

Ghosts, Ghouls and Others



Genre: Original / Horror

Rated: R

Disclaimer: No disclaimers are required. The characters and this story are mine.

Sexual Content/Violence: Sex? Just the mention of it and one rather chaste kiss. Violence? Yes and some of it graphic.

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In case you want to let me know how, and if you liked my story, please write to filfil67@yahoo.de and/or visit my website at www.filfil.de

"Is all that we see or seem
But a dream within a dream?"

E dgar Allan Poe

There was a distinct chill in the air, a damp East coast breeze that ruffled Erin's short hair and left her shivering. With a sigh, she turned up her coat collar, thinking that cold and rainy autumn nights like this called for a nice cup of tea, a crackling fire and maybe another living being to share that coziness, but here she was instead, out in Edinburgh's streets, freezing her ass off in the wind. She might have doubted her own sanity if the reason for this stupid jaunt hadn't just handed their tickets to the tour guide. Watching Claudia made Erin smile.

"Thank you," the tour guide said in a broad Scottish accent, "an' now, if ye please take a step back." He put the tickets he had collected into an inside pocket of his black cape and stepped on a small pedestal in front of Erin, who cast him a questioning look. Instead of commenting any further, he cried loudly to the group gathered on the pavement, spittle flying from his mouth, "Nooooooooooooooooow is the time! Gather closer, closer. Don't hesitate! Come near!"

Startled, Erin jumped back, afraid that her eardrums had burst from the sheer volume of his voice. Claudia appeared beside her and whispered, "Good gracious, does he want to wake the dead already?" Erin shrugged and shook her head, a slight ringing tone in her left ear.

Unconcerned, the guide continued encouraging the group members until several people formed a half-circle around him. "My name is Charles, and Ah'll be the one introducing ye to the ghastly, the gruesome, the grisly, the gory Edinburgh," he said. "The real Edinburgh, Ah'll add. There is no other city in the world with as much tales o' ghosts, ghouls, body snatching and torture as *Auld Reekie*, an' ye are either very brave or very stupid to join this tour on this very night when even the smallest child knows that at *Hallae e'en*, the spirits o' the dead are roaming the land, searching, searching, searching... maybe for ye," he finished dramatically, pointing his finger at an elderly lady with light purple hair who muttered "Oh boy," in response, immediately stepping closer to her husband.

Erin couldn't help rolling her eyes at the man's over-acting. She whispered to Claudia, "Want to bet that woman will scream hysterically at least once before the evening is over?"

Claudia shook her head. "No, I don't bet if I can't win."

Erin chuckled, bumping against Claudia, who in return granted Erin one of those smiles that made her heart stutter every time she found herself on the receiving end. Certain she had a goofy grin on her face, she turned her attention back to the tour guide, who was still rambling on about Edinburgh's history and all the grisly things they would possibly encounter tonight.

Right, Erin thought, as if ghosts, ghouls or poltergeists are running around in Edinburgh's streets, impatiently waiting for the next tourist to scare. And every self-respecting supernatural being is better off staying in whatever cursed places they called home with the way the wind's blowing the rain through the High Street tonight.

Be it as it may, Claudia was Erin's sole reason for doing something so absolutely untypical like joining this Ghouls and Ghost tour. She had met Claudia two nights ago at The Laughing Duck, one of Edinburgh's finest gay bars. After sharing a good talk, a dance or two and some pints, they had also shared a very enjoyable night together. Just thinking about the kind of unbelievable acts that woman could perform with her tongue made Erin feel a lot warmer, and made her hope that time would fly until they were finally alone again.

She told herself to be patient. The evening was meant to be Claudia's highlight before she returned to her home in Cornwall, and she had done her best to convince Erin to participate. Well, it hadn't taken a lot of convincing when the promised reward was a happy Claudia and a repeat of last night's excitement. Erin shivered again, this time as a tingle raced down her spine. For amazing sex, she would endure hysterical tourists and overzealous guides.

She turned her attention back to their guide, who was speaking loudly enough to be heard in the New Town. "An' so, ladies and gentlemen, Ah'll show ye the city's scariest and most haunted places. We will visit scenes of horrendous torture and supernatural happenings. An' I tell ye one thing," he lowered his voice, "ye better watch out all the way! 'Cause there is hardly a tour where ye won't meet the supernatural. An' if it isn't here in the streets and

closes, it will most likely be when ye follow me below into the dark, quiet and forgotten Underground Vaults of South Bridge. Trust me, ladies and gentlemen—this will be an evening ye won't forget. Ever!"

Erin stifled a snort. Maybe the concessions she had to make weren't as small as she had initially hoped. Supernatural happenings, hauntings, ghosts—oh, please! After living in Edinburgh for several months, she knew a lot of people earned their money with the city's spooky past. It worked; tourists were attracted to these tours like bees to honey. Looking up and down the High Street, she saw several tour groups strolling around. Especially tonight, at Halloween, the firms offering such tours made a lot of money. There was the "City of the Dead Haunted Graveyard Tour," the "Ghosthunter Trail", the "Haunted Underground Experience" and many more. What all of them had in common was the promise of experiencing ghostly activities up close.

Shaking her head at people's gullibility, Erin noticed that her own group had begun to move while their guide Charles yelled, rolling his "R" as only the Scots could: "But pay close attention when crossing the Royal Mile, fowks," he said. "Ah don't want to have ye running into the *có iste bodhar*, Edinburgh's death coach that collects the souls of the recently departed. I wouldn't want to explain to yer beloved that ye were run over by a ghostly vehicle or by a Nimbus 2000 while visitin' our lovely city."

The majority of the group sniggered, obediently looking to their right and left before crossing the street. Even though Erin had walked the same way dozens of times since starting work in Edinburgh, she had to admit that the city had many different facets, depending on what time of day one passed its streets. It was an impressive city by day with its old buildings and the castle perched on top of a rocky crag, but by night even Erin couldn't deny some kind of special magic, a kind of glamour that got a hold of the city and its people. As cynical and unbelieving as she was, she couldn't deny being affected by the change. Right now, she could imagine having traveled through time to someplace in the past, especially here on the High Street, the center of the Old Town. Here, she could easily envision dark deeds of days long past.

Erin sighed and followed an excited Claudia to the side of St. Giles Cathedral, taking the opportunity to observe the rest of the group. There were around fifteen people, most of them tourists. Some Americans, some Italians, maybe a French couple, an elderly woman leaning heavily on her walking stick accompanied by what looked like her granddaughter, a nice looking young woman with long red hair that continually blew in her face. However, there was something about the red-haired woman's face that just wasn't right. Erin tried to get a better look, the rain and darkness not helping. When they passed a street lamp, she saw the woman clearly and realized what had caught her attention. Even though the light was dim, she saw an ugly scar cutting through the woman's right cheek.

Damn, Erin thought. Whatever had caused such a deep wound must have hurt. *One would really think that in times like these, cosmetic surgery could do something. Poor girl!*

"Ladies and gentlemen," the tour guide yelled, making Erin wonder how much tea with honey he had to consume on a regular basis. The job couldn't be healthy for anyone's voice.

Without pausing, he continued, "What ye see here is the Mercat Cross, originally built in the fifteenth century. It was the focus for official announcements as well as business dealings and," he lowered his voice, "the place for horrendous tortures." He scanned the audience. "Ah'll need two healthy men to help me out a bit. Why don't ye an' ye join me up here on the stairs," he said, pointing to an older gentleman and a younger guy in his mid-twenties, "so that Ah'll be able to demonstrate just how nasty punishments were way back." He produced a fake whip from beneath his cloak. The excited audience members murmured approvingly. Only the 'volunteers' didn't look entirely happy, and Erin was filled with sympathy for them.

She groaned inwardly. The evening was going to hell in a handbasket. An interactive tour - could it get any worse? She plucked at Claudia's sleeve. "I feel as if I am back in kindergarten," she said. "I just want you to know that I'll kill him if he dares to call me up to participate."

Claudia smirked. "Yeah, and that is how the city gains its ghosts, right? No wonder you have so many of them here. The residents are just too willing to use violence to sort out their problems."

"Hey," Erin made a mock-protest, "just because I have to live here doesn't make me a resident." They smirked at each other. "So," Erin whispered, having a hard time hiding her disappointment, "you have something against a little roughness?" She had hoped to play a bit more tonight, maybe use a toy. And now...

Claudia smiled seductively, a twinkle in her eyes. "Who said that? Rough can be fun at times and," one of Claudia's fingers tipped Erin's nose, "I like to play."

Erin swallowed. *Holy cow!* "You make it really hard for me to not drag you into one of these Closes and have my way with you."

"Good," was all Claudia said, winking at Erin before she turned her attention back to the spectacle in front of the Mercat Cross. Erin felt a thrill of anticipation. Claudia was as beautiful as she was sensual with her long black hair and her piercing black eyes. Erin chuckled under her breath. This woman was going to be her death; however, what a way to go! She followed Claudia's line of sight. The guide's victims were bowing while receiving their applause, both still looking slightly uncomfortable with their role in the flogging re-enactment.

"Thank ye, gentlemen, for participating," the guide said, clearly relishing the men's discomfort. "But it weren't only murderers or villains that were executed in Edinburgh. This town was Europe's capital o' witch burning. Hundreds and hundreds of unfortunate souls, mainly women accused of being witches. Alone three hundred of which have been burned at a stake on Castlehill. Now, how did they find out that these women really were witches? That was fairly easy. A suspect's thumbs an' toes were tied together, and then she was ducked on a specially designed kind of chair into Nor' Loch. If she sank and drowned... well, then she was innocent. An' dead. But if she was unfortunate enough to survive... then she was a witch and was burned." Some of the audience gasped.

Erin leaned closer to Claudia. "It's hard to understand how people could be so stupid, isn't it? These poor innocent women; it makes me angry thinking about this part of our history every time I hear about it."

Claudia nodded slowly. "Yes, I agree. It makes me absolutely furious to think about the amount of wisdom and power that have been erased because of some pigheaded, stupid, old men."

Erin looked at Claudia, unsure what to make of that statement. "What? I mean... do you believe that there were really..."

"Witches? Who knows...?" Claudia shrugged. "We will never find out, right? But don't you believe that there must have been something special about all these women that made men feel intimidated enough to kill them." She sighed. "Come on, love, we need to move."

Erin didn't know what to think about Claudia's comment and stored it away for later. For now, she kept quiet and followed the group until her gaze was drawn to the dark and brooding church that seemed even bigger by night than during the daylight hours. St. Giles was a truly remarkable building, adding to the Royal Miles' medieval charm. For a moment, Erin could have sworn she'd seen a dark form moving up ahead on the building; maybe a bat? But wasn't it already too cold, and were there even bats in the city? She couldn't remember ever seeing any before. She kept her gaze on the same spot, and there it was again, only now slightly to the left. What was that? It seemed bigger than a bat, but it was so dark that she couldn't make out exactly what was moving up there.

"Hey, what are you looking at? Something interesting? The Hunchback of St. Giles by any chance?" Claudia asked, chuckling over her own joke.

"I don't know," Erin said, irritated. She couldn't see anything moving up there. Trying to concentrate, she closed her eyes and opened them again. No movement. The tour was promising to be real fun when she was already seeing things that weren't there. She shook her head at her own foolishness.

"Ye, ladies and gentlemen are very lucky tonight, 'cause ye are among the few fortunate to be able to get a good view on John Knox's grave," the guide said.

Everybody, including Erin, looked around the parking space. There was no graveyard, there were no gravestones, only a few parked cars. What was he talking about?

"No, don't look so far. As a matter of fact, ye stand right on top of it. If ye look really hard, ye'll notice the small pinkish rectangular stone on the ground. Yes, he has no gravestone, but his initials are engraved on the window of the church opposite car space forty-four. Don't let anyone tell ye that we don't honor our famous dead," he said in a mocking voice, explaining that in fact they stood on top of the old St. Giles graveyard which had, by the Edinburgh Council's decision, been bituminized over.

Erin had to grin. Not everybody was buried under a parking space that was for sure! It was a nice story and she looked forward to slipping into a conversation at the right time during work, since most of her co-workers had grown up in the city. Still grinning, her gaze wandered back to the church building, and her attention was drawn to one of the gargoyles, a stone figure in the form of a lion. They were odd creations. She vaguely remembered some years ago, watching an animated movie where gargoyles played a big part but was unable to recall the movie's title or anything else about it.

Erin ran a hand through her short-cropped hair, grimacing at the wetness. The still going breeze was covering everything with a fine blanket of cold spray. Erin drew her coat closer around her body and was about to look away when for the second time, she thought she saw something move. The gargoyle... she could have sworn ...its tongue... it was moving! She shook her head. No, it must be the rain, the flow of water from the gargoyle's mouth. But she found herself unable to turn away from the sight, her gaze glued to the stony carving. Out of the corner of her eye, she caught more movement. Another gargoyle, only a few meters away, was also moving its tongue. To her horror, she realized that these movements couldn't be due to the rain. Her breath caught. The creature's eyes were glowing yellow, and she knew there was not enough light to cause such a reflection. Suddenly, the gargoyle snarled at her, looking ready to strike at any moment. It seemed to grow in size. *What the hell!*

Her heart was hammering in her chest. Whatever she thought she saw... it just couldn't be. It was impossible. She had to be hallucinating. She looked around, wondering if anyone else saw what was happening, if they realized the danger. But nobody, not even Claudia, paid any attention either to her or to what was happening near the roof. She checked, flinching as the gargoyles were still behaving like living beings. One of them was licking his lips, as if already tasting his prey. Reflexively, she took a step backwards and bumped into someone. Turning around, she looked into the angry face of the elderly woman she had noticed earlier.

"Can't ye be more careful, ye damn fool," the old woman snapped.

Still feeling somewhat disconnected from reality, Erin mumbled, "I am so sorry. Are you okay?" and stretched out her hand, wanting to support the fragile little lady, who growled back unforgiving, "Aye, no thanks to ye!"

Erin was taken aback by the old woman's unfriendliness, which jarred her out of her daze.

The younger red-haired woman she had seen at the older lady's side suddenly joined in, scolding, "Grandma! She apologized and I am sure she didn't do that on purpose."

Erin looked gratefully at the younger woman, and then nearly screamed out loud when glowing yellow eyes similar to those she had just seen on the gargoyle gazed back at her. In a split second the eyes were dark again, and Erin supposed she had imagined it. "No, absolutely not. I am really sorry," Erin stammered, carefully glancing up at the gargoyle. It wasn't moving and looked exactly like an old stone carving, nothing special. And really, how could it have moved or tried to attack her - it was made out of stone! She was really losing it.

“Are you okay? What happened?” Claudia asked her voice low and filled with concern. She moved to stand next to Erin.

“That *eejit* nearly ran me over,” the old woman complained, “toddling around like a drunk.”

Claudia looked back and forth between Erin and the old woman. “What?”

“Please excuse my grandmother’s temper,” the younger woman said, smiling apologetically at Erin before giving her grandmother an admonishing look that didn’t seem to impress the old woman at all.

“But she did, Tallulah,” the old woman said. “Ye better stop buttering those tourists up, girl.”

Erin felt a headache beginning to throb at her temples. The old woman was really getting on her nerves. Why did she act as if Erin had tried to kill her? “I am no tourist,” she insisted. “Listen, I am really sorry. I didn’t mean to hurt you. I just... I was confused by something I saw up there on the church roof. Sorry.”

The old woman waved her hand dismissively before turning away as if disgusted by Erin’s behavior. Erin couldn’t remember ever feeling so stupid before. She was aware that several pairs of eyes were resting on her, and her cheeks began to burn in embarrassment. At that moment, Erin knew she should have stayed home.

“What an old brick,” Claudia murmured. “You sure you are okay, love?”

Erin nodded eagerly, relieved that Claudia was on her side. The humiliation she felt receded. What did she care about the others’ opinions? “Yes, let’s just forget about it.”

Claudia linked her arm with Erin’s, the contact making her feel better. They walked in silence side by side until they reached one of Edinburgh’s most famous Closes: Brodie’s Close. Charles waited until the whole group was gathered before he began to tell the story of Deacon William Brodie, who was the inspiration for Robert Louis Stevenson’s story ‘The strange case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hide.’ In colorful words, Charles described how successful Brodie had been as businessman by day and as housebreaker and thief at night, using his daytime job to gain knowledge for his nightly activities. Erin felt herself drawn into the tale, finding it easy to imagine Brodie and his family living in this narrow Close. Charles finally finished his tale with a horrid smirk. “Brodie and Smith were hanged on October 1, 1788, using a gallows Brodie had designed an’ funded the year before. Call that one irony. An’ the moral of the story: don’t trust respectable business people in the night.”

The group’s laughter echoed through Brodie’s Close, and Erin couldn’t help but join in. Claudia leaned closer, her breath tickling Erin’s earlobe in a very pleasant way: “I would add: never trust us business people... no matter what time of the day,” she said.

Before Erin could react, Claudia began to nibble her earlobe, making Erin dizzy at the sudden rush of pleasure. Erin was just about to respond in kind when she noticed the old hag’s frosty glare, which made her blood run cold. There was hatred in the rheumy eyes that

made Erin forget about the pleasant feelings Claudia was causing. Great, besides being absolute annoying, the old hag was obviously homophobic as well. How she wished this part of the evening was over already! Instead of kissing Claudia as she had planned, she stepped back, creating some distance between them, and said in a low voice, "We have spectators."

For a moment, Claudia looked pissed off, and Erin cursed herself for being so self-conscious. Thankfully, Claudia's features softened after a moment. "You're right, sorry," she said. It's just... I can hardly wait to have you on my own again... begging for mercy."

The statement was topped by the most seductive grin Erin had ever witnessed, and which struck her as funny. She had to put a hand over her mouth to stifle her laughter. It took a moment for her to regain her composure. Happy that Claudia didn't take her reaction badly, she said, "You really want to cause me problems tonight, eh?"

Claudia grinned in return and kept quiet. Still chuckling, Erin stole a glance at the old hag, who wasn't watching them any longer, but was in a lively discussion with her granddaughter, Tallulah. *What an unusual name*, Erin thought. Glad the old woman's attention wasn't on her, Erin went after Claudia, leaving one of Edinburgh's most famous Closes behind.

The group continued its way through the maze of narrow cobbled streets and towering buildings, following their continuously chatting guide, who told one blood-curdling story after another. They paused at the entrance of another Close, which was guarded by high-sided stone buildings with small windows; a few of which were softly illuminated.

Claudia left Erin, wanting to take a picture of something on the other side of the Royal Mile. Erin stayed behind at the Close's entrance to ensure Claudia wouldn't get lost. Feeling weary from the night's adventures and the frosty glances she received regularly from the old hag, and more curious ones from other group members, she leaned her head against the wall behind her, grateful for the chance to rest.

Closing her eyes, Erin savored the peace, disturbed only by the still drizzling rain and the wind. All of a sudden, a painful cold feeling started at her right shoulder, promptly spreading through her whole body. She felt as if her shoulder had been thrown into liquid nitrogen. It burned like hell. She opened her mouth, but no sound came out. She couldn't open her eyes, either. Panic struck. She tried to step away from the wall, but it was like her feet were glued to the street. It felt as if the walls around her were closing in, threatening to crush her bones any moment if she wouldn't be able to escape. *What was happening with her?* She tried to scream, to wiggle free, and to make the others aware of the fact that she needed help, but only a faint groan came out of her mouth. Spots danced before her eyes, she couldn't breathe, and it hurt. It hurt so damn much. Her stomach heaved.

She felt a hand touching her shoulder. "Hey, are you okay?" a voice asked beside her, drawing Erin out of her nightmare. She opened her eyes and forced air into her lungs. Breathing, breathing, she could breathe again. She crumpled, sliding down the wall until she sat on the cold street. Looking up, she saw that she wasn't alone. The agitated group surrounded her; their gazes full of curiosity. Once again, she found herself the focus of

attention and she didn't like it one bit. She felt a growing urge to hide in a corner, out of sight from prying eyes.

Claudia was knelling down next to her and touching her shoulder, which didn't burn anymore. At least *that* something to be thankful for, Erin thought.

"Erin, are you alright?" Claudia repeated insistently.

"Yeah," Erin croaked, "sorry, for a moment I felt... I don't know. I guess I should have eaten something before the tour."

She felt a bottle pressed into her slightly shaking hand and heard someone else say, "Take a good sip, will you? It's Gatorade."

Erin gratefully accepted the bottle, gulping down nearly half the contents. The cool sweet liquid felt good, banishing the bitter taste in her mouth, but she still felt queasy and stupid, with no idea what had just happened. She knew she would be the topic of many conversations among the group, and that her hysterical behavior was annoying some of the tour's participants as well. This much she was sure of - she would never again bitch about easily scared people!

"Miss," she heard the tour guide say, "do ye want me to call a taxi for ye? Maybe it would be better if ye let someone check on you in hospital."

"Aye," the old hag snarled, "maybe that would be better. A wouldn't want to have ye down in the vaults if a mere mouse is going to *gar your flesh grue*."

"Ah, come on," she heard Claudia reply, "she said it's her blood sugar. Erin paid for this tour as much as any of you, so let her participate if she feels better in a minute, okay?"

Grateful not to be included in the discussion for the moment, Erin took another gulp of the Gatorade, buying herself some time. Truth was, she didn't know what to do. Well, what she really wanted to do was go home, but she didn't want to leave Claudia behind. What had happened at St. Giles and the episode just a moment ago had scared her, but now the events really irritated the hell out of her. She had never been easily spooked before. Something was wrong with her, but Claudia seemed determined to continue the tour. What should she do? Even though she had been frightened out of her mind some moments ago, she wasn't ready to give up what she had been craving all day - she wanted to, needed to touch and taste Claudia again.

She looked at Claudia, who gave her an encouraging nod before nudging her gently with a foot. "Hey, are you doing better?" Claudia asked, giving her one of those marvelous smiles.

Erin nodded. In fact, she did feel somewhat better. She took one more gulp from the nearly empty bottle. "Thanks," she said, looking for her benefactor.

A smiling Tallulah took the bottle back and answered, "You're welcome."

The girl was indeed lovely when she smiled, Erin thought. It was a shame that the scar on her right cheek deformed her face so much. She had warm eyes and a gentle smile that Erin felt herself return in kind.

All this shit about seeing and feeling things that weren't there had to end. She just had to get a grip on herself. Erin came to a decision, hoping she wouldn't regret it later. "Do you think you could give me a minute? I am sure I will be fine. The drink is already helping, thanks," she said.

"Damn *eejit*," she heard the old hag mumble. Barely a moment later, a small package of Jaffa cakes was thrust into Erin's face. "Here, take my emergency provision." The old hag's face didn't show any kindness despite her offer, and Erin hesitated for a moment. She really didn't like the woman's attitude.

"Here, let me," Tallulah said, ripping the package open. "My name is Tallulah by the way. And that helpful and kind old woman is my grandmother, Martha Boyman." A cocky grin tugged at Tallulah's mouth.

"Thanks, I'm Erin. And this is Claudia," Erin said, before biting into biscuit. The pleasant taste of sugar exploded inside her mouth, and she wished that she had a glass of milk to go with the cookies. "Thanks. I really like these," she said to Tallulah. She ate a second Oreo, and then tried to get up, the ground way too cold and wet to sit there much longer.

Erin felt like a total dork and needed Claudia's help. Her knees were still shaky, and dizziness clung to her like a second skin. Her gaze met the old hag's, who seemed to have eyes made of glittering steel. There was no softness, no compassion in them. Erin's breath hitched. What was it about this old woman? Why did she dislike her so much? A chill made Erin shiver. She wasn't sure if it was the cold breeze or the cloud of fear and foreboding hanging over her that she just couldn't shake off. However, she just wouldn't allow fear or other people's prejudices to rule her life. No way.

There was doubt in the faces surrounding her, including the tour guide, Charles, and Erin knew that he needed some more convincing if she didn't want to be left behind. With as much sincerity as she could muster, she said, "Charles, I'm already feeling much better. I would like to continue the tour, honestly." Apart from reassuring him, she felt like she was also trying to reassure herself.

He hesitated so long that Erin was convinced that he couldn't be persuaded, and she admitted in her own mind that she wouldn't be unhappy if he did, then he surprised her. "Alright, let's see how it goes," he said. "But if ye do so much as feel unwell again, ye'll tell me immediately an' then yer out."

"I'll let you know. Promise."

Charles nodded, still looking not entirely satisfied. "Alright fowks, come on. Let's continue our tour and follow me to the Fishmarket Close."

The group began to move. Erin was happy that their collective focus was directed away from her and on to other things. Hopefully it would stay this way for the rest of the tour.

“Hey,” Claudia said, taking one of Erin’s cold hands between her warmer ones. “Come on.” She leaned over and let her lips linger on Erin’s for a moment. “You really are a brave one,” she whispered against Erin’s mouth.

Erin’s stomach fluttered in reaction, desire helping take the edge off her apprehension. “Sure sounds good to me.” She leaned over to return the favor, and then added, “Hurry, before they leave us out on the streets for good.”

“Yeah, I bet the old hag would love to see us leave. I hate people like that.”

Erin had to agree. “I guess she’s just jealous. Wouldn’t want to know when she got laid the last time.”

Claudia laughed and drew Erin with her through the Gothic streets until they stopped in front of another Close. It was obvious that they had reached their goal as the metal sign over its entrance showed all kinds of different colorful fishes.

“Right, fowks,” the guide said. “Here we are. This is Fishmarket Close, then there is Fleshmarket Close not too far away, an’ as ye may have guessed, the names are based on what was sold here in the past. Just imagine living here, way back, in one of these thirteen story high houses... with no plumbing.” The audience groaned, right on cue. Charles went on. “At night, the Closes rang with calls of ‘*gardez l’eau*’, meaning as much as ‘watch out for the water’. But it wasn’t only water that was coming down. If ye were a knowledgeable Edinburgh resident, you would call back ‘*Hand yer hann*’, meaning ‘hold your hand’, if ye had no idea what the first call was about... well, ye were about to find out and get wiser.”

The whole group laughed, including Erin, who felt a lot better thanks to the Gatorade and Oreos. She squeezed Claudia’s hand. Claudia smiled back at her, warming Erin further.

The tour continued to yet another Close, where Charles told them the story of Burke and Hare, Edinburgh’s infamous body snatchers - an appalling tale about two men who killed people in order to sell their corpses to the Edinburgh Medical College for dissection. They had cut out the middle man, so to speak, as grave robbing was a way to make money in those days. The law allowed only the dissection of executed criminals, and there had not been enough corpses to satisfy demand. Back then, the unwholesome trade was so dreaded that terrified relatives guarded the dead in long night vigils, afraid their beloved would be subjected to that particular crime. As a matter of fact, Charles pointed out, medical students feared that one day, they might encounter someone they knew on their table.

“Now,” Charles went on loudly, “this was our last stop before going to enter the vaults, one of Britain’s most haunted places. Please follow me, if ye feel brave enough to face yer worst nightmare.”

Erin and Claudia trotted behind the group, careful not to slip on the slimy cobblestones. Erin still felt a bit nervous about entering the underground vaults, but honestly, how many hallucinations could one person suffer during an hour? She had never been prone to stuff like this before, had never fainted or been hysterical, and decided that what had happened earlier in the evening was an aberration brought on by low blood sugar and the weather. So she was fairly relaxed when suddenly, a small shadow appeared in front of her and made an awful hissing sound that nearly caused her heart to stop beating. Erin clutched Claudia's hand and croaked, "What's that?"

"Hey, relax. It's only a stupid cat." Claudia said. A dark cat stepped out of the shadow, its tail twitching violently back and forth. It looked ready to attack. To Erin's surprise, Claudia drew back her foot and tried to kick the small beast, which avoided the blow before complaining loudly and running away to disappear in the darkness.

Erin's heart was hammering so hard, she felt like it might explode. She had nearly wet her pants because of a stupid cat. She was really out of it tonight. If moments ago she had been fairly alright with the idea of entering a part of Edinburgh's underground city, now she wondered if it wouldn't be wiser to stay out of the haunted vaults. With her luck tonight, she would be the first one to meet a real ghost down there, or the first to die from a heart attack due to a rat crossing her path. Anyway, she was certain to make a fool out of herself. Again. And she had absolutely done enough of that already!

"I hate cats," Claudia said, frowning. "Come on, we have to hurry."

Erin hesitated, searching for the right words. "Claudia, I don't know. Maybe it would be better if I stayed behind." She felt an utter moron but continued nevertheless. "I'm a bit afraid that maybe I'll feel unwell again down there, and that would destroy your fun as well."

Claudia grimaced. "But you feel better, don't you?"

"Yeah, but... it's just... nothing like this ever happened to me, and...I'm not really that easily scared but..."

"You don't really believe in ghosts, do you?" Claudia asked.

Erin wished the earth would open and swallow her whole. "No, I don't." She ran a hand through her hair, searching for a way to get her point across that wouldn't make her look like a total wimp. "Look. I'm usually not this cowardly, but I don't feel good about going down there. You could go, and then we could meet later in one of the pubs nearby."

Claudia wrinkled her nose. "Ah, come on. I promise to take good care of you. And if you do so much as feel unwell, we'll both leave. Promise. Okay?"

Glancing at Claudia's hopeful face made Erin rethink her decision. She was torn between insisting on staying behind or accompanying Claudia into the vaults. It was true. She wasn't easily spooked, but tonight... tonight was different. Intellect and instinct were fighting with each other in her mind, and she was very close to giving in to instinct for the first time in her

life. Nevertheless, she absolutely hated to think that her emotions could rule her decisions so easily. She hated hysterical women, and did not like feeling out of control. After a mental struggle, Erin reluctantly agreed to Claudia's suggestion, though she couldn't shake the feeling of foreboding that continued to haunt her.

Moments later, they caught up with the others just as the group reached the entrance that lead to the Southbridge Vaults.

"Let me make one more thing clear before we enter the haunted vaults, fowks," Charles said. "If ye at any time down there feel cold spots, icy sensations, any kind o' unease, you'll let me know an Ah'll get ye out of there right away." His gaze rested a bit longer on Erin, who nodded to make clear that she understood his message. "Good," he concluded. "Please turn your mobiles off and follow me."

Charles opened the creaky door with a key and guided them towards a staircase. Erin had to pay attention on the stairs; the treads were well worn from generations of feet, and rather slippery. With every downward step she took, she cursed herself for not having stayed behind. Old childhood fears were creeping up on her; memories long buried coming alive again. Memories of stories about haunted houses and ancient ghosts out for vengeance had been triggered by the night's events. An oppressive atmosphere hit her like a tsunami as soon as she set foot on the first step, and it did not get any better as they descended.

Erin had to concentrate hard not to let her imagination run wild. Few words were said by anyone in the group; no one seemed able to escape the vaults' gloomy air. Several flights of stone stairs later, Erin entered a dimly lit hallway, a shiver rippling through her while she took in her surroundings. It was so dark that it was hard to make out anything more than a few feet away. However, no ghosts had jumped them so far, which was alright with her.

The unventilated air needed some time getting used to, filled with the scents of damp and mold and who-knew-what. Erin was surprised to notice that it was warm down here when she had expected something closer to a cold tomb.

Without much ado, Charles led them into a rather huge chamber - a dank, dark and damp place that Erin thought would have made a perfect horror movie setting. All it lacked was some faked spider webs and scary sounds from a tape. Or even better, someone leaping at the group from a dark corner. If that happened, Erin knew that she would join the others in panicking and complete hysterics. She was far from acting like her usual self tonight.

Charles waited patiently until the whole group found its way and stood around him before he began to speak in a low voice that only added to the creepy atmosphere. "Now, Ladies, gentlemen an' other inhabitants of this place, let me tell ye the story o' these vaults. They are part of the South Bridge, as ye may know. A building work that was completed within three years an' opened in 1788. Only the bridge was cursed from the very first day of its opening. Now, ye wonder why! I'll tell ye: the very first body to cross the bridge crossed it in a coffin. The locals were aghast. Nevertheless, there wasn't anything that could be done. It had been promised to the Bridge's eldest resident, a well known and respected judge's wife, that she should be the first one to cross the bridge. Unfortunately, several days before the opening,

the lady passed away. However, promises had been made and couldn't be broken. And so it came that a dead body was the first to cross Edinburgh's new bridge. This resulted in the majority of the townsfolk refusing to use the new bridge, preferring instead the awkward and impractical route through the deep valley of the Cowgate. And maybe, just maybe, these fowks knew more than we care about today, 'cause strange and mysterious things are going on inside these vaults." He let his words sink in a moment. "We have a long list of recorded paranormal occurrences down here. Some ghosts we know because we meet them time and time again like "The Watcher" or the "Imp", more or less harmless spirits who won't cause any real harm. But there are other, more bloodthirsty creatures living down here."

Erin felt something brush her arm. She squealed, flinching away from the touch.

"Erin, please," Claudia whispered, "that was only me."

Once again all eyes were turned her way. Erin shrugged, embarrassed by her lack of self-control. She couldn't believe this was happening to her.

Shaking his head, Charles lead the group deeper into the vaults until the only light came from his flashlight.

Erin stumbled over something on the ground, cursing beneath her breath. She felt childish, angry about her own reactions. She knew that ghosts didn't exist, that the supernatural activities down here could either be explained scientifically or were just figments of someone's unnerved imagination. Despite her knowledge, she could feel a kind of helpless panic creeping up on her. Intelligence and skepticism did not shield her against these threatening emotions, and she hated herself for it. She was stronger than that. She was a smart woman ruled by her head, not some chicken-hearted fool who jumped and screamed for no reason other than a couple of inexplicable occurrences.

Unfortunately, all these mental mantras didn't make her feel any better. She couldn't stop looking left and right, expecting something grisly, horrible and undead crossing her path. She felt like the proverbial lamb being lead to its slaughter. As much as she wanted, she couldn't shake the feeling of dread. The vaults' brooding atmosphere was getting to her, making it hard to hold onto the things that she believed in: science, intellect and technological progress. Down here, far below the earth, she was thrown back to the more primal emotions, with fear the most dominant.

"So," Charles whispered, "please follow me into the first room. An' don't touch the walls as we haven't been able to find out what the sticky yellow substance on the walls is made of. It's literally oozing out an' definitely hard to get out of your clothes."

Erin felt the hairs on the back of her neck prickling when she entered a room that became absolutely crowded once the whole group was inside. She didn't want to be here. Gods, she wanted to head out of these vaults and drink herself into oblivion in the first pub that came her way. She couldn't do this. She couldn't stay through the tour. She couldn't stop thinking that something bad was going to happen. Erin cursed herself for needing to prove her inner strength. The situation was new to her, as she never before felt the overpowering need to run

away from anything in her life as much as now. Never before had she given in to the need to flee, and she sure as hell didn't want to start with this foolish shit tonight.

Claudia's hand squeezed hers, a reminder of the prize that was waiting for her later on, but Erin wasn't sure if she really cared about sex anymore. No tumble in the hay was worth this kind of emotional torture. She was a nervous wreck, her heart drumming a crazy rhythm. Looking around at the rest of the group, she saw that several of the people standing in a half-circle around their guide looked ready to jump out of their skins at any moment. Some of her own emotional upheaval was mirrored on their faces, she was certain of it.

How could she ask to get out of here? Especially after being allowed to rejoin the tour against the guide's suggestion to go and see a doctor. After an inner struggle, her resolution firmed. She couldn't really chicken out after having been so insistent that she was okay. That would be too humiliating. No, she had to try to get through this and then, she vowed again to herself, she would never again make fun of people who were easily scared about things. Maybe they had every reason to be afraid

"Well," Charles began, "this is a chamber where lots of supernatural activity has been noted since the vaults were opened again. Ye have to imagine a family of six or seven living in this one room with no natural light, without fresh air, an' lets not think about the hygiene too much, or the lack of it." Nervous laughter followed his explanation.

Erin noticed one woman staring wide-eyed at a dark corner as if she saw something that wasn't supposed to be there. Feeling slightly sick, Erin followed her line of sight but couldn't figure out what held the woman's attention. There was nothing in that corner... or at least nothing that Erin was able to see. She gulped, shuddering.

Charles went on, "Whereas these chambers were first used as warehouses or even little shops, they were deserted by merchants rather soon. They were too dark, too dirty, too wet for their businesses. But they were absolutely fine for *Auld Reekie's* poorest souls that had no other place to live in. An' many of those that lived here died here. Some because of terrible diseases and some... well, some were murdered. An' others we believe arrived here already dead."

Low gasps followed the statement, and Erin felt absolutely sick, an icy sensation taking hold of her stomach.

"Ah've told ye about Edinburgh's body snatchers," the tour guide said. "Well, we believe that these vaults were either used to help supply dead bodies, like Burke and Hare's murder for profit, or that dead bodies were stolen from the graveyards and stored here in this part of the vaults. No proof was ever found, but it is likely that a perfect hideout like the vaults wouldn't have gone unused." Suddenly, Charles' attention turned to the woman who was still casting nervous glances at the dark corner. "Madam, are ye all right?" he asked. The woman, obviously embarrassed about the attention, only nodded her head. He continued, "Ye have to know that several people saw something in this corner which we call 'the ghost of Mr. B'. A spirit which doesn't like visitors down here and often isn't very shy of making his disapproval known." He smiled when the woman shuddered.

Her resolution faltered. Erin wanted out. Gods, she wanted out of here. She didn't like one bit what she had just heard, and at this point she didn't care how much of a fool she would make of herself. Just as she was about to open her mouth and ask the guide to be lead out of the vaults, Claudia's voice hushed into her ear.

"You aren't going to chicken out on me now, are you?" she asked.

Erin swallowed hard before answering with a resigned, "No."

"That is good to hear."

Erin nodded, unable to form words. Everything inside her screamed to get out of this ghastly place. She felt cold sweat sticking her shirt to her back. Claudia's hand on her shoulder made her nearly pass out. "Don't do that again," Erin demanded, angrier about her reaction than about the fact that Claudia had once again spooked her with a touch.

Claudia sounded hurt when she replied, "Sorry, didn't mean to frighten you. Just one more room, and then a pint will be waiting for us, and we'll have the rest of the night to ourselves. Just you and me. Isn't that what you wanted?"

Erin swallowed again, fighting down her fear. "Yes, great. Absolutely." She forced a fake smile on her face.

The group followed Charles into the dimly lit hallway. Erin couldn't avoid brushing against the old hag, who wanted to walk through the doorway at the same time. Erin received another of those frosty glances. The hag muttered something under her breath that Erin did not quite catch, probably curses and ill wishes, she thought, but that was the least of her worries.

Charles led them into the next chamber. It was rather large in comparison to the ones they had already visited. He closed the door as soon as everyone was inside. "Now, I am going to tell ye real stories that took place in this very room, but we need the right atmosphere first." Without warning, Charles turned his flashlight off, leaving them in pitch black darkness.

At first, nervous giggling and heavy breathing were the only sounds she could detect above the frantic pounding of her own pulse. Erin scrambled backwards until she hit a wall. This was her personal nightmare come true. She couldn't see anything. It was like being thrown into a dungeon. How could he do this? Why had Charles turned out the light? Pressing against the wall at her back, she tried to make herself as small as possible.

She heard someone to her left shouting, "It's attacking me, help me." Suddenly, the whole vault was alive with unseen bodies yelling and crashing into each other. It seemed as if the rest of the group had lost their composure as well, Erin thought grimly.

Erin felt a soft, warm hand grasping her cold and sweaty one, and a familiar voice whispered in her ear, "That stupid asshole. We'll leave, come on."

She nodded before she realized that Claudia wouldn't be able to see her gesture. She couldn't even begin to describe her thankfulness. Finally, the ordeal would be over, she would get out of here.

Erin relaxed a little when Claudia gently tugged her out of the dark chamber after opening the door and let them into the equally dark hallway. Where before it had been dimly lit by the guide's flashlight, now it was black, so black Erin couldn't see her hand before her eyes. Only her connection to Claudia, that firm warm grasp, helped her to stay as calm as possible—that and the hope of getting out of this hell as quickly as possible. Stumbling through the darkness, she fervently prayed that Claudia knew the way out.

"Hey, Claudia, you do know where we have to go, right?" Erin asked, her voice shaky.

Claudia sounded serene, apparently undisturbed by their circumstances. "Yes, I do. Just trust me, love. I know exactly where we're going."

They hurried through the darkness; their footsteps echoing dully back from the walls. Erin couldn't shake the creepy feeling that they were lost. How could Claudia know where they were going? Neither of them knew the vaults. Moreover, how could Claudia possibly see anything when Erin was totally blind? The thought of being lost inside the vaults, groping through the endless darkness with no idea where to go, made her tremble even more.

"Hey, Claudia?" Erin tried again, forcing the words past the tightness in her throat, but she received no answer. Instead, heavy breathing sounded through the hallway, followed by tiny footfalls. A rank-smelling draft of air passed Erin's face. She couldn't hold back a gasp.

"Claudia?" Erin asked, more insistent.

"What?" came the harsh reply.

"Did you just hear that?"

"Yes, just relax. Everything will be fine," Claudia answered. From her tone, she was obviously annoyed.

"I think we should turn around. Please," Erin begged, feeling as unsafe out here as she had in the dark chamber.

The breathing grew louder and more frantic, sounding much too close for Erin's liking. However, Claudia held her hand in a vice-like clasp, the touch no longer comforting but rather adding to the horror she felt. She struggled against the implacable hold. She had to get away! Instead, she felt herself drawn against Claudia's body until there was no space left between them. Erin began to scream, struggling harder. Even so, there was no way of escaping Claudia's grip; the woman's strength was unbelievable.

“Stop this immediately. You really are behaving like a little child, Erin. I’m trying to get us out of here and you’re acting like a hysterical brat. That doesn’t help one bit,” Claudia admonished. “You have to stay calm, or it will only take longer to reach our goal.”

Erin stopped struggling, aware that she had lost control again. Ashamed of her childish behavior, she mumbled a “sorry” and let Claudia pull her further into the maze of dark corridors. Despite Claudia’s apparent confidence, she was sure that by now they should have found their way back to the vault’s entrance. To help ground herself, she stretched out a hand, dragging the tips of her fingers along the wet wall’s rough texture.

Finally, Claudia stopped and Erin felt herself pushed none too gently against a wall. “Why did we stop?” Erin whispered but received no answer. Instead she heard Claudia lighting a match, wondering why the hell the other woman hadn’t done that earlier. Erin had to close her eyes against the sudden brightness. Opening them again, she found herself in a chamber. Light came from two candles in sconces on the opposite wall. Erin turned her head slightly and saw a smirking Claudia, who stood in a circle of stones that was placed in the corner farthest away from her own position.

Claudia lifted a hand, pointing an outstretched finger at her. Murmured words echoed through the small chamber. What was happening? Erin wanted to move but felt immobilized, as if her hands and feet were bound. She couldn’t move an inch. “Claudia, what...”

“Oh, stop already. I can’t listen to your whining anymore,” Claudia replied coldly. “You wanted to experience something special with me tonight. And you are about to do so.”

“Claudia, what is this shit about? I’m not into stuff like this. I want to leave,” Erin snapped, her anger rising. What kind of stunt was Claudia trying to pull?

Claudia chuckled in reply. “You are such a gullible, sorry creature.” Cruel laughter echoed through the chamber, and it felt to Erin like a kick in the guts.

Erin fought hard to push down the tears that were threatening to fall, tears of mingled anger and fear. “Claudia, this isn’t funny. I want to leave. Now!” she cried.

“Nobody cares about what you want, love. It’s a bit of a shame that you won’t survive tonight. You weren’t so bad in bed, really.” Claudia stood straighter. “Pay good attention to what I am doing now, ‘cause no human eye has witnessed this ritual since my grandmother’s days. Ah, and sweetie... don’t bother screaming ‘cause no one will be able to get to us in time to save you.” Claudia began to chant, swaying back and forth on her heels. The chanting grew more and more intent, rising in volume until Erin felt as if her ears were about to bleed. The full force of Claudia’s power stung like a whip. Erin screamed as loud as she could, not caring about what Claudia had said. Somebody had to hear her. She knew that they would be missed by now, and surely Charles would look for them.

Her heart sank when her screaming and begging only infuriated Claudia further, who threatened to cut out Erin’s tongue if she didn’t stop. She couldn’t believe this was happening to her. Stuff like this simply didn’t happen in real life; only in tabloid newspapers and soap

operas. Nevertheless, here she was, held captive by a lunatic who was chanting words in a language Erin had never heard before. They sounded cruel and promised nothing good.

Erin's throat was hoarse from screaming when all of a sudden, the temperature dropped, cold biting through her clothes. Breath-mist hung in the air around her face. The candles threw strange shadows on the chamber's vaults, creating fantasy monsters in Erin's imagination. However, she sensed that *something* was shuffling in the chamber, just out of sight - something very real, something very hungry.

She stared at Claudia, who didn't look surprised or afraid but utterly content. Erin couldn't believe that this was the woman she had been intimate with the night before, the woman that she had made herself vulnerable to, the woman who had made her cry out in ecstasy and who had begged for more in return. How could she have been fooled so easily? Erin started to whimper. She didn't want to die. She knew that some horror was in the room with them, crawling in the shadows outside the little circle of light cast by the two candles. Pure evil had entered the chamber with them.

Erin struggled anew, trying to break free from whatever power held her in place. She panted for breath, her chest heaving. Scratching noises came from her right, and the most disgusting smell hit her nose, triggering a burst of nausea that made Erin gag.

The smell grew stronger, nearly unbearable. An unearthly moan made her flesh crawl. Claudia's chanting did not falter, but continued, the woman sounding more and more excited.

Erin felt foul hot breath on her right cheek, and knew that whatever had entered the chamber had found her. She was sobbing uncontrollably, tears and snot running down her face. As if from a distance, a calm part of her noticed that Claudia's chanting stopped.

The woman said, "Welcome. I brought you a sacrifice, Old One. A token of my admiration."

Then Erin saw 'it', the thing that Claudia had called "Old One" - a dark form that rose in front of her, its red eyes glowing with a demonic light. A rough tongue licked over her face, slick and searing against her skin like acid. A low guttural cry came from the being's throat, and Erin felt a sharp pain in her legs. Her trousers were ripped open. A cold, leathery hand grasped her flesh. The painful grip made her cry out, "No, please...no."

The beast didn't react to her plea. Instead claws dug into her soft flesh, tormenting her. She felt the warmth of her own blood running down her leg. Agony exploded through her body. She tried to squirm away, but was unable to move. Her face was slapped hard, her head rocking back on her neck. She was being ripped apart alive, the Old One playing with her like a cat with a mouse. Dazed, she thought that a mouse had at least a chance to outwit the cat or run away, but Claudia had made sure that she could not escape. An irrational part of her brain wondered if the Old One wouldn't have preferred a more active sacrifice.

Her thought was cut short when a clawed hand drilled into her other leg, a wave of fresh pain burning and driving a scream out of her raw throat. Claudia's cruel laughter added to Erin's agony and desperation. She wanted to give up. There was nothing she could do to save her

life. Just when she had given up, from out of nowhere came a forceful voice that didn't belong to Claudia. The voice shouted, "Stop!" Lightning streaked through the chamber, blinding Erin. The creature hissed with fury, and then a blood-gurgling wail rose through the chamber. Erin felt the being's rage surge through mind like a wave.

"This is stopping now. You, Old One, are not allowed here," the newcomer said, "and you have no right to be here." The beast roared, while Claudia screamed obscenities.

To Erin, all of it sounded good. Really good. Even though she was still overcome by fear and hurt like hell, a tiny spark of hope blossomed deep inside her. However, when she turned her aching head, that hope died. In the chamber's doorway stood the mean old hag and her red-haired granddaughter, Tallulah, who held the hag's walking stick. An eerie green light emanated from the end of the stick, bright enough for Erin to see the Old One, which proved to be an ugly, deformed being with wings and long fangs that looked as if it had just jumped out of the Edinburgh Dungeon.

The creature tried to avoid the light and sought refuge in the darkest corner. Erin still couldn't believe her eyes. A burst of adrenalin surged through her, dulling the pain from her wounds somewhat. Slowly, she dragged her gaze back to the old hag, who rushed to her side.

"How's everything with ye?" the woman asked in a voice so full of compassion that Erin felt more tears springing to her eyes. She did not dare believe this wasn't another trick that someone indeed had come to rescue her that maybe the nightmare was over.

The old hag - her name is Martha, Erin reminded herself - took a small chain with a pendant out of her pocket, putting it over Erin's head.

Erin's whole body tingled all over, warm waves pulsing over her skin and inside her flesh. Surprised, she found that she could move her fingers again, only the pain wasn't entirely gone. It still felt as if the flames of hell were burning through her legs. She groaned and writhed, scorched by the nearly unbearable fire.

At last, the pain began to retreat. Erin blinked hard, not understanding what had happened. She looked into Martha's gentle gaze, unable to speak.

"Ye wouldn't think an old woman like I had it still in her, aye?" Martha asked.

Erin looked down her bare legs. Her trousers were in tatters, but the only marks left from her ordeal were scars. No blood, no open wounds, no more pain. "How did you...?"

Martha opened her hand, showing Erin a softly pulsing green stone nestled in her palm as if that explained everything. The old woman gently pressed the stone against Erin's cheek and the same healing took place. As unbelievable as the whole ordeal was, she was nearly pain free in a few seconds, as if a beast of hell had not tried to chew her alive mere moments ago. Gazing into eyes that were so different now compared to earlier, Erin felt relief flood through her. Finally she could hope that this night wouldn't be her last on earth. As Martha took the stone away, Erin's attention was drawn to what was happening a few feet away.

“No,” she heard Claudia scream at Tallulah, who looked bigger than before, her swelling holding a grace and power that impressed Erin even more than the eerily glowing stick still held in her grasp.

Tallulah stepped closer to the stone circle, apparently unfazed by the other woman’s demeanor and unconcerned about the ugly beast that still occupied the back part of the chamber. In a voice dripping with honeyed venom, Tallulah said to Claudia, “Why don’t you join us, dear? It isn’t nice to invite a guest and then don’t welcome him personally.” She pushed two of the stones out of the way, opening the protective circle and leaving Claudia as exposed as everyone else in the room.

“No,” Claudia screamed a second time, and made a quick movement. Erin wasn’t sure what the woman had in mind—to close the circle again or to attack Tallulah—but Tallulah moved fast. She held up the walking stick, swishing it through the air and pointed it at Claudia, who stopped dead in her tracks. Hate contorted her formerly beautiful face. Nothing reminded Erin of the woman she had held in her arms the night before. Seeing Claudia revealed this way, Erin wondered if she would ever be intimate with another stranger, if she would ever be able to forget that she had shared her bed with pure evil.

Claudia pointed at Erin, declaring, “She’s mine. You can’t have her.”

“Sorry to disappoint you, but no one here is yours. Even your own life doesn’t belong to you anymore,” Tallulah responded, her laughter annoying Claudia even more. Claudia stretched out her hands as if throwing something at the younger woman. Before she could perform whatever she had in mind, Erin saw something dark moving inside the stone circle. The ugly beast had crossed the formerly protective barrier. Letting out a coughing roar, it jumped Claudia from behind. A cry of pain and fury echoed through the chamber, and Erin felt hot liquid on her face. Looking down, she noticed that she was splattered with blood, and she felt like vomiting. She averted her eyes, afraid to watch what was happening to Claudia. The crunching tearing noises and agonized shrieks were enough fodder for her nightmares.

“Come, too much evil in there. She needs to concentrate,” Martha said.

Too exhausted to fight against someone dragging her through the vault’s corridors yet again, Erin followed Martha, praying that for once her luck would hold and no further evil would come her way. The awful sounds continued behind her, growing fainter as Martha continued to pull her along the dark passageways. Erin tried not to picture what was happening back in the chamber with Claudia and Tallulah. Martha seemed to trust Tallulah to take care of herself. As for Claudia... Erin wrenched her thoughts away, trying to think of something else. She tried to focus on how good it would feel to be out of these chambers of horror, to breathe fresh air again, to embrace civilization and leave the supernatural behind.

For what felt like an eternity, Erin stumbled over the uneven ground, holding on to Martha’s warm and surprisingly comforting hand. How strong the old fragile woman suddenly proved to be! No more leaning heavily on a stick or limping around, seemingly capable of carrying

Erin along at will. The old body hid Martha's strength and agility, which was odd, but Erin gratefully followed until they reached a dimly lit room, then another not-so-dark hallway.

However, they didn't stop their headlong rush until Erin felt that she simply couldn't walk any farther. Everything hurt. However, no complaint forced the old woman to halt. She urged Erin on, wanting to get out of the vaults as fast as possible. At one point, when Erin's complaints became louder and more frequent, Martha snapped impatiently, "Better *haud yer wheesht*. The walls have ears down here. We don't want to draw attention."

Erin's mouth snapped shut and the feeling of vulnerability returned full force. She thought they had escaped the worst, but it seemed as if they still weren't as safe as Erin hoped. She didn't try to speak, and continued to follow Martha until she couldn't feel her feet any longer. Just as she was about to give up and beg to be left behind, they walked through a large door and were out of the vaults, standing in a narrow deserted street.

Fresh clean air hit Erin's face and she breathed it in gratefully. Never before had the sound of a car's engine been so lovely. Music came from somewhere, probably a pub around the corner. She grinned faintly. She was alive! Alive!

On the heels of her exultation, a wave of exhaustion rolled over her that made Erin lean against the wall behind her, breathing heavily. She couldn't stop the trembling that washed over her body and made her knees weak as pudding. Looking at Martha, she noticed how the old woman constantly scanned their surroundings. She didn't need to be told that they were still not entirely safe, but she simply couldn't and didn't want to move any more.

"Just a few more steps, come on. There is shelter around the corner," Martha cajoled in a soothing voice, beckoning Erin. "Look, I can't carry ye. A'm too old for this fun," she said with a dry chuckle.

Despite her state, Erin felt herself responding to the old woman's humor which gave her a bit of strength back. Still, every step was painful and she was more stumbling than walking, but finally they halted in front of a pub, the sign saying that it was called "The World's End." Erin looked questioningly at Martha. The old woman couldn't be serious. She was sure that she looked like shit, trousers in tatters and blood and gore covering her body and clothes.

"Aye, Ah'll want ye to go inside, go straight to the toilets and ask for Rena. Then wait for Tallulah. She will be here in short time. I have to leave ye here. Me time is up."

"No," Erin pleaded, shuddering as a fresh spate of fear weakened her further, "you can't leave me here. She will find me... or the beast..."

"No." Martha reeled Erin in and hugged her close. The old woman smelled like rose-scented powder, comforting Erin for a sweet moment. "Ye go on in," Martha went on. "Nothing will happen to ye Ah'll promise. But A' can't come with you. Ah'll have to leave."

Erin shook her head, clinging to Martha as if for dear life. All her doubts and mistrust concerning the one holding her were gone. She forgot the disputes and frosty glances; she

forgot her own need for self-sufficiency. This woman was her lifeline, and she wouldn't let go. Never before had she felt as sheltered and safe.

"I see you made it," a tired voice said from behind them. Erin turned to see Tallulah approaching with the now ordinary-looking walking stick in her right hand. She realized the girl's eyes were glowing as yellow as they had for a moment at St. Giles Church.

"Aye," Martha responded. "A' was just telling her to go inside. Why don't ye take her with ye? A' better leave now."

Erin looked back and forth between Martha, a woman who had healed her with stones, and Tallulah, a woman who had used magic to fight supernatural evil—and survived. Erin thought all of it seemed so unreal when at the same time, a motorbike drove past, reinforcing the mundane and providing a contrast to the magical.

"What is with... where is Claudia?" Erin whispered, afraid to hear the truth.

Tallulah studied her a moment before saying, "She won't harm you anymore. The Old One was satisfied with a very reluctant sacrifice tonight."

"She's dead?" Erin was utterly shocked, even though the sound of crunching bones had not left much to the imagination.

"Erin, a blood sacrifice had been promised. It was either you or her," Tallulah explained, meeting Erin's gaze calmly. "And I have preferred her to die tonight over you."

Bile rose in Erin's throat. She bent over, loudly emptying her stomach's content on the street. She couldn't stop until only dry heaves were left, cramping her belly. Horrible images flickered through her mind. Claudia, killed by the beast. Claudia, who wanted to sacrifice her. Claudia, who had brought her unbelievable pleasure the night before. Claudia, whom she had trusted and who had betrayed her.

"Hey," Tallulah's voice cut through the fog in Erin's brain, "why don't we skip the pub and I'll take you home with me? I guess a change of clothes is in order. We all look like hell." She turned to Martha. "We can do the debriefing later. The others will have to wait to hear the whole story. I'll call up Duncan and let him know."

Erin turned her head, eyes going wide as panic surged inside her. She couldn't go with this woman. Not alone. Erin looked at Martha, silently begging the old woman's help.

Tallulah laughed gently, glancing at Martha. "I guess you'll have to spend some more time with us. Looks like she doesn't trust me."

"No, she doesn't," Martha sighed. "All right, come on. Ah'll have some more time." She waved, and out from nowhere a black coach appeared, drawn by six black horses. There was no coachman on the box, but a whip snapped through the air, held by an invisible hand.

Erin stared wide-eyed at the arriving coach... the *có iste bodhar*, her horrified memory supplied. Her heart stuttered, and then everything went dark, oblivion sweeping her away.

* * *

The first thing Erin noticed when she regained consciousness was that she was very warm... uncomfortably warm. The second thing was that she felt like absolute crap. Pain hammered in her head, the taste in her mouth was utterly disgusting, and every nerve ending in her body felt scorched and frazzled. She slowly opened her eyes, having no idea where she actually was. It took a moment for her brain to absorb the reality surrounding her. This was her own bedroom. *How had she...?* The last thing she remembered was the *có iste bodhar*. And then, nothing. *Had all of it been a dream?*

She carefully looked around, trying to ignore her headache and aching muscles. There was no sign that anyone else was with her. This was her flat, her bedroom - no mistake. She remained still, listening intently with her eyes closed, but the only sounds she could detect were the humming refrigerator in the kitchen, and a garbage truck banging away outside.

Was it only a dream? she wondered a second time. The monster, her escape, Martha and Tallulah... Claudia's betrayal and death? She closed her eyes again, trying to get a grip on her inner turmoil. If this *had* been a dream... well, it was the worst and most realistic nightmare she had ever experienced. It was the stuff of horror stories—the good ones at least. Everything had felt so real, even the pain of the beast clawing at her flesh.

She opened her eyes again, noticing with irritation that the blanket she usually kept thrown across the back of her sofa was lying on top of her duvet. That explained the sauna-like temperature in her bed. Moving to throw the thing on the floor, she groaned. Her muscles hurt like hell. Great. She could remember having had a dream like that as a child. She had dreamed that she was riding a horse, and the next morning her muscles were sore and she hurt as if she had been sitting in a saddle for hours. Must have been the same kind of dream last night, she thought... too real for her body to ignore.

Claudia, she remembered. Claudia was real. Erin distinctly recalled that she had wanted to meet up with the woman last night. *So had she really met her? If so, why was she alone in her own bed? And naked as well?* She only slept in the buff if there was a good reason to strip to the skin, like sex. *Had Claudia been here and left already? Why? Why couldn't she remember?* Erin groaned.

What time is it anyway? A short and painful glance at the alarm clock on the bedside table told her that she was way too late for work already. Shit. She had to phone in and think of an excuse. Maybe she should just tell them she'd caught the flu. Felt like it, too, unless someone had slipped her a roofie at the pub she didn't remember going to. Shit!

Ordering her body to cooperate and ignoring the signals it was sending her, Erin cautiously moved her legs out of bed. The cold wooden floor felt nice against her overly warm feet. She

needed a minute to get used to being horizontal, for the world to stop spinning and her stomach to stop lurching. Slowly, she stood up. After the first step, she felt ninety years old, every joint creaking. Moving was a really, really bad idea. What the hell had she done yesterday?

Staggering into the bathroom, she took a look into the mirror above the sink and was taken aback by her reflection. Her face color reminded her of a zombie. Ash gray didn't even begin to describe it. And the dark shadows under her blood-shot eyes weren't improving her appearance either. Had she entered a drinking contest yesterday evening and forgotten all about it? She remembered that she had wanted to meet up with Claudia, who was looking forward to participating in a Ghost and Ghouls tour. And then... the *có iste bodhar*. But the so-called death coach must've been a dream caused by too much alcohol or maybe hash. She hadn't done hash in a long time but without a clear memory...

She absolutely needed to call Claudia, Erin decided. Whatever she had done or not done yesterday evening, she had to make sure that she hadn't behaved like a caveman or something equally stupid. Just as she turned away from the sink, her gaze fell on a chain around her neck. She recognized the pendant. This was the chain the old woman, Martha, had given her in the dream. But if it was here, then it couldn't have been a dream.

Erin touched the pendant and in a flash, everything came back to her. A door inside her mind opened wide. She remembered yesterday's events in full clarity and color. Trying to process all the pictures bombarding her brain, she realized her legs weren't holding her anymore and had to sit down on the toilet seat before she fell over.

Now she really felt ill. If last night's happenings hadn't been a nightmare, if monsters really did exist and Claudia had wanted to sacrifice her... all of it was real. *Shit! Shit! Shit!*

She had witnessed a murder, or at least a killing or however one called it when someone was eaten alive from a demon which he had summoned himself. Claudia had been a sacrifice to the Old One which she had summoned in the vaults. Erin groaned, her head sinking into her hands. What should she do? Did she have to go to the police? What would she tell them? That Claudia, her one night stand from Cornwall, had tried to sacrifice her to a demon and then had become a sacrifice herself. *Lucky me!*

Erin whimpered. She couldn't go to the police. They would either think she was a lunatic or arrest her for Claudia's murder, if there was anything left of the body. No one would believe her. She had a hard time believing it herself.

She could tell the police, but she couldn't run away from yesterday's events, either. Knowing that the supernatural did exist turned her perceptions topsy-turvy. Everything she had experienced informed her the supernatural existed, indeed. There were probably vampires, werewolves, poltergeists and worse out there. Were Edinburgh's ghost stories in part reality?

With shaking hands, Erin carefully touched the pendant on the chain around her neck. It felt warm and comforting. For a long moment, she stared into space, unable to decide what to do. Finally, she sighed. Really, when it came down to it, she could only face reality as she

had always done, even if that reality seemed unreal. No running away! But she had needed answers, and she knew who could give them to her.

Decision made, Erin got up. She would call in at work and ask for a day off, then take a shower and then head out to have lunch. It was time to pay a visit to the “The World’s End”.

The E nd... for now

Auld Reekie - Edinburgh

Closes – narrow alleys

cóiste bodhar – Edinburgh’s death coach

Eejit – idiot

Fowks – folks

gar your flesh grue – make the blood run cold

Hallae e’en - Halloween

haud yer wheesht – Hold your tongue!

And if you want to let me know what you think about the story write me at filfil67@yahoo.de
I’d love to hear back from you!