Her knobby knees spread apart as she hoofed it up the front stairs. It was almost absurd enough of a sight to make Linda forget her inevitable follow-up question.

"What is it, Mrs. Clague?" Linda tried to cancel out the laugh that tickled the back of her throat.

"Be right back, peaches!" Mrs. Clague was worried, but not so much as to refrain from taking another drink as she dashed back to her house. "I've got some fruity bonnags in the oven!" was the excuse Mrs. Clague trailed off as she disappeared inside. She did it so fast, she didn't even close the door behind her.

Linda went back to her laundry. "Fruity indeed," she muttered, shaking her head. Pinning up the last of the load, she collected her basket.

Gunnar and Christopher were already in the barn, but Linda saw something else in the road.

It was too far away, unmoving out in the distance, but Linda was able to squint out the most general details as she raised up the flat of her hand to keep the sun from her eyes. It looked like the form of a man. A husky, compact figure there in the swaying and bristling elm branches. The breeze made the foliage sway and rock in front of the silent form, but Linda could have sworn that she could make out a shield. An actual shield--like the

ones you see a cartoon hero swinging around during the last ten minutes of a Disney film as Good triumphed over Evil.

But whoever it was, they just stood there. Watching her.

Linda dropped her hand and made a quick path back into the house. Ever after she closed the door and bolted its lock, she could see the form was still out there, still obscured by the pale green swirl of the elm leaves. But now just a few steps closer.

Gunnar knew that watching him assemble metal frames for the flower box flats couldn't be the most exciting thing for Christopher. That's why he slowed his screwdriver to a stop and gave a sprightly raise of his thick, red brows. "Want to feed Big George, yessir?" Gunnar mused at his last word, which was the island's colloquial way of saying 'friend'. Though some tended to overuse it, sometimes he couldn't resist.

"Yeah!" In the time it took him to give the eager reply, Christopher was already at the ladder.

Gunnar raised the lid of a box mounted to the wall of the barn. He picked out two slices of bread and handed them off to Christopher. "Don't let him have any more than this. For now, I'm going to finish up with the frames. When you're done, come back down and you can lend a hand, okay?"

"Okay!" Christopher began his way up the ladder, welcomed up in the rafters by what surely was the largest, fattest duck on the entire island.

"Hi, George!" Christopher greeted Gunnar's prize-winning piece of poultry. It quacked back a reply, waddling its way across the pen to see what Christopher might have in his hands.

Gunnar stole away into the back areas of the barn. He wanted to throw an eye across the flowers and make sure everything was going to fit into the bed of the truck the way he hoped. The flowers were breathtaking--a stunning mix of shepherd's purse, speedwell, gorse, and fern greenery took the shape of a triskelion, something Gunnar had been laboring over for the best part of three weeks now. Finally, the time had come to show it off.

Forgetting all about sizing up things for the truck bed, Gunnar opted to throw open the back doors of the barn to get a better look at the fruits of his labor. The sunlight was a stark polar opposite to the cool dark of the barn as it blasted in. The glare stunted Gunnar's aging eyes for a moment before they could refocus on the low, flickering lights that captured his attention.

Gunnar thought the two figures in the firelight must be Ben and Bree, and that they'd come to give him an update on the bastards who'd worked all night to turn the beach into some half-assed golf course for giants. But the smile slid down Gunnar's face, past his aching and quivering knees, as something he couldn't ever imagine stared back at him.

Eyes sticky with mold and rot gazed unblinking from behind the flame of the torch. The opposite figure held something thin and long, but it couldn't be made out just yet. Both men were clad in a wrap of stained and clotted animal fur. Threadbare laces snaked up their boots and around their calves, and leathern braces were strapped like manacles around the bones at their wrists. The fair summer breeze that came in through the back barn doors ruffled the tatters of blackened linen covering their

decaying chests. Swaying from their shoulders were sashes of a strange and dirty shade of noble purple.

Gunnar meant to speak, but was never given the chance. The glow of the torch lit up the long tapering shape as it flew out and bit into his chest just below the collarbone. Feeling his feet leave the ground, the large man sailed backwards before the spearhead could ram deeply into the open barn door.

With all his weight hanging on the wound, an ironic, angelic radiance was cast over Gunnar as he gasped for breath in the blinding rays of sunlight. Blood seeped in to replace the air inside his punctured lung while thick gore poured down the splintery wood behind him. Twisting helplessly like an insect mounted on a pin for display, Gunnar should have already died by now, but he hadn't.

And so, the last thing he saw before closing his eyes was the axe.

The barn slowly began to heat as the torch was discarded to the floor. The second purple sash advanced, and a swinging hiss of air hit Gunnar's nose as the blade tore perfectly down his midsection.

For just a quiet, fleeting moment, he thought it had missed him.

Then, the bloodied material of his shirt fell away right before Gunnar's hairy stomach burst open along its thin, red seam.

Shining viscera dumped out from the exposed rib cage in a spray, slapping into a small pile just below Gunnar's suspended, motionless feet.

A hearty quack from Big George rang out from the rafters. The bones in the neck and back of each ghoul ground sickly as they turned their heads upward to follow the sound.

"No George, I don't have any more!" Christopher wailed as the duck nipped and tickled him through the holes in the pen. George had a habit of falling back and then running up to the fence, his kooky orange feet smacking against the wood as he ambushed Christopher in the hopes of snagging more tasty bread bits.

Noticing he hadn't heard anything from the barn's first level, Christopher figured he had better go before ornery George got any worse.

"Gunnar?" Christopher's call was dense against the rafters. Pawing the railing and backing down on his knees, his feet stopped on one of the top rungs. "George is really hungry today!"

Christopher hung tightly to the ladder, waiting for Gunnar's voice. The sunlight swept through the back doors of the barn, but he couldn't quite see more than the triskelion of flowers just inside the doorway.

Something shifted under the ladder, and Christopher was sure it was Gunnar. His feet patted on each rung as he continued down.

The burning smell coming from the back of the barn is what made Christopher speed his descent down the ladder. His rush was the only thing that made the whirring swing of the axe miss him.

The frame of the ladder splintered under a single swoop of the blade. Pegs from the rungs ate into Christopher's legs and the gush of air fluttered his hair as he sank into a freefall.

He hit the ground with a choking gasp as two men with grey, brittle faces stepped forward. A contorted rattle wheezed inside their lungs from behind a pair of split and growling lips.

The young boy screamed for his life as the ghouls advanced on him.

"Gunnar!"

The traction of Christopher's shoes bit into the dirty barn floor, shuttling him out in the direction of Gunnar's truck. He could see the ragged purple sashes following behind him, but tried not to look too long at the bloodstained finger bones and sharp weapons held out at him. Unlike everything else on these ancient monsters, the blood was the one thing that was different. It looked fresh.

"Gunnar!!!"

Even though she was inebriated to a point that would make Churchill blush, Mrs. Clague was still the model of a perfect neighbor. Four fresh-baked fruity bonnags, one for each of the Malleys, were nestled into a small straw basket. Her drunken senses weren't exactly keen at the moment, of course, and so she didn't pay much attention to the three long spearheads slowly raking against her open front door.

She would have run headlong into the zombies making their way up her corridor had she not taken a moment to refresh her drink.

Mrs. Clague twisted at the cap, but her buttery fingers slipped over it. After wiping a nearby tea towel over her palms, the vodka bottle's lid spun off admirably.

A shield clanged against one of the dinette chairs.

It was only a moment, but, to the old lady, it seemed to last forever. Three men, or three *somethings*, stood there in her kitchen. Right beside her. She didn't see them as much as smell and taste them.

The triad were dirty, their long, scraggly blond-black hair hampered with nits and pitch and the filth of almost a thousand years. She breathed in their scent, itself a harbinger of the unholy intent floating behind each one of their wrinkled, scabbed foreheads.

In the end, Mrs. Clague did what any good neighbor should do. She held up her bottle to the three terrors, as if offering them a drink. She figured it might just be enough to save her from the fate about to take her soul.

The sharp pain knocking against her head, as well as the linoleum that scraped under her nails, told Mrs. Clague she was already on her back. The thrust of each iron shank tore into her body, her blood flying gracelessly over the dinette, the windows, the bonnags--everywhere. The depraved invaders speared their prey and never stopped until it was a crippled, ragged shell.

The sound coming from outside was the only thing that finally slowed their attack.

"Ma!"

Crossing the road from Gunnar's smoldering barn, Christopher ran as fast as he could towards his front door. The spryness of youth mercifully got him there within just a few seconds. His fists smacked against the door like little jackhammers.

"Ma! Ma, it's Chris, open up!!"

Linda had been upstairs in the master bedroom, having just placed her smartphone on the nightstand to charge it for later this afternoon. For the moment, Linda was deep in the master

bedroom closet considering changing out of her dress and into something that didn't smell like potatoes. She furrowed her brow at the pounding coming from downstairs. Poking her head into the hallway, Linda traced the sound to the front door.

She was halfway down the steps before Linda remembered why she had locked the front door, and quickly threw it back when she recognized her own son's screams from the other side of it. Christopher grabbed onto her, his face a warped puzzle of shock and horror.

"Chris! Chris!" Linda's eyes were as wide as her son's. Her fingers dug into the hulls of Christopher's cheeks as she stared at his tiny, chaotic pupils. "What is going on?!"

"It's Gunnar!" Christopher dropped his voice, as if afraid of being heard. "I think something bad's happened to Gunnar. We gotta go find Bree and Dad, ma."

"What do you mean?--"

Hysteria began to squeeze at Christopher's throat. "We have to go! It's the holes on the beach, ma!"

"Chris, hon, you gotta calm down!"

"That how they got here--"

The burning corpse of Mrs. Clague hurtled out her open front door. The form tumbled, crumpling into a loose ball at the foot of the porch stairs. Linda and Christopher could never tell that she had already suffered a hundred savage stabbings as the flames rose to swallow her tattered holiday house dress and the wounds underneath that soaked it.

Linda set off an anguished yelp as she wrapped her arms around her screaming son, dragging him back through the doorway. A now-empty vodka bottle followed out of Mrs. Clague's front door, spinning through the air and cracking into a hail of glassy powder on the dainty tiles of the walkway.

And that's when Linda saw them.

The three moved like a singular shadow, black and featureless as they descended the front stairs with a shuffling, creaking series of footfalls. All six eyes were fixed on her and her son, the whites plasticine and inhuman. The first one had been watching her for a while now. She recognized the cross-like

pattern on the shield from not long ago when it was there in the swirling elm branches. The second one wiped the rest of Mrs. Clague's vodka from his mouth, defying vanity as part of his lip peeled and hung there under his cheek. Finally, the third chewed away at a bloodied fruity bonnag. Linda saw the tan mush ball up and squeeze its way down his rotting, pinkish-white esophagus.

Linda's foot pushed hard at the open front door. She scuttled up from the floor to shoot its lock into place.

"Get upstairs, right now." Linda's quiet words had an urgency that Christopher normally wouldn't have trifled with.

"We gotta go find dad!"

"Get upstairs, goddamn it!!"

Christopher rushed up the stairs and out of sight as the first blow registered against the front door's bolt lock. Linda shot a fast look down the hall, eyeing up the height of the kitchen chair. She flew down the hallway as the ghouls scratched at her door. The knob jiggled as the blows came faster and harder.

Linda hinged the back of the chair under the doorknob, kicking its frame viciously, over and over, until it lodged in snugly. She backed away, watching the door shake with an impatient rage.

The bloody blade of a Danish axe crashed through the kitchen window. Linda shrieked as the purple sash over the ghoul's shoulders shook across its bony frame in trying to pull back the formidable weapon. Another one, with a gory, violet sash just like the first, reached up and busted out the remainder of barbed panes from the window frame. The axe's blade pinged as it dislodged from the wood, smearing Gunnar's blood across the sill.

Behind Linda, the front door began to give way.

There were at least five of them out there now, and Linda's only safe path led her up the stairs as the Vikings started to slither inside.

The chair barring the Mulley's front door splintered under the axe, and the bolt lock bent under the weight from the other side. The five shambled around in their search, finding nothing. They gurgled with anger, busting off the chair's legs, tearing off the tablecloth, and lighting torches from the stove top. The

two ghouls adorned in purple sashes fought and growled over the potato wedges on the counter as the other three began touching their flames to the downstairs drapery. The Mulley home quickly smoked and burned as heated light bulbs burst, pictures curled and singed, and lapping flames bit and consumed the furniture.

There was only one place left where their prey could hide.

Linda smashed her ear against the inside of Christopher's bedroom door. After the rush to barricade the doorway with a series of wedged-in furniture, including her son's single bed, she could barely breathe through her nose. She made a marked effort to quell the sounds her hot breath made as it tipped over her quivering lip.

"Where's your phone?" Christopher's hiss of a whisper asked.

Linda backed her cheek slowly off the flatness of the door. "On the charger," she huffed under her breath.

Christopher's tone remained low, but his eyelids shot up with promise. "I can go on my bike!" he rasped.

"No!" Linda's quiet voice broke with a screech much louder than she intended. "You're not leaving on your own. We have to get out of here together!"

Linda's terse, crumbling words were cut off. A crash from downstairs made both mother and son back away from the door fast enough to nearly lose their balance. Linda whipped around and fixed a desperate glance out the window. Short flames ticked and snapped off Mrs. Clague's corpse. Her unrecognizable form was beginning to gradually ash and cave in on itself, passing its burn on to the clean white posts and planks of the porch.

The crashes got louder from the other side of his bedroom door, and Christopher bit his lip to try and secure any sound from coming out. Now longer and louder, the smashing from the other side of the blocked door fueled Linda's search for a way out. She couldn't bear the sight of Mrs. Clague any longer, and shuttled her look in the opposite direction.

In the wake of the first discernable flames jumping from its wooden eaves, Gunnar's barn shook off a series of black, sooty wisps. Below, Gunnar's truck sat there, seemingly forgotten in the wake of the nightmare that had literally crawled out of the ground to claim them all.

That's when Linda knew she had no time to waste.

The metallic clang of the shield muffled against the wall of the stairway as the darkened ghouls, clad in thick, putrid layers of fur, hair, and sludge, began to follow one after another up the carpeted steps. The final member of the queue dragged one of Linda's crisped potatoes through some gravy smeared on the countertop before trailing its undead brethren. All their feet fell in time, thumping closer to the bedrooms as sharpened edges of their weapons gouged into the banister.

Linda could begin to smell smoke as she gripped onto Christopher.

"Are Gunnar's keys still in his truck?"

The first blow of the axe blade rattled the brass pins of the door.

Panicked, Christopher began to wail as Linda insisted, "Did Gunnar take his keys?"

Linda's insistent fingertips dug hurtfully into her son's arms. The boy's response was more of a coughing heave of delirium than a string of words.

"I--I don't know!!"

Chips of the door panels sailed through the air as the Danish axe tore away the wood near the jamb. The only thing keeping Linda and Christopher from the decomposing terrors out in the hallway was having the bed frame lodged at a crazy angle into the corner of the room. Its rocking metal squeaked and bowed as Christopher screamed, and the smell of rot and fire got stronger under Linda's flaring nostrils.

Christopher threw open the window and bounded out onto the roof of the porch. The smoke rose from underneath, and the heat was almost unbearable. The turmoil inside him raged as he saw flames hopping around the first-floor windows, the growing orange inferno rubbing and teasing the inside of the panes.

"Ma, come on!" Christopher yelled, knowing they didn't have a moment to spare.

Linda's foot raised to the sill as the door hinges began to give way under the scraping wrath of the Vikings, their collective stench filling the small bedroom through the splintered door jamb.

"Ma!!"

"You're not even fucking human!" Linda detested, screaming at the invading, blackened menaces as the bed frame started push back. The sides of her mouth locked as tears filled her eyes. She began to feel the onset of her lungs rebelling, hyperventilation forcing an acute bout of tics up the length of her windpipe.

Linda thought they all looked like something right out of a movie. But today's holiday wasn't Halloween, and they were very real. Stinking, hateful, seamless, and right in front of her.

And then the phone rang.

The growl from each of the five fiends trailed off as a piano tinkled and Martina McBride's voice drifted through the air from the phone charger in the master bedroom. The hallway filled with

the opening lyrics to "In My Daughter's Eyes", the song she'd assigned to Bree's cell phone number.

The pause was full of poignant absurdity. On the other end of that line was Bree, wanting to tell her mother about what's been happening, the cops who were supposedly coming to check out some weird holes on the beach, and to just say hi as Jimmy was off doing some actual work. Or maybe, just maybe, she was calling because these exact same things, dressed in gore and fur and slime, were after her now, too...

That final thought was what needled Linda's senses into action. The notion gave her just enough strength to push out the window and make her way out onto the porch roof. Bony, vise-like hands reached out, tearing at her mercilessly. The Vikings pulled out clumps of Linda's hair and squeezed her clean, pink skin as her feet skidded and kicked over the sharp and sandy shingles.

Christopher steadied his footing and reached up to try and free his mother, sinking his tiny fingers into the thinning, papery skin. The invaders seemed to turn their attention from his mother to him, but not before a single, decaying palm slid under Linda's dress and found her tight, floral underpants. The elastic cut into her hip, shooting pain down the length of her

leg until the threads ripped away and she stumbled farther down the roof. The surface was rough and hot as she shifted her balance, staying her footing just in time.

Linda grabbed onto Christopher's leg and shot a look over her shoulder. Her underpants hung from the sharp knuckles of the closest Viking. It pulled them back and took a deep sniff from the crotch, a gurgle of air rising as Linda's scent expanded the creature's perforated lungs. Two of the others busted through the opposite panes of the window to grab at Christopher, who screeched in horror as glass rained over him. Breaking her sight from the wanton, greyed pupils staring at her from behind her own shredded underpants, Linda yanked hard enough on her son's leg to dislodge him from the sudden, nefarious grip.

Christopher was the first one off the roof, his nimble youth landing him on the ground unscathed. Linda was much more hesitant, that is until the broken window shards began sliding downward around her feet as the Vikings began to approach. Already, two of them were hanging their bent torsos across the sill. Their outstretched hands gripped spears that were edging closer and closer to her as the cracking bones of their legs scurried them out and over the shingles.

On the ground, Christopher winced against the smoke. After clamping his eyes shut, he opened them to see more silhouettes dotting the landscaping farther down the road, their evil forms moving slowly towards them like timeworn slugs.

The heat under Linda's bloodied hands was getting to be too much. The spearheads were near her now, and she knew there were only scant moments of safety remaining. She could hear Christopher's high, shaking voice calling for her from below, and her perceptions all swam in a sick, dizzying cluster in front of her eyes.

Linda jumped.

Fear twisted her landing. Sticks from the front shrubbery slashed into her legs, but Linda was a short distance safer as a result. She clasped onto Christopher as they both hopped the low fence and headed toward the muted shine of Gunnar's truck, idle in the stark daylight. Linda's jostled eyesight noticed the keys still hanging from the ignition and loaded Christopher into the passenger seat.

As Linda cautiously made her way around the curve of the grille to take her place behind the wheel, Christopher watched as the

Mulley home began to surrender to the flames. Ebony plumes haloed the house, and even his new birthday present began to be consumed. He could see the vinyl starting to ash, and ugly, sooty smoke rose and wove through the spokes as the rubber tires began to scorch and swell. The slow burn of Mrs. Clague's house would soon merge with the rampant blaze at the Mulleys to form an immense and singular pyre.

The clambering forms began to emerge from the landscape. Their proximity allowed Christopher to better see the sickened skin, the ragged clothing, and the unsettling paradox of blunt shields and keenly-honed weapons.

Just as Linda turned over the key and the engine leapt to life, a figure rose behind the truck, flashing up to fill the reflection in every mirror.

With a blinding blur of speed, a coarse metal shaft rammed through the rear window of the cab. Its gnarled, iron head embedded in the dashboard between Linda and Christopher.

Neither son nor mother had time to scream as Linda slotted the transmission into reverse and mashed down the accelerator. The smooth tailgate dented with a malicious, sickening thump as the

sneering ghoul was knocked under the crushing weight of the rear axle. The whistling back tire tore and gashed on the fiend's sharply-hued mandible. Quickly, the whirling rubber flayed and opened with a startling, explosive *pop!*, blowing a putrefied mixture of teeth and brain matter against the side of the flaming, whitewashed barn. The slop slid down the rutted exterior wall in crude, greasy fragments.

Linda wrenched the gearshift one more time, and the truck chomped into the soft dirt. The frame shifted uncontrollably on the metal of the back rim before righting itself under the hard stability of the asphalt. On three good wheels, Gunnar's truck limped down the road, but was fast enough to allow the monstrosities to become smaller and smaller in the rear-view mirror.

In the clearing belch of exhaust, you could see them all coming. The dense smoke and roaring flames on each side of the road wasn't enough to hide them. Slow and methodical, more of them trudged out every minute. Each battered shape continued on in the direction of Gunnar's truck as the sun began to rise high overhead. Mute and unstoppable, their duty pushed them closer to Tynwald Hill, the only site where they could possibly right the wrongs of nearly a thousand torturous years.

CHAPTER THREE

The constabulary, as they were known in local parlance, were the Isle of Man's police force. Small, friendly clusters of them patrolled north, south, east, and west portions of an island that never gave up much in the way of true crime drama. The Western branch of the Neighbourhood Policing Teams, or NPTs, operated out of a modest brick building not too far from the Tynwald Hill fair fields.

Sergeant Cain was the head of operations for the holiday, with Constable Killup minding the desk along with her trainee, the very green but enthusiastic Constable Shelley Boyde. Three other on-duty officers were out tending to the Tynwald Day activities, keeping an eye on things to make sure nothing got out of hand.

A rattling noise came from the back of the building, scaring both of the women at the desk. Constable Killup couldn't help but giggle.

"What is it?" Constable Boyde queried, feeling left out of the joke.

"Probably just the Sergeant," Killup grinned, her big teeth shining and white. "Every holiday, he eats too many sweeties, and then ends up shitting his brains out in the loo."

Being the newest recruit of this NPT branch, Boyde wasn't yet seasoned enough to control her resulting screech of laughter. Thankfully, she threw a hand over her mouth to stop it from getting too loud. "I think I'm going to enjoy working here," she confessed.

"Right," Killup began, snaking the coiled cord of the radio's microphone around her wrist, "now you're going to hear some things you probably never heard before."

Boyde was like a sponge, ready to soak up anything that her new job sent her way. "Oh, really?" she mused.

"Yeah, but don't worry about it." Killup twisted a few knobs on the console. "It's just that Constable Corkish loves to talk in Yankee radio slang." She dropped her voice just a bit as she continued with a tinge of mischief in her eye. "Sergeant hates when we do it, but it's a lot of fun." Her thumb hit the side button on the microphone. "HQ to Smokey, HQ to Smokey! What's your 20?"

On the other side of town sat Constables Daniel Corkish and Betty Karran. Their car was comfortably tucked behind a few large shade trees off the roadway. Karran's hand was getting numb from holding the radar gun for so long, especially when, for some reason, there was next to no traffic for such a high-profile holiday on the island. As soon as Killup's voice squawked out of the dashboard, Karran immediately reached for the radio, but her partner beat her to it.

Corkish perked up as he pushed in the microphone's button. "HQ, we read you loud and clear from out here on the A27, over."

"Why's your gumball machine way over there, Smokey?" Killup's chirpy tone queried.

"We're setting up bear bait, HQ, over!"

"How's mama bear, Smokey?"

Corkish threw a look to his partner. "She'd be asleep if I hadn't made her hold the radar gun, over."

The tailend of Killup's laugh echoed from the speaker. "*Sounds riveting!*"

"Would be if anyone was around, HQ, over."

Killup, understandably, sounded surprised. "*Really?*"

"Yeah, it's real light out this year. No one gives a damn about this holiday anymore, over."

"*Have you located Maddrell?*" Killup queried with a hint of worry in her voice.

Corkish smirked. "Not since the Sergeant sent him to go check out supposed holes on the beach, over."

"*Okay, Smokey, keep us informed!*" Killup signed off.

"Will do, HQ. Over and out." Corkish hung up the microphone.

"You think we ought to just head for Tynwald Hill?" Karran prompted wearily, running her hand over her silky ponytail as she refocused her eyes.

Corkish could only groan. "I don't wanna get into that shit yet."

Karran's boredom tightened her voice, her tone nearly a demand. "Well, as you can see," she motioned to the empty motorway, "we're not exactly making the best use of our time out here."

"There's one good thing, though...", Corkish teased.

Karran came to know her partner's bait when she heard it, but against her better judgment, she took it anyhow. "What's that?"

Corkish pushed up his eyebrows, his eyes even and kind. "It's cooler this year."

Perhaps it wasn't bait? Karran nodded, thankful. Thankful, but naive.

Corkish's friendly, jaded expression didn't change until he couldn't help but jab his partner just as she let down her guard. "Now, I don't have to hear you moan about the fuckin' heat."

Disgusted, Karran's lips pulled into her mouth. "Moan? You wish."

For a second, Corkish wondered what he'd done to deserve spending every single work day alongside his ex. "Hey, you were the one who wanted to break it off--"

"Don't start--"

"No, this was your decision. I haven't said one fucking word! Not a fucking word, Betty!! By the way, how's the hubby these days?"

Karran tried to slide the pin back into the emotional grenade she'd activated. For a second, she just sat there, looking down the empty A27. Finally, she gave in to the temptation deep inside her. That craving for getting the last word.

"You're an animal."

"Animal?" Corkish sounded genuinely offended. He tried to catch his partner's eyes. "You oughta see me in bed."

Back at HQ, things were far more relaxed, except for another loud bang from the direction of the men's room. This time, Boyde was the first to seep out a sly grin.

"Too many sweeties, huh?"

Killup scrunched up the left side of her mouth. "Must have a real toilet monster in there this year."

Despite both getting a snicker from the topic, the absence of Constable Maddrell once again rose to the top of Killup's mind.

"I wonder if the Sergeant's heard from Maddrell."

Boyde's lack of experience seemingly made her a little more understanding. She shrugged, "Isn't it normal to be out for a bit without a call back to the station?"

Killup couldn't help thinking she was overreacting, but the whole day so far had seemed to be off-kilter. "Even for a holiday, though, it was kind of a strange call, don't you think?"

Boyde's eternally lighthearted approach couldn't be shaken.

"Couldn't it just be pranks? Someone starting early on the beer?"

"Nah, not this one," Killup interjected with a shake of her head. "It was Ben Mulley. His family has a lineage all the way back to the beginnings of this island." She gave Boyde a hard, sideways glance that was tipped with an unsettled certainty. "He's not the kind to do something like that."

Just then Sergeant Cain wheeled around the corner. "Constable Killup!"

The two women were a bit alarmed, as their boss had been in his office the whole time. So, what the hell was going on in the men's room then?

Cain's sour expression belied the last nib of a chocolate bar he was working on. "You hear from Maddrell yet?"

Both ladies shook their heads. "No, sir," Boyde offered.

The Sergeant's displeasure deepened. "And, Killup, I told you and Constable Corkish about using that Yankee crap over the lines. We're professionals, remember? We need to act that way."

Killup gave a good-natured nod. Probably because she knew she'd just continue in their usual fashion the next time she radioed to Corkish.

"Look, I'm putting Corkish and Karran on drunks, me and Maddrell will do the grounds, and you two..."

As the Sergeant trailed off, Killup knew what came next was going to be payback for the little bit of radio fun she and Corkish had just had. "Yeah?"

The drollness of Sergeant Cain's response was practically insufferable. "You two can handle prostitution."

Throwing back her head, Boyde let out a hoot at her boss's assignment.

Killup, however, didn't find it funny. "Sergeant, how many whores have you seen on this island?"

"Not many! Which is probably why someone's down on the beach making holes."

It was a comical logic that was tough to argue with.

Nevertheless, Killup still took a quiet umbrage at it, as well as the continuing, kowtowing giggle of her new trainee.

"You're serious?" Killup questioned beneath a crooked brow.

"No, I'm never serious, Constable," Cain offered as he made his way over to the radio. To make things worse for Killup, the bastard said it in his usual flat, emotionless manner that still left her an iota of doubt as to whether or not he was joking.

The Sergeant growled into the radio's microphone, "Cain to Maddrell, do you copy?" A few bloated seconds of silence fell before another attempt was made. "Sergeant Cain to Maddrell." He tossed the microphone on Killup's desk. "Bloody hell. Listen, you two stay here until three. After that, lock up and head down to take care of the parking area at Tynwald Hill." The Sergeant turned his eyes to Boyde, as this next part was more for her benefit. "It'll be getting positively mad down there by then, so we're going to need the usual help into the evening when people

start to get too pissed to get out of the car park by themselves."

Boyde couldn't help but wonder what she was in for. "How bad does it get?"

Her boss tried to find some consolation for his new recruit. "Not as bad as the TT races, if that's what you're asking."

"W-What are the TT races?" Constable Boyde stammered out.

Cain could only shake his head ruefully as he turned and headed for his office. Thankfully, Boyde's partner was able to fill her in as soon as their boss was hopefully out of earshot.

Killup swirled her finger in the air. "It's where the motorcycles go in a circle for a fucking fortnight." And with one sentence, she succeeded in reducing one of the world's premier motorsport events to a caustic blurb.

As Sergeant Cain picked up what he needed from his office before heading out, his stomach began to go on a revolt. He tossed his final piece of chocolate into the trash bin and made a dash for the toilet. Luckily for Cain, the men's room shared a wall with

his office and was mere steps away. It was one of the small perks of being a Sergeant.

Ducking out of sight, the two women were once again rattled by a loud sound coming from the back of the building.

"That has to be the Sergeant," Boyde reasoned after seeing their boss head into the loo just moments earlier.

But Killup wasn't entirely convinced. "Yeah, but he was in his office when it happened before." She said it timidly, almost to herself. Killup started heading back the hallway. "I'm gonna go check it out. See if you can get Maddrell on the line yet."

"Okay!" Sitting down at Killup's desk, Boyde was happy to finally be designated a task she actually knew how to do.

Logic and a good set of ears led Killup back to the toilets to uncover the source of the noise. She headed first into the ladies' room, and the emptiness inside was sterile but strangely calming. Shrubs shimmied outside the window, casting a swaying set of floral shadows over the sink and the floor. Heading back out, she put her hands up to the men's room before remembering her boss was in there recycling his chocolate, so to speak. She

pulled back her hands and gave a wry smile as a way to censure herself. Back at the desk, Constable Boyde saw the whole thing and issued a bit of a simper.

"Headquarters to Constable Maddrell, do you copy?" The latest team member's radio call was well-intentioned, but nothing came back in response.

At the same time, Killup alternately poked her head into Sergeant Cain's office, as something told her the sound was coming from right around that part of the building. Cain's desk and most of the space around it was too much of a mess for her to bother for long. Even casting a quick look up to the ceiling didn't offer any solutions.

A sudden shot of grit and plaster flew out from the side wall, inches in front of Killup's face. Rich blood dripped off the end of the hearty spear, forcing the Constable backwards from the wreckage in a heaving, breathless wretch. She could hear Boyde calling her name, concerned and sliding out from behind the desk. It only served to further spark Killup's panic as her hands clawed at the door of Sergeant Cain's office to regain her footing.

"No, no--Don't! Stay where you are!" Killup screamed towards Boyde, her order pressing urgently against the walls of the hallway. Crazy eyes homed back to Cain's gun laying atop of his desk, and Killup shuffled quickly to arm herself.

She lifted the smooth, weighty weapon with both hands, brutally foisting it in the direction of the men's room door. As she got closer, she passed the threshold of Cain's office and could again see Constable Boyde out of her peripheral vision. She turned and met her new recruit's baffled look, but only for a second. Soon, Killup's eyes were back where they belonged.

"Get the loo keys out of my desk. Hurry. Top drawer," came Killup's commands, sharp and certain, as she steadied the gun on the men's room door. Killup heard her familiar belongings rattle around in the drawers as Boyde did as she was told. The tinkling sound of the keyring settling into her trainee's grip allowed Killup enough courage to take one step closer.

Killup didn't want to take a hand off the gun, but she did. Ridges of the door's thick wood kissed the pads of each finger as they pressed back, slowly and evenly, without a sound.

The men's room windows let in a loving outpouring of sunlight, which completely belied the limp, contorted form of Sergeant Cain. A spear had been driven through his shoulder blade and was now the only thing propping him up. The pike had refused to stop once it pierced the poor Sergeant's body, continuing into the far-left wall in front of him, and, as a gasping Constable Killup had already witnessed, punched clean through the other side.

The force had pasted his cheek flush against the space right above the wash basin. In the terror of it all, Killup couldn't help but marvel at the precision--she noticed some of her boss's slowly-clotting blood running into the sink and dripping down its small, grated drain.

However, most of Sergeant Cain's blood was starting to fill the men's room floor, and that was probably what made Killup start to wail. She wanted to stop, but it rose to a sputtering, guttural scream as her fingers rubbed against the pocked iron shank of the spear. She never heard Constable Boyde coming out from behind her desk, yelling her name in an anguished impatience. The slippery tiles of the floor had ratcheted up the acoustics of Killup's scream all the more, and it flitted and

stabbed her own eardrums as it droned on and on against the smooth surfaces of the toilet stalls.

Cain was still alive, and his unmoving, horrified eyes reflected the knowledge of something unspeakable. Something that was probably still in here with them.

The Sergeant's mouth, bloodied and full of chipped teeth, slowly repeated the same lisping word over and over, and this was the only notion that choked off Killup's hysteria. It took her ten full seconds to finally stay her breath long enough to hear the word that tumbled out like a mantra from Sergeant Cain's busted lips.

"Run...Run..." was the mechanical, dying command, but it came too late.

Shuffling up close were the stinking dyad responsible for such an abominable fate. In one of the final flashes of her clear sight, Constable Killup saw the broken lock of the bathroom window. In the summer breezes, it banged against its metal frame, and had provided an ingress to the pointed, withered threat just inches away from her.

Each one of them held an axe, poised high above the muted grey of their helmets. Austere figures with matted pelts and threadbare tunics--one a sallow gold, and the other a fierce, stained red--filled Killup's vision. The fear hypnotized her, as the two monsters were now close enough to touch. The tip of Killup's gun pressed out, mashing into the soft animal fur. There was no way for her to know if the decaying chest behind her aim still housed a beating heart.

In Killup's final seconds, she was compelled to look deep into the dark, festering nooks of their eyes. Barely able to make out the moist, nefarious pupils back behind the tarnished metal of the nose guards, her last thought was an ironic one: *They have no noses...*

The shots that filled the men's room echoed into the hallway, assaulting Constable Boyde's senses. Though she had no weapon of her own, she dropped the radio microphone and sped down the corridor toward the toilets, screaming Killup's name.

The rapid gunfire didn't last long, stopping long before Boyde could throw her weight against the chunky men's room door.

The attack had only lasted a few mere seconds, but in that time, the two marauders had shorn off parts of Constable Killup's arms. The Vikings stood up from their kill, giving a collective, grunting wheeze as they noticed their latest victim just inside the doorway.

Boyde dug in her heels, trying to get some kind of traction against the reddened, slippery floor. In doing so, her left foot pressed down on something soft, but unyielding. The keyring tore into the skin of Boyde's clenching palm as she kicked the clump from under her stead. Two of Killup's fingers slid and tumbled over the floor as Boyde let out a primal screech, pulling the door closed again with all her might.

She heard the wet footsteps advance behind the men's room door and blasted the key into the door's bolt lock. Her sweating fingers raked against the metal, but did their job efficiently. The Vikings growled from behind the impasse, scrabbling against its stout wood.

Within seconds, the first strike of their axes came. Boyde watched, transfixed as the chrome ring hanging from the key swung and shook from the blows registering on the other side of

the thick door. She retreated farther down the hallway as piss began to seep and run down the darkening thigh of her trousers.

The difficulties posed by the locked door enraged the zombies to a shattering degree. Their shrieks raged at shrill, obscene levels as Constable Boyde sprinted toward the radio aside Killup's desk. The microphone again filled her squeezing hand.

"Constable Boyde to Constable Maddrell, do you--"

Vague, slick hands slid up both of her arms. The grip from two more of the undead ravagers came from behind, slowly tightening around her shoulders as the doors to the front entrance moved shut. They had simply walked in.

The microphone fell from Constable Boyde's hand, smacking against the drawers of Killup's desk. The grip intensified, bringing her to her knees as she wept. Slowly, her windpipe constricted, her welling eyes and lack of oxygen blinding her as the radio microphone's cord wrapped around her neck. The pull against her throat was sluggish, dense, and constant as a blur of stench teased Boyde's dying senses.

Suddenly, the numbness began to win, and for a fleeting second, Constable Boyde thought that these demons were relenting. Then, the cord slackened a bit. The prayers that ran through the innermost reaches of her brain seemed as though they would be answered, and that all this could, somehow, be washed away from memory.

That was, until she heard the men's room lock give way in a puff of splinters, and its spare aluminum key skidded across the floor like a mouse.

The waving red tunic stepped before Constable Boyde's fading eyes.

She felt another pair of hands clamp each side of her head just a second before it split in two. The killing blade of the axe pulled back from the carnage, and a cracking glut of gristle and cartilage rained onto the floor.

Soon after, all four of the lumbering invaders left the headquarters of the Western Neighbourhood Policing Team just as quietly as they had arrived.

Had Constable Boyde been given the time to radio out to Constables Corkish and Karran, they probably wouldn't have heard her anyhow.

Karran bounced herself up and down on the steely, familiar cock she hadn't had inside her for what seemed like forever. To Corkish, she certainly looked as though she was having fun, but for him, this was slowly becoming a form of torture. The clasp of the backseat safety belt was jamming into his neck, and he could swear that his partner had gained weight since they last did this, what, two months ago? It had to be longer ago than that!

Corkish's attempt to calculate his ex-girlfriend's weight didn't allow him to give into his body's urge for release. However, as soon as he opened his eyes and ran a line of sight from Officer Karran's splayed, sopping pussy all way up to her fat tits jiggling just inches away from his nose, he needed no more incentive.

Suddenly, Corkish's face tensed up from the union of pain and pleasure. Giving in, he blew out his load with a wolf-like yowl.

Karran pulled herself off the sticky mess and slowly began to make a mental checklist of all the clothing she previously had been wearing. She wasn't exactly satisfied, but they really needed to get back to work, anyway.

"We should radio in," Karran insisted with a husky, breathless sexiness she sure as hell didn't intend. "We need to at least look like we're putting in some effort today," was the summation she came to as she untwisted her bra straps.

As Corkish shook himself back into the bottom half of his uniform, Constable Karran reached for the radio's microphone. "Mama bear to HQ."

After a few blank seconds, a wrinkle of worry crossed Karran's forehead, but Corkish was too busy trying to tuck his dick out of the pathway of his zipper to notice. Karran tried again.

"Mama bear to HQ, you reading us?"

Corkish was officially back on duty. You could tell by the growl of impatience in his voice. "Did you knock the radio off the band again?"

Karran's eyes slid back and forth over the controls, seeing nothing out of place. "No." Her response was empty and flat. She wondered if the Sergeant had commandeered the radio duties and figured she should go a more professional route. "Constable Karran to West NPT headquarters."

Nothing was registering, except maybe for Corkish's irritation. "Give me that," he muttered through a set of clenched teeth.

A new thumb pushed in the microphone's button. "Corkish to HQ, does anyone copy?"

Meanwhile, Constable Karran was dialing up her smartphone. "Yeah, I already tried that," she griped, "so I'm going with a more reliable way."

Corkish could hear the muffled rings repeat, time and time again, through his partner's phone.

"Just hang it up. Let's try the lads down south," Corkish offered, his fingers twisting in a new band. "Constable Corkish to NPT South, do you copy?" But no one answered there, either. What the constables didn't know was that the picturesque stone building housing the Southern Neighbourhood Patrol Team down in

Castletown had had its windows bashed out less than an hour ago. Gore was smeared across the exterior masonry, and a multitude of paperwork littered the floor inside. All of the nearly-unrecognizable corpses belonged to honest, dutiful men who made the mistake of working Tynwald Day this year.

Starting to be visually shaken, Karran demanded an answer. "Then try the Ramsey lot then!" Her voice cracked in mid-sentence.

Corkish's fingers flicked across the console yet again.

"Constable Corkish from the West team trying to reach Northern NPT headquarters, do you read me?"

No one up in Ramsey could answer, either. The clean blue doors to the station had been smashed in and hacked off their hinges. Most of the unlucky ones inside had been beaten into a convulsing pulp towards the back of the office. There was so much blood, rivulets of it still dripped from the ceiling as Corkish's voice pierced the quiet. "*Constable Corkish, do you lads copy??*" echoed out to the stillness, alone.

"Fucking hell!" The thrown microphone banked off the plastic covering of the speedometer, cracking it in two places. Corkish

could hear his partner breathing through her mouth. He looked over to Karran. Her reddening eyes were wet and tormented.

"Daniel, I'm scared. Where is everyone?"

"Don't get bent out of shape." Corkish said it as steady as he could muster, but there was definitely something wrong going on. "I don't know, maybe there's some kind of communication issue, some fucking electronic snafu, I..." He trailed off, looking up the road. They hadn't seen a car on the A27 for at least 15 minutes. "There's gotta be a reason no one's around."

Karran's withering voice added another component to the dismay. "We haven't heard from Maddrell, either."

Corkish twisted the ignition, with the patrol car gargling up a steady hum in response. "Look, let's just head for Tynwald Hill. Everyone's going to be showing up there soon, anyway. At least there we'll have a good chance of catching up with Maddrell and finding out what's going on, okay?"

Constable Karran wiped her eyes as she nodded in agreement. The back tires caught the blacktop and Corkish sped up the empty lanes of the A27. Neither of them ever figured their sound, easy

logic was about to send them straight into the epicenter of the island's newfound horror.

CHAPTER FOUR

With the chairs finally set up, Ben could concentrate on something more fun--putting the finishing touches on the three game booths. Thankfully, he had coerced both Bree and Jimmy into helping him out. Ben appreciated the assistance, but it was mostly just an easy way to keep an eye on the two of them.

Jimmy put up the marquee to the ring toss game and stepped down off the ladder. With Gunnar still not back yet to bust his balls, he decided it was time for another break, especially since he hadn't seen Beeman or Oliver since they'd finished the tents. Nosy holiday revelers were starting to show up, and everyone seemed to be dragging their feet getting anything done.

Bree's arms were starting to ache from stringing clotheslines along the roof of each booth. She opened a few packages of clothespins as Jimmy caught her eye while her father's back was turned. He made a smoking gesture that convinced Bree, as well, that it was time for a break.

"Dad, we need the toys to finish these up," Bree prompted.

"Ah, that's right!" Ben remembered. "Your mother put them in the car last night."

"Me and Jimmy can finish up the lines here by the time you run and get them." Bree's voice was a little too bright and eager, but her dad fell for it, nonetheless.

Ben's childlike excitement was growing, and it was probably the reason for him taking his daughter's bait so fast. "Right! Don't move. I'll be back in a jiff."

As soon as Ben was a few feet away, Jimmy's eyes lit up. This was typical of a horny youth who saw no use in wasting any more time.

"Come on!" he rasped to Bree, backing away from the booths.

Torn, Bree took a quick glance at her father. He wasn't even a quarter of the way to the car. "Maybe we should wait a few more minutes? He'll probably be back straight away."

"Fuuuuck, Bree! He's been babysitting us all morning!" Jimmy moaned. Gauging from the doubting look on his girlfriend's face, he remembered that old adage about catching more flies with

honey rather than vinegar. "Come on, let's head down to the shade for just a minute so your beautiful face doesn't get any redder. We can tell your dad we were just looking for Beeman and Oliver."

All this was more than enough to convince Bree, and she and Jimmy took off down towards the beach. A lighter tipped off Jimmy's cigarette, and the resulting smoke blasted up in the wind as he handed it off to Bree.

Jimmy knew he didn't have much time, and armed with an elixir of guilt, randiness, and determination, his words seemed to rise out of him without any effort. "Have you thought any more about coming with me for that weekend in September?"

Bree's teeth chilled as she exhaled a rich plume in front of them. There seemed a heartsick weight on her new beau's question. She felt pressured, as all girls at her age age do, but her own impatience was just as big as Jimmy's. For days now, Bree had tried to make a deal with her mind, her heart, her body, and the fellow in front of her she was scared of losing if she took too long finding a happy medium.

"I don't know, Jimmy."

"You don't know?" Jimmy repeated. Disappointed, he inhaled to stop from indulging in any more words he might later regret.

"Exactly." Bree admitted, dropping her head. "I just don't know if I'm ready yet."

Trying to be a gentleman, Jimmy still hadn't exhaled yet. He nodded his head and slid his arm around Bree as they went down the dunes. The surf had evened out as the sun rose overhead, but all those strange holes in the sand gave the beach a perilous vibe.

Some people were starting to gather to check out the anomalies punched into the entire west coast of the island. Kids tossed gum wrappers into their black abysses, rumors circulated amongst pensioners in sun bonnets, and sniffing, yappy dogs considered lifting their legs and peeing into them. The whole thing was so bizarre.

Just then, Beeman jumped out of the curve of the dunes, nearly scaring Jimmy and Bree out of their minds.

"Bloody fuck," Beeman gasped, hyperventilating from the momentary fright. "I thought you were Constable Maddrell."

Jimmy looked over and saw his other coworker, Oliver, hunched over and sucking on a glass marijuana pipe. He gave a goofy wave to Jimmy and Bree as he toked.

"You mean that policeman who showed up a bit ago?" Bree questioned.

Nodding, Oliver blew out his smoke. His contorted face straightened out again as he caught his breath and handed the pipe to Beeman. "Yeah, the bastard's supposed to be keeping citizens away from these things!" He swept his arm in the direction of the beach. "Pretty soon, children and pets are gonna tumble into these fuckers and then they'll have a lawsuit on their hands!" Oliver was close enough to one of the holes to indignantly kick some sand into its chasm. The grains sprinkled into the dark and disappeared without a trace.

"So, what do ya think?" a nervous Jimmy asked as Beeman picked up on the pipe where Oliver left off.

"Jimmy..." Oliver said calmly. "I know what it is."

Jimmy's eyes skidded over to Bree, and both of the youngsters waited intently for the explanation.

"It's a tremendous, obsessive-compulsive gopher." Oliver began to give up a hiccupping series of laughs. Though Oliver's answer wasn't exactly cogent, it was enough to make Jimmy and Bree smile for a moment. Oliver continued to cackle so hard, you could barely understand him. "It's a gopher with big, fuck-off digger!--"

It all happened so quickly, the others didn't see the reason Oliver's face had changed. His head--it was suddenly shorter. Splattering blood that looked like wine tipped and spilled from the goblet of his skull. Something had come out of the hole Oliver had been standing before and, as his lifeless body crumbled to the sand, they saw what was behind it.

Grey eyes stared back from behind a timeworn leather helmet that half obscured this thing's face. You couldn't really say it was a man, as there was no doubt it was older than any living thing on Earth. Red ran down the edges of its short sword, and the top of Oliver's head now lay at its booted feet. Whatever it was, it

could breathe. The chest underneath its belted cloak rose and fell, gurgling with bloodlust as it got closer.

Beeman yelled like a madman and fled up towards the fair fields. Almost immediately, the beach onlookers began to cry out and point towards Jimmy and Bree. Both sets of their feet pushed into the sand, sliding back towards the monster as they tried to get back up to the top of the overlook. They screamed for Beeman's help, but he was too far ahead, already disappearing over the top of the crest.

The collective set of shouts coming from the beach onlookers gradually lessened. Though Jimmy and Bree were too busy trying to make their way back up to the fair fields, the reason for the quiet was far more horrifying than anything they would have expected.

One appeared, then another. It took numerous minutes, but soon each hole had a new undead visitor pull themselves up and onto the sand. This was the second wave--a hellish Norse militia sent to ensure the outcome not yet carried out by the first. Each of them was just as ancient as the others, their skins a jelly of mold and sinew. At their waist were sharpened swords, and their rank demanded their movements be stronger, more deliberate.

As hundreds of heavy feet began to pat a trail up to the fair fields, the youngest and oldest onlookers proved the slowest in their escape. Soon, a mess of their body parts were hacked off and strewn across the beach.

"Dad!" Bree's scream shot across the field, but the parking area was too far away for Ben to hear. Jimmy whipped his head around to see the beach filling with more and more fractions of the Viking brigade. It was as if each lurching member was a piece to a puzzle, slowly sliding together to form a profane and cohesive whole.

Jimmy wrenched Bree's arm as they made for the toolshed. Barring themselves inside, Jimmy found a power drill and quickly changed out its bit for a screwdriver head. Drawers of the tool cabinet opened and pounded shut until he found some heavy-duty hasp latches and screws. Aluminum shards flew as the threads bit into each side of the jamb, fastening the steel closure to the door.

Jimmy's hands picked and felt through all the junk on the worktable.

"What? What is it?!" Bree yelled, absorbing Jimmy's panic.

"I know the locks are here!" he bleated. Shoving everything off the table, he exposed three new padlocks. Using the screwdriver head, Jimmy sliced through one's package and quickly slapped it through the eyelet, effectively securing them inside.

Outside that door, the air was starting to bloat with a dreaded, marching staccato pattern. As soon as any screams could rise, they soon fell under the arms of the advancing Norse army. Metal clattered and the ground vibrated with the crunching weight of a thousand footfalls as the next phase of slaughter began.

Ben was still too far away to notice the electric panic beginning to rise around him. He stood there in the parking area, trying to figure out how he could get three huge bags of stuffed animals down to the game booths in only one trip. He knew his knees weren't as young as they used to be, and wondered if Gunnar was bringing back any carts or wheelbarrows to help set up the flower display. A smile lit up his tired face as Ben noticed Gunnar's own truck heading into the parking area.

All Ben's ideas evaporated when he noticed the sloppy thump coming from the truck's rear wheel. He was absolutely sure

Gunnar wasn't behind the wheel and, for some godforsaken reason, it looked as if a huge spear stuck out the back of the cab.

The brakes engaged and Linda's twisted, weeping face rushed up to him. Confusion sank into Ben's brain, but little else did for those first few seconds. His wife could barely speak, and Christopher had jumped out to clamp a vise-like grip onto his right leg. It seemed as though his son was trying to use every bit of his mere eight-year-old strength to pull Ben towards Gunnar's truck.

"Ben, they killed her! *They killed her!!*"

A thousand possibilities thundered like a stampede through Ben's mind. He tried to reach out for Linda, but her panic showered needle-like pricks into his skin. His knee began to buckle under Christopher's insistence. Ben's only choice was to listen, and the shrill, deafening echo in his wife's voice was finally starting to register.

"Those things killed Mrs. Clague!" Linda's spittle jumped and sputtered as tears dropped down the hot red of her cheeks. "I think they got Gunnar, too, Ben. We gotta find Bree. We got to get out of here!"

Ben finally found the strength to reach out and try to steady his wife's wide, radical gestures. Her skin felt as though it was about to boil up under his fingertips. Despite the swathe of fear rising from Ben's thumping heart, he somehow mustered up enough courage to make his words coherent and somehow soothing.

"Sweetheart, I want to know who you mean. Now, just slowly tell me who you're talking about."

Christopher's pointing finger directed them to the grim parade of the undead as they made their way up to the fair fields.

"It's them, dad."

The fuel tank in a car parked down the road exploded, burying Ben's intended calm in the discord. He and his wife swung around at the concussion as it blew out in every direction. Christopher refused to relinquish his grip, his small fingers now bringing up bruising welts on his father's leg. Gusts coming off the water carried high the choking smell of smoking petrochemicals, blowing stink all over the Mulleys as more car alarms chirped and brayed in the aftermath. Ben and Linda whirled in place,

hyperaware, and both noticed small pockets of fire being set as far as their eyes could see.

Instinct told Ben to run, and that's just what he did. Hoisting Christopher up to his hip and filling his grip with Linda's wrist, they cut down across the parking area as the first heat from the fires could begin to be felt. Ben's vision shook at every slam of his feet on the hard, manicured lawn. Unknown to his wife and son, he knew exactly where they needed to go.

Bree's name tore up and out of Linda's throat as her tired legs tried to keep up. Her husband's desperate grasp made thick tendons bulge grotesquely from her forearm as she tried again and again to call out for her daughter.

Inside the toolshed, Bree's head tilted up, rubbing against the barricaded door. The distant scream belonged to her mother. She was certain of it. Her feet skidded as she tried to fill her lungs with enough air.

Considering what roamed outside that door, Jimmy didn't opt for chivalry as Bree began to get to her feet. Her eyes filled with a false hope that could surely get them killed.

Wrapping himself around Bree, Jimmy gracelessly slapped his hand over her mouth as she tried to scream out to the voice she knew belonged to her mother. He tucked tightly, resolute, as Bree kicked and squirmed against him.

"No, you can't, Bree. NO! They'll know we're in here!" Jimmy hissed cautiously in her ear. Bree twisted defiantly for a few seconds more, but soon her body went limp and her chest began to shake as she cried. Jimmy could feel Bree's ragged exhale over his fingers, but couldn't take his hand away. It was the only way to be sure.

Jimmy looked around the four short walls of the toolshed. His mind spun as he wagered his life against the odds both he and Bree faced. *How long can we last in here?*

Unseen behind the drapery of the main tent, Ben slowed at Gunnar's trunk full of fireworks. Christopher, terrorized beyond his senses, wriggled defiantly as his father tried to set him down.

"Empty the box, will you?" Ben pleaded to Linda before turning back to match the narrow, horrified slits of his son's eyes.

"Look, we're--"

Another nearby car caught fire and sent a booming rupture of glass, metal and flame high into the air. The Mulleys all recoiled from the sound, driving Christopher even deeper into his mania.

"Chris. Chris, listen to me!" Ben didn't even realize he was shaking his son. He could barely hear the sound of Linda toppling over the fireworks box behind him. "I want you to stay in this box until me and your--"

"No!" Christopher shot back. Linda quickly righted the box before hugging onto the child, if nothing else to silence the sound of his wailing. Every few seconds through the drapery, she could see one of those fiends lurch past in the distance. They had started to break from their marching line and get closer to the center of the fair fields. Right now, some still stalked the edge of the beach, but most of them were turning the areas near the toolshed and the game booths into a bloodbath. Linda closed her eyes but still could hear the screams. The tearing flesh of innocent people. The heavy drop of blood and bodies hitting the lawn.

"Chris," Ben reasoned, "if you stay in the box, and keep quiet, they won't know you're here."

"They will! They're coming to get me!" Christopher protested.

"They're not coming to get you, I promise," Ben assured his son.

But Christopher wasn't listening. His eyes wandered out to the dark figures with their sharp swords and pikes. There seemed to be a reverent kind of lull out in the fields, a sudden quiet. The reason for it had just crawled from one of those black holes on the beach, bringing up the rear of its bloodthirsty subordinates.

Christopher was transfixed, and noticing their son's face, Ben and Linda turned back to behold it with an aghast, collective awe.

The shine of the huge sword's jeweled hilt belied the terrifying vision that held it in his grasp. Those deeply-hued rubies and emeralds illuminated the rotting specter stomping slowly through the promenade. The cloak covering his thick shoulders hid a series of exposed bones and vertebrae, their presence barely seeping through the thin covering of filthy, translucent skin.

The immense and braided monstrosity of his beard, combined with a lack of any facial musculature, hid any expression The General could have worn. Instead, you had to look straight into that glazed and cutting dead stare. There, beneath the brow bone of the helmet, you could witness the burning wrath that lit up his hollow, bluish pupils in a way no one had seen for the past 800 years.

Ben picked up a nearby screwdriver and punched a few raggedy holes into the side of the trunk. Christopher kicked as his father lowered him inside, with Gunnar's leather pouch falling out of his pocket. It landed silently in the grass between where Ben and Linda stood.

"No!" exclaimed Christopher, refusing to break his gaze. It wasn't just the fear--he was genuinely entranced. The subject of a hundred of his father's tall tales was very real and more menacing than anything he'd ever imagined, and now it trod slowly before him, just within earshot. His small arms buckled under the strength of his parents.

"We'll come back for you, sweetie. You'll be safe for now."

Linda could barely get through the two sentences before her lip began to tremble, uncertain of the promise she was making.

As the lid slammed closed and all went dark, Christopher still couldn't break his attention. He positioned his eye in front of one of the small air holes the screwdriver had made in the side of the box. The tattered edges of the General's whipping cloak smacked and rubbed over the perfect gemstones fronting his sturdy grip on the sword. Just knowing who that was out there somehow made some of Christopher's terror dissolve, replaced instead with a strange notion he couldn't understand. A notion that possibly accepted that fate that was coming for him.

Ben moved quickly, wedging the screwdriver into the eyelet of the trunk's lock before tearing down one panel of the drapery. "Help me out here," Ben whispered Linda's way as he plucked up the fallen burning glass. A pile of fireworks soon grew on top of the velvety cloth. "It's a short distance to the stage. Make sure they don't see me."

"No, Ben, no!" Linda hissed, her eyelids pink and swollen.

"We've got to find Bree!"

But Linda's insistence was in vain.

By now, there was gore sprayed all over the walls of the toolshed. Its broken padlock now hung precariously by a single screw to the side of the door jamb. The head of Jimmy McTavish had become part of the landscape of hand tools and clutter. It was a vicious end for a young man who futilely tried to protect his girlfriend during those last seconds, right before the axe had met his jugular.

No matter how vile Jimmy's punishment at the hands of the barbaric Vikings might have been, it was a fleeting shadow of the travesty that awaited Bree Mulley.

There on top the worktable, her arms and feet were tugged at by a horde of invaders, just as the first of her defilers was taking his turn. Pinpricks of blood began to pepper Bree's mouth, her throat shredding under the weight of an unending series of screams filling the toolshed to capacity. Each thrust of the demon between her legs sent more splinters into her back, and all the hands pulling at her dark hair were beginning to tear it out by the roots.

That's when the door frame filled with a wide and terrible figure. Priceless ornamentation at the hilt of its sword raised before an indignant grunt, the heft dropping in front of two scowling eyes and straight into Bree's midsection. Skin, innards, and spine all parted with a coarse snap as the blade continued its descent, lodging into the dense wood of the tabletop underneath.

The Vikings positioned at each of Bree's extremities recoiled as the blade hit. Immediately, the screaming within the four mere walls of the toolshed ended.

As the top half of Bree Mulley's body slid to the floor, her rapist could not help but relish in the final muscle spasms clasp around his veiny, bloated cock. He shivered as a jet of yellowish semen glutted the void and seeped in a trickle from the viscera.

As the General pulled back his sword, the worktable shook frailly and collapsed to the floor in a fractured jumble of its own dust. A few of the marauders moved quickly, plotting to flee in sheer fright, but they all just stood there, too scared to move. It was as if they truly believed any further disrespect

would raise their superior's ire to even greater heights. The repercussions would be unthinkable.

For hours and hours, the carnage the Vikings had inflicted on the island had been done so without a word. Now, steeped in the guttural tones of Old Norse, the General gave his first order.

"Move to the circle. He is here."

The indignant rapist took a small and impertinent step forward. Steeped in the same ancient language, his words were slightly truculent. "How can you be certain?"

Those hollow blue pupils scanned the sloppy pile of flesh at his feet--a busted and grisly heap that somehow used to be the beautiful form of Bree Mulley. The General raised his eyes, his intimidating review searing in the direction of each of his subordinates.

"Because she was one of them."

CHAPTER FIVE

Closing in on Tynwald Hill as their patrol car burned up the A27, Constables Corkish and Karran recognized the familiar blue markings along the side of the road.

"There's Maddrell's car!" Karran piped up as Corkish hit the brakes.

Karran swung open her door before the car was at a full stop. As soon as she was close enough, she noticed Maddrell's side mirror was chipped, as well as a streaky brown smear of blood just outside the edges of the quarter panel. It was almost imperceptible against the clean, shining remainder of Maddrell's rig.

Just then, a faint clamor coming from the north began to wheeze and bleed through the air.

"The hill," Karran deduced.

Corkish was already sliding back into the driver's seat. "Come on, get in!"

The car got back on the road, pointed towards the commotion. Even under the rev of the engine, the constables could hear the pandemonium up ahead get louder. Dingy smoke began to ring the area around them, its plumes circling in vulture-like swarms as they neared the fair fields. That's when Karran finally clicked on the siren.

Ben and Linda had made it safely under the stage with the fireworks. Every time the thick, sinewy legs of a Viking headed their way, they simply would jump behind the lattice work of the scaffolding.

Linda heard the nearby police siren and immediately assumed there was a way out of this. Her eyelids pushed up as she grabbed her husband by the arm.

"Ben, it's the police! Come on--"

"There's no way," Ben shook his head with a mixture of resignation and sadness.

"We have got to have them help us find Bree!"

Ben, seemingly ignoring Linda's urgency, strained under the cramped clearance of the scaffolding to give one last push to the fireworks. "They're outnumbered," Ben intoned, his face sullen and dark. Suddenly, though, as he pulled Gunnar's burning glass from his pocket, there was a flash of justice in Ben's eyes. An understanding that he had to share with Linda. "I need you to do something for me, though."

Corkish and Karran pulled up to the fair fields. Unwittingly, their car's siren was announcing their arrival to the throngs of ruthless ghouls who awaited. Their slaughter would be just as brutish as the rest before them, and even more precise.

Corkish ducked the axe that swung into the windshield. In the time it took him to spit the pebbly glass from his mouth, he was being dragged through the tapered, razor-sharp slivers. His uniform tore and blood smeared over the warm hood of the car. He slammed to the ground just ahead of the patrol car's front bumper.

Corkish could hear Karran's screams getting farther away as he continued to be dragged along the lawn. Small rocks and ridges struck against the back of his head as a grayscale blur of swaying tunics billowed up above his senses.

Constable Karran ripped her seatbelt off and attempted to open her door. A long spear slammed into the dirt just beside the running board, blocking her way out. She pulled up her knees and headed to the driver's side as shards of glass slid across the seats and bit into her palms. Another odious form appeared before her as yet another spear sank itself deep into the soil just outside the driver's side. She cried and screamed as the door bumped into the second immovable iron shaft. Now trapped inside the car, she was forced to watch what unfolded before her.

A total of eight warriors gathered in the area directly ahead of the police car. Moving like clockwork, four Vikings stretched each of Corkish's extremities. Their victim groaned and wept as four additional shadows with axes stepped out from behind.

Her eyes unable to blink, Karran began to beg uncontrollably back through the shattered glass, knowing what was in store.

In unison, the four axes fell, quartering Constable Corkish's body as a bright excess of blood erupted from each excision point. Karran heaved and choked as her own vomit began to gurgle and spill over her bottom teeth. The lack of air getting to her

lungs made her sobs sound like stuttering hyena laughter as Karran gasped for breath. She doubled-over, not seeing the light flickering over the front end of the car. Rising back up with a bleary consciousness, she saw it coming at her.

Set ablaze by his murderers, Corkish's arm was being pushed through the broken windshield. Karran recoiled, pressing herself into the backseat. She whipped back her neck as her former partner and lover's bluish, burning fingers moved closer to her face.

Within seconds the car was beginning to smolder. Another few moments on, it was an inferno. The smell of cooking flesh rose and twisted everywhere in the air, and you could see the Constable's body thrash and scratch against the windows. It was as if Karran's screams were hypnotic to her attackers, as all eight Vikings gathered at the front of the car and simply watched her burn, transfixed by the amazing heat and color of the flames.

Ben took a quick look out the clearance of the scaffolding. The clean yellow rays on his skin meant that the sun was in a good position, so he pushed the burning glass into Linda's hand.

"Just hold yourself steady and light the drape on fire," Ben demanded, calmly.

"What? What are you talking about? This is going to get us all killed!" Linda heaved.

Ben continued on, never absorbing his wife's detestation. He knew this plan was their only hope. "Just hold it till it catches fire."

"Ben, you--!"

Ben seethed through his teeth. "Listen to me!" For a moment, he stole a glance through the scaffolding to make sure he hadn't been heard. "Chris is safe, and we need to find Bree, but I need you to do this. Linda, I can make them go away."

"Oh Ben, how?" Linda broke down, burying her face in her husband's chest.

Ben Mulley lifted his wife's head, staring through her teary lashes and straight into her eyes. "It's me they want." Linda's confusion pressed him on. "You've seen them. Those weapons, the clothing, the helmets. I know what they are. My ancestors--my

family--drove them off this island, and now they've come back for it. That's why I have to give myself up."

Linda's eyes once again boiled over with a bloodshot panic.

"No...NO! Ben, don't go out there!"

"Listen!" Ben grabbed Linda's hands. He could feel the smooth, oblique edges of the burning lens digging into their fingers.

"Just catch the sun and get the fire started under the stage."

Ben took out his car keys and handed them off. "After it starts to go, I want you to get the hell out of here, go get Chris, and try to make it to the car."

The reluctance Linda felt was all over her face. She shook her head, and her words were plaintive and quiet. "Ben, we have to find Bree."

Though he had no idea how, Ben decided to just try and push along his plan the best way he knew how. "Let me find Bree," his voice raised in an optimistic manner. "Just do as I ask, okay?"

The charred police car was beginning to flame out, but Beeman still couldn't move. There, beneath Gunnar's truck, he had watched the killing of the two constables without making a

sound. It wasn't just because his life depended on it, but because he had been struck dumb by the display of brutality at the hands of these...*things*. Indescribable in their ugliness, they were a collective pack of rotting flesh, iron, and hate, killing with something approximating a zealotry of religious devotion. They clearly had a mission, and it was being fulfilled right before his eyes.

It had been at least five or ten minutes since one of them had been close by. The blown-out rear tire had made getting under the truck from the other side easier, but Beeman couldn't help wondering if Bree and Jimmy had been lucky enough to find a similar place to hide. The stench of burning gasoline and blood still hung thickly over the fair fields, but the time had come to make his move.

In getting under the truck, Beeman could have sworn he had seen a keyring hanging from the ignition. Even with the bum wheel, he could still drive away faster than any of those putrid things could run. It was a good plan--his only plan--and the time to go was now.

Beeman's fingernails filled with dirt as his cramped muscles pulled him out from underneath the truck. There was still no

sign of anyone, but the numbness in his legs and hands made reaching up for the truck's door handle much more difficult than it should have been.

Finally, the flap clicked. Beeman wedged his fingers into the side of the door and pulled it back. Mercifully, the door did so with nary a squeak from its door pins.

He dragged himself inside, and there it was.

Gunnar's keyring was right there at the ignition. Beeman let out a small gasp of delight as he softly clicked the door shut again. He remained there beneath the steering wheel for a few seconds.

One of the other things he remembered was that the truck previously had a spear run through its rear cab window. It was almost absurd--the way it had jutted out like that--and Beeman reached out and touched the gash it had made in the dashboard. Cracked plastic and sponge brushed back at the tips of his fingers, but there was now no trace of the weapon itself. One of those things out there had probably appropriated it not long before he scurried under the lopsided chassis.

The screams and the noise were starting to level off a bit. Beeman assumed this was because there wasn't much of a populace left to kill. The notion gave him a bit of confidence. A realization that he could very well be a survivor of all this. The possibility made him impatient as a rose-tinted optimism began to glow on Beeman's face. He slid upwards to position himself in the driver's seat. At first he hesitated, but finally twisted the ignition. The engine turned over with ease.

Beeman now found the missing spear that had earlier been lodged in the dashboard. It crashed straight through the driver's side window and deep into his skull. Though Beeman wouldn't be a survivor, he had been lucky indeed--as his ear canal split and shredded around the spear's iron tip, he died much quicker than many of his fellow countrymen had that day.

Vikings growled as they heaved chairs out of the seating area Ben had set up earlier that morning. Following behind, a handful of them began to use their swords to carve out a line of demarcation--it ran in a huge circular border, from the bluffs above the beach to down near the parking area.

Ben was screwing up his confidence under the shadowed scaffolding. Linda was behind him making small progress with the

burning glass, as both of them could just begin to get a whiff of singeing polyester.

Ben couldn't help notice that, under their blood-soaked furs, patchy flesh, and chirring bones, they exhibited a peculiar meticulousness as they worked. The swords sliced through the perfect green lawn, gouging out the borders of what seemed to be their playing field. This was much more than a game to them, though. It was then Linda echoed what had been circling his brain.

"Go, Ben." The words were soft and even. Small flames began to fan inward from the pencil beam burning slowly away at the drapery. "Do it now."

Ben rose from his shaking knees. For a moment, they wouldn't let him fully stand, cracking a bit. The sound was far too similar to the soft grating sound of the ghouls' skeletons for Ben's liking. He wrapped his hands around the cool pipes of the scaffolding and began to walk out from behind the stage. Though he didn't see them, Ben knew tears dripped from Linda's nose, and she was doing her best to steady her hand as the flames started to grow under the command of the burning lens.

At first, Ben felt the queer inclination that he was suddenly invisible. He had come nearly the entire way around the side of the stage without a single one of them seeing him. The bizarre, comforting feeling was only to last a moment.

The Vikings all seemed to recognize Benjamin Mulley at the same time, unleashing a terrifying vocal composite as his presence was discovered. It lifted up in a wavering battle cry that sounded like a loud, liquid-filled scream from underwater.

Ben was certain it was all over. Within moments, a stampede would form and ambush him. A jangling terror of footfalls and decay that could send him out of this life and into a darkness that would cloak him forever. Instead, his appearance seemed to make them work harder. Swords dug deeper and faster into lines bordering the fair fields. Any remaining bystanders were struck down out of efficiency rather than bloodlust, and more chairs whizzed through the air to clear the way for the guilty party.

Just as the rough, bony hands began to be laid upon Ben Mulley, pulling him towards the front of the stage, Linda remained hidden back behind it all. Her senses were telling her it was almost time to run, and her mind raced with thoughts of Christopher as large flames reached up from the burning drapery.

The heat was beginning to chew into the wood planks of the stage floor, hurtling toward the shrouded pile of fireworks.

Ben was prodded up the steps of the stage and pushed to his knees. The ghouls rasped and hissed to one another as they rolled corpses outside the lines hacked crudely across the lawns of the fair fields. It was as if they were treating the area as sacred ground. Ben understood. This was no longer the site of a massacre. It was a trial.

Linda made sure not to be seen as she scurried away from the scaffolding. Overturned holiday trimmings and burning embers strategically hid each of her movements as she got nearer to the tent. Soon, she was close enough to see that the trunk was still there, unmoved.

Linda's final dash to her son was delayed. She watched The General take a scroll from his cloak as he trudged his noble, scraping bones slowly up the steps of the stage. The jeweled sword continued to swing heavily in its scabbard, beating softly at his creaking hip with each lumbering stride.

The General stepped behind the lectern. The microphone atop it, along with a Pepsi left behind by one of the workers, were

swiftly stuck off. Cola flew and showered the side of the stage as a feeble chirp of feedback eked out from the lawn below. The scroll was unrolled. Lines and lines of Old Norse clauses adorned the fragile parchment that pressed flat under The General's poxy hands.

Linda stared breathlessly through the still-burning wreckage of the game booths as The General walked up to Ben and clasped him around the throat. She gasped at first, lost in the possibility that her husband was going to be taken from her right in front of her eyes. But within seconds, Linda could see The General was in a kind of trance, almost pained, as he seemingly drained something from Ben.

It wasn't until The General removed his hand and took his place again at the lectern that she knew what he had taken from her husband: his voice.

"Here, we stand under the rule and power of Odin," The General began. His words were steeped in a thick Norwegian accent, but the transfer from the man kneeling before him allowed The General to condemn Ben Mulley in the only language he understood. "I bequeath this man, of the name Mulley, stands

guilty of ousting the rightful inhabitants of this congregation."

The only thing that could tear Linda's attention away from the grim spectacle unfolding before her was the rich, smoking set of flames beginning to shoot up the back of the scaffolding. What was left of her senses told her there were only seconds to go.

"The sentence of death," The General continued, "is to be granted this Midsummer's Day, in the year one thousand, two hundred, and sixty-six."

As The General walked a few steps toward him, Ben's face creased at the thought of the fate coming his way. No longer able to speak, he bowed his head in a mute, regretful despair, never hearing the first two screeching fireworks that went off underneath them.

The first explosion cracked up through the beams of the stage. Linda ran as the ghouls tumbled and sailed off the platform. The second explosion knocked Linda off her feet, scrambling and stumbling all the way to the trunk.

"Chris, *Chris!*" Her hands tugged at the screwdriver lodged in the trunk's eyelets. Christopher called out, slapping his hands off the inside of the box as he begged and caterwauled to be saved. The sounds of scaffold pipes clanging as they hit the ground pulled Linda into a whole new level of frenzy. Drooling and yowling like a feral animal, she kicked the screwdriver over and over until it dislodged from its place.

Christopher jumped into his mother's arms. His hair was matted to his head with sweat, while his slight chest swelled and collapsed to fill his lungs with as much fresh air as possible.

Linda tripped over the rubble outside the tent as a rapid succession of fireworks shot mightily into the afternoon air. Surveying the damage, she saw that an ample hole had been torn in the stage's framework. Ben, injured from the explosions, weakly crawled up the center of the cleared seating area. Some of the Vikings who had been at the stage were now trapped and unmoving under the broken, burning scaffolding. All of the rest of them began to dutifully exit the scene, standing just behind the borderline they had hacked out with their swords.

"Dad!" Christopher called out with an unsettled cry.

Ben turned his head and smiled. Knowing his son was still alive was enough. He could let go of this world without fear.

"Ben!" The urgency in Linda's voice came from the fact that the many remaining monsters were now all outside of the circle. Her feet sped her and Christopher back over the small gulley that curved near the parking area.

A fallen panel of burning stage drapery began to lift--two, three, then six feet off the ground. The point of a broad, soot-smeared sword blade breached the material, whipping in a rage around the menacing form of The General. The tips of his clothes still flicked with small flames as his boots began to beat a deliberate path toward Ben.

The fallout of the fireworks still rained in brassy shades and raucous tones, drowning Linda's voice.

"Ben!"

Ben could feel The General's steps gently rumbling the ground under his hands and knees, closer and mightier with every second.

The swathing twine of leather encircling The General's calves filled up Ben Mulley's sight. There was no use in trying to crawl any further, and so he simply stopped. Far off to the side, Ben could barely hear the crying of his wife and son.

Wrapping both hands around its grip, The General plunged the jeweled sword into the ground. It tore in with so much force, the blade disappeared up to its hilt.

Unknown to Ben, this was actually a signal, a call of sorts. The tip of the sword had come down through the ceiling of another world he would never see, but was soon to become part of in a very important and singular way.

With his great sword still stuck in the beautiful green lawn fronting Ben Mulley, The General crossed the fair fields and moved behind the carved-out borderline, just as his subordinates had done.

The ground didn't seem to move at first. It was more like a vibrating suggestion of motion. But the symptom grew. Parts of the lawn thrust and cracked, soil rising up and spilling down in clumps as the Vikings retained their inert stance, waiting.

Ben winced at the power of the tremors. Tynwald Hill shook as vast gashes appeared within the borderline circling him. He could no longer hear Linda or Christopher, and the world toppled away from him as he started to rise in the spin and smell of centuries-old earth.

Great fingers pressed upward from the ground as roots strung and ripped around them. Ben could see the thumb not more than 20 feet away, its nail smeared with dirt as it closed in on him.

The fingers straightened then began to curl, jailing Ben in the enormousness of their frame. As the hand turned into a fist, it propelled upwards into the clean, cold air. For a moment, Ben could see the blue sky closer than he ever had before through a latticework of unbelievable knuckles and sinew, like stone walls of marble etched with a million chiseled lines.

The soil under Ben started to crumble, break, and slide off the sides of what he knew was the giant's palm. All he could do was use his own hands, miniscule by comparison, to paw at the warm lifelines under his knees. He tried to hold on for a few moments more as his death cage bucked and tightened.

For Ben, the holiday afternoon daylight dimmed, and the cool breezes were shut out. What remained was a claustrophobic hell that slid around every one of his crushing bones. Ben wanted to scream out and curse the immense pressure rupturing his eyes, flattening his lungs, and separating his spine.

But the darkness inside that colossal grasp soon took everything away. The thick, muscular forearm struck up from the fissure, three stories in height, and the heat and power of the grip atop it singed and pulverized all Ben Mulley had, including his soul.

Linda's screams still couldn't be heard as she wrapped her arms around Christopher and continued to back away from the borderline. All of the ground inside it started to sway and fall. She knew the giant's arm was about to pull back down into the hell it came from, taking what remained of her husband along with it.

She didn't even know how or why she made it to the car, but the keys twisted and the levers gave way, allowing her and Christopher to make it inside before the end came.

The monolith of flesh and bone began to descend, and soon everything was moving toward the hole it had punched into the

seaside. The car bounced all four of its wheels off the ground as the mammoth fist of pointed knuckles dropped and hit the excavated ground.

Christopher screamed and shivered on the carpeted passenger-side floor as Linda threw the transmission into reverse. Everything in front of them--the tents, cars, corpses, and even the Vikings themselves--began to break and freefall into the void, tossing inside torrents of seawater draining into the newly-made inland chasm.

All details were a glassy blur in Linda's rearview mirror as the tires spun the car back from the precipice. The little engine squealed out under the command of the accelerator, sending the car away from the fair fields, across the road, and smashing into the side of a house. The impact abruptly jarred Linda and Christopher, forcing them to refocus their vision. The sound of the wheels still spinning and grinding finally made Linda lift her foot off the pedal.

"Ma, look!!"

Linda looked up just in time to see it. The wave was coming right for them.

The world blotted out under a singular thrust of water. Mother and son unleashed a mutual vocal squall as the air vents bled water and the panes of glass all threatened to crack. Gaskets at each door began to trickle, making Linda's wild eyes shut tight, her arms reaching out to embrace Christopher. His screams reverberated her breastbone as he buried his face in her ribs.

Soon, the daylight started to seep into the corners of the windshield, and the water began to ease. From out of the grate of the vents, trickles of saltwater ran down the dashboard for a few minutes before stopping completely.

Linda's foot made a squish into the carpet as it slid from underneath the brake. She was afraid to open her eyes, but needed to know if the quiet was all a lie. Just another ruse before finally taking her and her son.

It was peaceful for the first time that day. So much so, the unmistakable sound of seagulls could be vaguely heard outside the floodwater-smeared windows. Everything from before was gone now. No burnt stage. Or game booths. Half of the parking area had disappeared. The seawater level was shockingly high in the

freshly-torn bowl of granite and debris, but the pull of its churning current showed it was slowly emptying back out.

Had they not made it to the car, they surely would have been taken away with the rest--that towering arm, the ghouls, all of it. Including Ben and Bree. Crying uncontrollably, Linda stepped out of the car. Her ankle had cracked in the wreck, but her senses didn't register it. She shrieked out the names of her husband and daughter, but they were lost in the sunny air and tidepools that swirled in the new lagoon where Tynwald Hill used to be. Linda's grief couldn't allow her to get any closer to it, though. She collapsed, wailing for some kind of forgiveness from there in the middle of the road.

The passenger door swung open. Christopher's seat emptied a gush of water onto the running board as he twisted himself out of the car. He landed in a thick muck running up from the side of the road, finding wreckage and vegetation now dotted the landscape in every direction. Cautiously past his mother, he stepped through the pockets of flood water remaining, farther and farther until he reached the edge.

The land now dropped off just a few meters from the road, and all of Tynwald Hill had become an intimidating basin that swept

and chugged with whitecaps. The tide of the Irish Sea rushed into the pot of pressed and layered rock, now exposed for the first time in thousands of years. Overwhelming earthtones shone like the gilded edges of an ancient tome. Everything beneath bubbled in the silt of the fair field rubble as it bashed in the agitated curl of the waves.

With his mother still crying in the road behind him, Christopher stared down into the dirty whirl of loss and regret. What he saw was nature already beginning to rebuild itself. A few vibrant panels of drapery still floated in the surf, but most everything else, including his sister and father, had been ravaged in the wake, and was now being pulled out to sea.

With the sun just starting its descent toward the horizon, eight-year-old Christopher Mulley looked out at the never-ending canvas of slatey blue, trying to understand why all this had happened. Attempting, in some naive way, to reason with the destiny that found his family today. The child couldn't comprehend the true concept of revenge, and so his intellect could only prescribe one explanation. It was one that held no pity, remorse, or resolution.

Simply: the time had come.

CHAPTER SIX

The hall was immeasurable and spread as far as the eye could see. Down its lengths, tall shields curved and formed ceilings. Somehow, despite the immensity of the structure, one easily could presume there was a holy type of firmament outside of its stone walls.

Here in this place, a lilting blue drifted in the air--it was heated and smooth, and freely gave the impression that you weren't breathing at all. Then again, most of the beings in Valhalla didn't need to breathe, as those types of functions were just a leftover response from a former life.

A speck of movement in this grandeur belonged to The General, but not of the same ghastly appearance as those unlucky souls had witnessed on Tynwald Hill. As he strode mightily to the forefront of the many queues of his warriors, the heft of his frame was now filled to capacity. His skin was thick and glowing, his beard robust and clean. The wide bands of glossy leather around his calves wound down around boots that were as rejuvenated as the rest of him and his men.

The army of Nordic heroes stood at attention in their fine uniforms consisting of gleaming helmets and precisely woven tunics. The reward for their duty had been regeneration--a heavenly existence free of scraping bones, rot, or anguish. Their presence was a unified splendor, and any witness would have wagered this palatial domain existed simply to house these distinguished and vigilant Viking soldiers.

The General, with that jeweled sword forever at his side, stopped shortly ahead of the first queue of his subordinates. While slowly and easily dropping to one knee in reverent fashion, unspoiled animal furs fluffed upward and his cloak brushed gently against the ground.

Seated before The General and his congregation was Odin. A lord in both nobility and size, his throne was dozens of times higher than the tallest Viking. Slim torches burned on each side of the sovereign's chair, and an ornate hourglass rested at his feet like a small, foggy mountain.

Odin's legs stretched farther than any man could crane his neck. The hands at the end of his gargantuan arms could pick up any earthly creature and crush it into nothingness within seconds.

In fact, they just had. A faint, powdery sound lifted up from what Odin still pulverized in his magnificent right fist.

The General was the only one permitted to speak, and his Nordic query rose up into the ether, patently seeking approval. "Noble Odin, has justice been handed down, my lord?"

The giant Viking king opened his clenched hand, using an opposite finger to swirl around in his palm some sand, which is all that remained of Benjamin Mulley.

"Yes," he issued. The forceful voice pressed against the golden ceiling, and probably could have been heard for miles. "There will be a time to rejoice, and a time to rest."

The lid capping the top bulb of the hourglass was removed, and Odin flicked the smattering of sand inside. That white magic flowed down through the curved neck to lie with the rest. One could only assume that its entirety of grains had been made up of more than 800 years of the Mulley bloodline. Odin carefully replaced the capping glass.

"Show me," the calmly breathing titan intoned. He leaned down to open his demanding hand, which still sported a crystalline dusting of residual sand. "Show me the next one."

The General rose to his feet and turned back to regard his soldiers. He narrowed his eyes, searching for the two who stepped out from the pack. One held an axe, the other a spear, and elegant purple sashes ran across each of their chests.

Their offering was given first to The General, who then transported it to the waiting monarch's outsized hand. The Polaroid picture was so minuscule, almost farcical, laying there in Odin's possession. It rose back up to the strata for consideration.

The Viking overlord studied it, offering no words to the minions at his feet. Unsure glances were passed around below in the silence that followed until, finally, The General's appeal rang out.

"May we sleep now, my lord?"

After committing all the picture's features to memory, Odin further raised the photograph to touch its corner to one of the

prodigious torches. Soon, the happy countenance of Christopher Mulley began to slowly streak and bubble. The emulsion became ash and smoked up sickly from the god's tremendous palm before being lost forever.

Odin's answer was direct and ominous: "Yes, you may sleep, but not for long."

THE END