

Nightfall

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Shadow City Press

PROLOGUE

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The young man shivered as a gust of air entered the mausoleum. Though he huddled in the corner of the stone crypt, arms hugged around legs that he kept pulled to his chest, he could not escape the icy draft of the wind. The cement emanated a cold sensation that seeped through his jeans and numbed his buttocks. The slab of stone that constructed the wall he sat against chilled his back through the thin flannel shirt he wore. The tomb echoed the sounds of his chattering teeth and the clanking of the wrought iron gate at the mausoleum's entrance.

The realization hit him that, perhaps, he'd made a mistake. He had not anticipated running out of money so quickly. After all, he had only spent a week at the motel. Being young, he hadn't a concept of finances. He hadn't a clue that the money he'd taken provided him with nothing more than a week's worth of housing and food. The original plan was to find a job as soon as he got to the city. The young man didn't think it would be that difficult, but he had been proven wrong. Another thing he had taken for granted was the gelid weather of a northern winter. Nonetheless, his innocent ignorance left him homeless, without money or food for the past three days, and residing in a cemetery tomb.

He hesitantly moved his hand down to the mausoleum floor, where he felt for the furry lump that had been the center of his contemplation for the last hour. The rat had scared the hell out of him when it had moved across his legs a short time ago. He had practically jumped out of his skin and hit the back of his head upon the stone wall. Both frightened and frustrated, the adolescent grabbed for the rodent with a fierce grip. The rat squirmed within his clasp and began squealing when the young man tightened his clutch. He could feel the small bones easily crush in his grip. The crackling sound of the rat's skeleton reminded him of the Rice Krispies he once ate when he used to live with his family.

The young man's stomach churned. The dead rodent was still warm. What would it taste like? *No*, he told himself. He couldn't do that! The thought of the wiry hair of the rat in his mouth made it less appetizing. Then again, he reflected, he could pull the hairy exterior off the flesh as he chewed it. It would be no different than pulling off the skin of fried chicken, which he disliked.

With that thought rationalizing the situation, he put the corpse of the rat to his lips. The hair was smooth. *I can do this*, he encouraged himself. He tilted his head to the side, mouth wide open, like the way he ate jumbo hot dogs back home. He was awfully hungry.

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Through unorthodox sight, they watched him. Like a band of gypsies with crystalline vision, the adolescent gave prudence to their arrival. Their eyes feasted upon him with the same inhuman hunger he had developed for the rat. Yet, as much as they desired the teenager, they were ruled by a cosmic commandment preventing them from going to him.

He must come to them.

They had no doubt that he would.

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When the young man first dug his teeth into the belly of the rat, he almost gagged. It took him three times, along with the constant rumbling of his stomach, before he was finally able to rip a chunk from the rodent. The warmth of blood spit at his cheek and visceral juices exploded in his mouth as he forced himself to chew on the tender meat. With inexperienced uncertainty, the teen used his teeth to divide the skin from the flesh and used his thumb and index finger to pull the hairy exterior from his mouth.

His taste buds were accosted by the salty taste of the rodent's bodily juices. Although the flesh itself was rather bland, the meat was warm and temporarily halted the shivering of his body. He repeatedly chewed on the soft tissue of his first bite until it was nothing but ground meat. When he was about to swallow, he had half the mind to spit the rat meat out. However, he willed himself to gather the courage that, ultimately, would alleviate his fear. Once the mangled meat of the rat traveled down his gullet and into his stomach, his appetite kicked into gear.

He took a second bite, and a third. He began chewing the meat less and swallowing larger pieces. He had instantly developed a precise routine for separating the skin from the flesh of the rat with his fingers and teeth. Occasionally, the prick of a soft bone against his inside cheek would create an obstacle. Yet, he quickly learned to casually extract the bone from his mouth as if it a tendril found while eating a turkey leg.

A subtle glow upon the cement floor of the mausoleum diverted the young man's attention from his prey. Instinctively, he threw the rat to the other side of the crypt and wiped the dripping juices from the soft hairs upon his chin with the sleeve of his flannel.

He hadn't realized how much energy he had gained from eating the rat, until he noticed the vigor he had to stand to his feet and investigate the mysterious glow. The faint color of orange, or maybe red, was cast upon the gray flooring. Surely, he thought to himself, it must be coming from outside. He cautiously crept toward the wrought iron gate of the mausoleum and peered into the darkness.

A fierce wind chilled his face as he winced across a sea of tombstones to discover the source of the mysterious glowing. Less than a hundred yards away, the youth spotted a black imprint stamped against the deep purple night. It was difficult to recognize, and his mind was too frazzled to understand it. It appeared as a flat piece of black air somehow misplaced in the atmosphere. It was bordered by edges that emitted a red-tinted blaze, like an angry fire.

Fire, he thought. *Warmth*. With that, he unhinged the gate to the mausoleum and pushed it outward. The screaming creak of the gate had him observant of his immediate surroundings. The paranoia of being caught by the police made his heart race. He was sure his parents had filed a runaway report on him. He'd be damned if he went back to their house and had to follow their stringent rules.

The gelid mouth of a midnight winter consumed the youth as he furthered himself from the still coldness of the mausoleum. He weaved in and out of the maze of graveyard headstones; back hunched and legs bent at the knees, as he approached the fire with the agility of a cat. The wind pushed against him several times from all directions, raising

goosebumps upon his covered flesh. Surely, it would snow tonight. The chilled atmosphere only gave the adolescent more motivation to reach the warmth of the fire.

Midway through his stride toward the fire, the he came to a halt. Amidst the low howling of the wind, he thought he heard whispering. But it wasn't the type of murmur like that of a single person; the resonance upon the chilly wind announced multiple whispers, both low and high-pitched. The lower undertones were altogether muffled and hoarse, nevertheless scary. Then came a sound like paper being crumpled or torn in two. He sought out the darkness in all directions around him, acting the prey to an unknown animal lurking in the surrounding night. He clutched at his chest as he felt it tighten. His heart began to race and his stomach felt as if it were being tickled from the inside out. As his heartbeat quickened, his mind sped through the limitless possibilities of what the sound could be. A wolf? *No, couldn't be*, he told himself, wolves howl and he hardly found the city to be the setting for such an animal. Yes, perhaps a wild animal of some sort. *But animals don't whisper*, he quickly deduced. The tearing sound, he brought to mind, ignited images of his mouth tearing into the rat. Suddenly, the youth was awestruck in childhood terror.

He recalled a documentary he had once seen, perhaps five years ago when he was twelve. The program depicted the myths of monsters—from ghosts to vampires to...ghouls. Yes, he remembered, the segment about ghouls scared him the most. He recollected the prickling sensations of fear that had enveloped his body on many nights as he lay in bed. Sometimes, he imaged the hand of the horrid creature creeping up to grab him from under his bed. Or, worse yet, the shadowy image of the gangly monster as it emerged from his closet door. In the youth's fragile mind, he would envision the ghostly being slowly moving towards him, with hands that freakishly hung below its knees and sported rigid claws for nails.

To alleviate this nightmare becoming, he would always remind himself that, just as portrayed in the documentary, ghouls did not lurk in closets or beneath beds. No, instead they haunted cemeteries, hiding in the shadows of tombstones and feasting on the newly buried bodies of the dead.

The murmurs, along with the wind, hushed. The young man could hear his strongly beating heart in his ears. *What if it was true? What if ghouls did exist?* And, here he was, in the middle of their hunting grounds, late in the nighttime midst of the witching hour. His imagination began to get the best of him. *Ghouls! Oh god, they're going to eat me!* With that hindering thought keeping him stock still, he turned his attention back to the would-be fire and made a mad dash.

The young man refused to look behind as he raced through the necropolis. Though he felt something was chasing him, he rejected the idea of turning around and facing it. To either side of him, his peripheral vision gave way to a fast blur; he maintained his visual target of the radiance he was eagerly approaching.

Once the youth was in proximity of the glowing, it became discouragingly apparent that it wasn't a fire at all. It appeared a large, vertical rectangle of blackness against the night. Still, its borders emitted a fiery red. This piqued his attention. He had to get warm!

The young man raced to the radiance and stretched his hands toward the pulsing light.

The constant resonance of a static buzz escaped behind the young man. It was like that of a television channel gone off programming for the evening. The noise was off in a distance, perhaps in another room. *Yes*, the youngster dreamily reckoned, *Dad must have fallen asleep in front of the TV again*. He realized that he must've been in his own bedroom, between the conscious and subconscious realm of half-sleep. *In bed?*

If so, then he'd had the most vivid dream! He had runaway from home; he'd spent three nights living in a cemetery, in a crypt. It was so cold, and he ate a rat! The salty taste of the rodent's insides still annihilated the boy's taste buds. *No*, he battled with his mind; *I did run away, and I am in a cemetery*. Yet, the chilling wind no longer accosted him. Instead, he felt pleasing warmth.

With the inviting atmosphere easing his mind, the youth's eyes slowly fluttered open. What, at first, was only a blemished blur, revealed an impossible visual mystery. The young man, flabbergasted by his surroundings, hesitantly stood to his feet.

The burning orange of a whole new world had eclipsed the inky darkness of night. The young man stood, mouth agape, in awe of everything in sight. The landscape stretched out before him, a veritable orange-colored desert floor of cracked earth. In the distance, a sea of fire bubbled and swelled like an ocean of lava. Plumes of flames exhaled hither and thither from beneath the molten liquid, as if some fire-breathing creature gave off life beneath the smoldering fluid. He anxiously sought out the sky, but no matter how high he searched toward the heavens, he could only find a series of unending granite walls that peaked higher than any mountain range. The rocky mass reflected the orange glow of the fiery sea, as did the hard earth of petrified dirt. The youth could only compare his setting to that of a volcanic cavern.

Where the hell was he and, what's more, how did he get here?

The familiar guttural whispering he had heard while still in the cemetery interrupted his puzzling query. However, the raucous murmurs began to grow louder, perhaps closer. The young man stood frozen, unable to move in this unfamiliar world. From behind, the resonance of hoarse moaning became more evident.

No, he thought. *Can't turn around*.

The youth felt the heat of a fetid breath touch the nape of his neck and travel around to accost his nostrils.

Oh my god, oh my god! Don't want to see it! His posture grew stiff; his heart heavily pounded within his chest.

On either side of his shoulders, he horrifically observed two hands make their way from behind him and down to his chest. They appeared as human hands until the terrified lad noticed the monstrous, brown and tangled nails.

He trembled. It was as if the epicenter of an earthquake had emitted from his stomach, sending all of his limbs into an uncontrollable quaver.

He knew he had to turn around. But, before he could summon enough will to face the thing behind him—and, oh god, he knew what it was—the inhuman hands tightly gripped at his flesh and spun him around in a swift force.

The youth caught glimpses of what followed, as he fell to the ground, feverishly flailing his arms and legs about the hardened dirt and screaming with all his will.

A scraggly haired, almost bald subhuman was atop of him. Three more emerged from nowhere. Claws scratched deeply into his neck, legs and chest. Black eyes. Four monsters had mounted him. Four *ghouls*. His shirt had been shredded. His adolescent flesh had been torn by brown-black claws. Sunken jaws, like skeletal faces. Teeth. Jagged teeth!

He wanted to go home.

The young man's mind was launched into an ultimate frenzy of terror as he felt the multiple teeth of the creatures burrow into his stomach. The hot blood of his viscera pooled upon his chest as the gnawing pain of his flesh shot paralyzing sensations throughout his body. Soon, the life of the youth faded, as the gnashing of his flesh and slurping sounds of his fluids became a nightmarish lullaby that would put him to a sleep from which he would never naturally awaken.

He wished he could tell the rat he was sorry.