

Excerpt from *Morrigan*

Abel hadn't realized Pepper's Mill had houses this nice. The Hammond place was a mini-mansion, like one of those old plantation houses of the Old South, complete with tall columns and a white-railed balcony. It stood out against the surrounding fields like a castle. And here he was, Romeo visiting Juliet in her tower, although he hoped the ending to his story would involve less death.

Then he saw her standing on the balcony, framed by the window's light and more beautiful than ever. She had changed out of her dress into a road-ready white tank top and black jeans.

"Took you long enough." Morgan tossed him down a key. "Go through the cellar and meet me inside. I need your help with something before we leave."

Abel caught the falling key and started to ask where the cellar was, but Morgan was already gone. With a shrug, he walked around the building until he spotted a small double door built into the side of the house at an angle and sealed with a padlock. He stuck the key into the padlock and, with some effort, clicked it open. Pulling open the doors, he descended into the damp darkness.

In the light from his phone's flashlight, Abel saw boxes and old furniture left down here as food for mushrooms. The whole place stank of mildew and rotting meat. He stopped short. Rotting meat? Had something died down here? Probably just a squirrel or possum, but why was he so uneasy? And why did he feel eyes staring at his back? He whipped the light around, but wasn't sure whether he saw something darting out of sight or the dust he'd kicked up himself.

And was that hoarse laughter or settling furniture?

*It's just your mind playing tricks on you,* Abel told himself. But something ancient stirred in him, rippled through generations from before science and reason, slithered through dark waters of old magic and unholy terror, threatened to leap from his throat in a primal scream.

The door to the house proper swung open, bathing Abel in rays of artificial light and calming his hysteria.

"Took you long enough," he said with a grin.

Morgan sighed. "Fair. Come on."

"What exactly are we doing?" Abel stuck his phone in his pocket and bounded up the stairs to meet her. "If you're planning some revenge scheme like stealing or vandalism—"

"Revenge comes later." Morgan shut the cellar door behind him. "Right now, I need to get rid of this." She pulled up the right leg of her jeans and tapped a thin iron band clasped around her ankle.

Abel peered at the band. It was etched with runes and Celtic knots and symbols so dark he didn't want to think about their meaning. "Weird choice of accessory."

"Cora's choice, not mine," said Morgan, "and it's not just a bracelet. Think of it like an unconventional ankle monitor. As long as I'm wearing it, Cora's got me on house arrest. I can't go anywhere she doesn't want me to."

"She did this to you? That's sick."

"You don't know the half of what she's done to me," Morgan said, rage shivering through her voice as her jeans fell back into place. "But I can't get out and, until tonight, no one else could get in. It took me a few tries to find the one unguarded entrance to the house. If you'd

come in any way but the cellar, you'd be dead right now."

Abel swallowed. "You're telling me she booby trapped the house?"

The look Morgan gave him told him she wasn't joking. "Cora is the poster child for paranoia."

He cast a nervous glance down the hallway. "Please tell me she's not here right now."

"She had some 'errands' to run. And I'm guessing she didn't mean a quick trip to the grocery store." Morgan grabbed his arm and pulled him through the kitchen and up the main stairs.

"Easy," Abel complained, trying to pull away. Morgan's fingers clutched him so tight they threatened to crack bone. "I can walk by myself, you know."

Morgan let go and cleared her throat in embarrassment. "Sorry. I guess I'm just really eager to get out of here." She stopped outside a bedroom door, uncertain. "This is Cora's room. The key to my ankle monitor is in there. I'd get it myself, but. . ." She stretched out her hand. Where her fingertips crossed the threshold, green flames sparked to life and danced around them, charring and blistering where they touched.

"Holy crap!" Abel grabbed her arm and pulled it back, staring at the empty doorway and wondering what chemical reaction could cause that, or where the motion detectors and flame nozzles were, or if there even was such a rational explanation for this.

Morgan rubbed her blackened fingers, drawing Abel's attention. "Are you okay? Those burns look pretty bad. Is there any aloe in the house?"

"Yeah, but you don't want to go in the bathroom," said Morgan. "Snakes in the toilet. I'll be fine; I've had worse." She cast a worried look at the doorway. "But I just realized I don't

know whether that's only a reaction to my ankle monitor to keep me out, or whether anyone other than Cora who tries to get through. . .” Her voice trailed off.

“Gets barbecued,” Abel finished.

Morgan offered a half-hopeful smile. “She likes the occasional gentleman caller in her bed, though. She wouldn’t have shielded it from everyone. You’ll probably be fine.”

“You’re a real comfort in these dark times.” Abel held his breath, closed his eyes, and stretched out his hand, slowly, waiting for the searing pain of green fire.

It never came. He opened his eyes to find his arm halfway into the room. Not even a wisp of smoke rose from his sweater.

“I’m okay!” He laughed nervously. “I’m not on fire.”

“Great!” said Morgan. “Now go!” She pushed him hard, and he stumbled through the door.

“Thanks.” He straightened up to look around the room. He wished he hadn’t.

Cora’s sick-green blouse had clearly been the tip of the obsession iceberg; the color was everywhere from the carpet to the bedspread to the curtains pulled across the windows. Abel stood there, locked in battle with his rebellious gag reflex. Finally, he got it under control and peered deeper into the shadowy room.

“Bingo,” he whispered, spotting a key rack on the wall. “Which key am I looking for?”

“Is there more than one?” Morgan asked.

Abel pawed through house keys, car keys, safe keys, and keys that went to who knew what. “Lots, yeah.”

“Then you want one that’s old fashioned, and iron, like the ankle monitor.”

“These all look pretty modern to me.”

“She wouldn’t hang it on a key rack, though,” said Morgan. “This is the key to me we’re talking about. She’ll have a special place for it.”

Abel’s gaze moved to the dresser, to the antique full-length mirror, and then to a nightstand topped with a lamp, a bottle of eye drops, a romance novel. . . and a jeweled box with a picture of Cora and Morgan framed on the lid. Cora had her arms around Morgan and a grin on her face. Morgan looked like she was holding back from stabbing Cora in the face.

“The key to me. . .” He sucked in his breath as he took the box in his hands. “Please don’t be a trap,” he pleaded, and threw back the lid.

No poison darts, no electric current, no green fire. He was still alive. And lying in the velvet interior was an iron key.

He snatched up the key, closed the box, and ran back to Morgan, holding his prize aloft. “Found it!”

“Quick, get it off!” Morgan lifted her leg.

Abel pushed the jeans back from her ankle, felt around the iron band until he found the keyhole, and slipped the key into place. The band snapped open with a burst of heat and thudded to the floor, and Morgan drank in a breath as though it had been clasped around her throat.

“You have no idea how good that feels,” she said with a sigh of pleasure that made Abel’s skin tingle. He dropped her leg, self-conscious about how long he’d been holding it.

“Thirsty. . .”

“Yeah, I could totally go for a drink,” said Morgan. “Soon as we get clear of Pepper’s Mill, I’m buying us a round.”

But Abel's skin goose-pimpled again, not from pleasure but from the same ancient fear in the cellar. "I didn't say that."

"Thirsty. . ."

The two peered down the stairs to see someone—no, something—clambering up towards them. At first it looked like a little old man with a pointed red cap and a long white beard. But even the oldest men weren't that short and bone thin. And their eyes didn't burn red. And their fingers didn't end in iron claws like eagle talons. And their caps didn't drip drying blood down their wrinkled faces.

"Thirsty!" the thing hissed, and another two appeared at the bottom of the stairs, climbing after it.

"Holy. . ." Terror left Abel unable to finish his thought or even run away. Morgan pulled him back into Cora's room and slammed the door.

"You realize you just cornered us in here with those things," said Abel. The urge to scream again pushed his voice up an octave.

"What's the matter?" Morgan asked with a smirk. "They scare you?"

Abel stared at her wide-eyed. *Is she serious right now?* "They're gnomes with sharp talons and a thirst for human blood, so yes, they scare me! What the heck are they, anyway?"

"I've seen them once before." Morgan peeked under the bed, shoved the dresser aside. "Spent a few years in Scotland. Red Caps, the locals called them. I've seen them rip a grown man apart in less time than it takes to blink."

"Really not helping," Abel muttered, faint from fear and nauseated from the green room. The Red Caps outside hissed and scratched and threw themselves against the door.

“I should have known Cora wouldn’t leave any entrance unprotected.” Morgan moved the mirror aside and checked the back. “Smart of her to use guard dogs I’m less familiar with.”

“Those guard dogs are going to break through the door any minute,” said Abel.

The knob twisted, and the door swung open.

“Or they could just open it, since no one bothered to lock it.”

“Thirsty!” sang the rough chorus of Red Caps, now six strong.

Abel backed away, tripped over his own feet, and landed hard on the carpet. He scampered to the wall and pressed his back against it. The Red Caps were only as tall as his knees, but they didn’t need size with claws like that. He could already feel those iron talons ripping into his flesh. All he could think was *God, please don’t let me die in a room the color of seasickness.*

He searched the room for Morgan and spotted her in the walk-in closet, rifling through clothes. “Please tell me you’re working on a brilliant escape plan. I could really go for one of those right about now.”

“How many patterned blouses does one woman need?” Morgan muttered to herself, and then shouted, “Aha! Found it!”

“Great! Could you use it before I’m sliced and diced?” Abel pushed against the wall, trying his best to crawl through it, but the Red Caps were almost in reach. Then the one at the head of the pack lunged for his throat.

“MORGAN!” Abel shrieked and threw himself to the side. He felt a wind and saw a blur. Something thumped against the dresser and fell to the floor.

It was the Red Cap’s head. Its body lay three feet away, leaking blood like a punctured

tank.

Abel toppled backwards and scrambled away on all fours like some awkward crab as Morgan, swirled above him in a deadly dance. Morgan brandished a thin broadsword and tiptoed through the Red Caps, the epitome of grace. She skewered one, sliced the throat of another, kicked a third through the mirror and hurled the shattered glass into the stomach of the fourth, and split the final goblin clean in half at the waist. All that violence with as little effort as a ribbon dancer.

Abel gawked openmouthed. “Who are you?”

She offered him a red-splattered hand up and pulled him to his feet. “I am the Morrigan, goddess of war.”

Abel blinked and nodded. “Oh. Now see, that’s the sort of thing you want to bring up before the first date.”

“If this is your idea of a date,” Morrigan said with a teasing smile, wiping her sword clean on the drapes and sheathing it, “you’re more my type than I thought.”

Abel tried to come up with a reply, but the word “goddess” slowly worked its way through his brain, trying to make sense. Before it sunk in, though, movement caught his eye. The first Red Cap had crawled toward his head and stuck it back in place on his shoulders. Around the room, the other creatures stirred.

“Zombie gnomes?” Abel asked, that old hysteria creeping back into his voice.

“Not zombies.” Morrigan drew her sword again. “Just immune to most forms of mortal harm.”

“So what doesn’t fall under the ‘most’ category?” Abel asked.



“No idea,” said Morrigan. “I’ve never seen them die; I’ve only seen them kill.”

“I imagine it’s pretty painful,” said Abel as the Red Caps closed in again.

“It did involve copious amounts of blood,” said Morrigan, putting herself between Abel and the little monsters. “And screaming.”

“Wow, that’s exactly what I needed to make me feel better.” Abel’s head swam.

“Thanks.”

Morrigan sprang forward, hacking at the Red Caps again. This time, though, they were quicker, dodging her blade with ease. She wounded a couple, but then a talon sliced her forearm. She hissed in pain, her sword wavered, and the Red Caps batted it away across the room, backing the goddess against the bed and surrounding her.

The leader, who hadn’t quite gotten its head back on straight, approached Abel, claws gleaming darkly, the twisted smile even more crooked than before. “Thirsty!” it howled.

Abel wanted to run. He wanted to fight. But he wasn’t a warrior. He was a highly conditioned preacher’s kid, and somewhere in the back of his mind, a bell clanged away. The scream that had built for so long broke forth in a Bible verse, the first one that came to mind in times of fear: ““When I am afraid, I will trust in you!””

The Red Cap popped like a gorged mosquito, showering Abel in blood. He squeezed his eyes shut as the liquid splattered his face and clothes, making his skin crawl. When it was over, he wiped his glasses clean as best he could. All that remained of the Red Cap was a sticky red puddle and a single yellowed tooth.

Morrigan stared at Abel in surprise. The Red Caps stared at Abel in horror. Abel stared at the tooth in mild confusion. Something in him felt like he should react more strongly to being

covered in goblin blood, that shock numbed him. But honestly, he was just happy his random Scripture spouting had worked. And it seemed ironic that somehow, on a day that involved meeting evil gnomes and teenage war goddesses, this qualified as the weirdest thing he'd seen.

Panicked, the Red Caps surged toward Abel, and he forced his brain back into gear, scrambling for more Bible verses.

“‘Trust in the Lord with all your heart!’ ‘For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God!’ ‘You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free!’ ‘For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son!’”

At each verse, another Red Cap burst in a wet crimson firework, and four new teeth plopped into the soaked carpet.

Abel flashed a cocky grin at the final goblin. “‘Jesus wept!’”

*Splat!* No more Red Caps.

A smile spread across Morrigan's lips. “Wow. And here I thought I'd only need you to get the key. I might have to keep you around for a while.”

Abel frowned. “Was that not the plan?”

“Dunno. I'm sorta making this plan up as I go.”

“Me too. I have no idea how I did what I did. What did I do?”

“Most evil creatures can't set foot on holy ground, like a church.” Morrigan tore a strip from the curtains to bind the wound on her forearm. “I guess it's the same principle with Holy Scripture, only these Red Caps must be concentrated evil for so little to obliterate them.”

Abel looked down at his blood-drenched clothes and wiped as much as he could from his face. “I wish there were a way to obliterate them a little less completely.”

Morrigan grinned, using the bedspread to towel off her own dripping red face and to wipe her sword clean. “You’ll get used to it.”

Abel nodded. . . and then doubled over and puked all over the carpet.

Morgan knelt behind him until the flow stopped. “All better?”

Abel wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “Hey, the carpet hides the mess. Guess that color really is good for something.”

“I’ll take that as a yes. Come on!” Morrigan grabbed his hand and pulled him out of the room and down the stairs. They ran through the cellar and out to a tarp-covered car behind the house. Morrigan threw back the tarp to reveal a vintage Mustang convertible, as close to Cora’s shade of green as the car manufacturers could bring themselves to paint it.

“Won’t her car be protected too?” Abel asked.

“It’s not the car she doesn’t want people stealing away.” Morrigan threw her sword into the back. “Get in.”

Abel slid into the passenger seat and buckled up, expecting them to take off. Instead, Morrigan felt around beneath the steering wheel for something.

“Shouldn’t we be driving away?” Abel asked.

“I’m gonna need time to hotwire the car,” said Morrigan.

“You know how to do that?”

“Of course! I’ve seen it on TV plenty of times.” She leaned over farther. “I know those wires are here somewhere.”

Abel rolled his eyes. “I’ll be right back.” He was halfway to the house before Morrigan could protest. Half a minute later, he was in Cora’s room, ignoring the carnage and running his

fingers over the key rack until he found the car keys. He snatched them up and hurried back down the stairs—and froze.

A key turned in the front door lock. Cora was home.