

The Neighborhood, Proper

Inside the Priory Market of Crow's Nest Pass, Arabel scanned the crowd for her best friend, Shelaine. She was usually easy to spot, due to her red hair and fondness for wearing orange.

But tonight, the Priory was hosting the Night of Lost Souls celebration, and busier than usual. Revelers from all four districts of The Korvids—Ravenswood Glen, Magpie Moor, Crow's Nest Pass, and Blue Jay Hollow—thronged the old stone building.

The scent of strawberry taffy was strong. Arabel's mouth watered in anticipation as she joined the short lineup at the taffy stall. Dinner seemed a long time ago.

Suddenly jostled, she bumped into a boy from her graduating class last year at school. Smirking, he mouthed two words at her: *witchy girl*.

Beside him, his friend—a boy she didn't know—began to laugh. Unwilling, but unable to stop it, she heard his mental dialogue within her brain, as if he spoke aloud.

Pretty, but too bad she's so weird.

Arabel's mouth went dry. Turning back toward the taffy stall, she concentrated on slowing her breath, stopping her angry retort. When her arm was jostled again, she whipped around, fire in her eyes. But it was Shelaine.

Pulled into a quick hug, Arabel's defensiveness slid away.

Shelaine's unruly red hair poked out from beneath her bright orange woolen hat. Her cheeks were pink from the cold.

"The carriage took forever to get here!" she complained.

"I'm so glad to see you."

“Does your grandmother know you left the house?”

“No, I was lucky! She’s at her club.” Arabel’s tone was tart. “The great Amelia Bodean Johnston will be filled to the brim with liquor right about now.”

"Then let’s forget about her and enjoy our freedom!"

“Agreed! I can’t wait to see the bonfire! And the dancers!”

The girls moved up to the taffy counter, next in line. From here, they could see the entire display. There was blueberry, strawberry, watermelon, molasses, peppermint, and something that looked like maple.

“Which taffy do you girls fancy?” the elderly sales clerk asked when it was their turn.

“Strawberry, please!” Shelaine replied.

Arabel slid a coin down along the counter toward the sales clerk before Shelaine could beat her to it as the man scooped pink taffy into a bag.

Shelaine wagged her finger at Arabel in a pseudo-scold. “My treat, next time!”

Arabel accepted the overflowing bag of bright pink taffy from the taffy man. “Thank you, sir.” She plucked a piece, passed the bag to Shelaine. “Let’s go outside. It’s almost time.”

Making their way through the market’s bustling stalls and tables, they admired the many varieties of merchandise created especially for the festival. The Night of Lost Souls had inspired a swathe of intricately-woven blankets, original artwork, intriguing sculpture, curios, and handicrafts.

Celebrating reunion with loved ones after death, most of the art featured brightly-painted skulls and dancing skeletons in colorful costumes. Many played musical instruments, like guitars, drums, and fiddles.

“After the Torch lighting, we *have* to shop!” Shelaine declared as they reached an exit out to the courtyard.

Under a canopy of stars, the courtyard was dimly lit and misty. Revelers streamed onto the uneven cobblestones, indistinguishable, a dark mass of bobbing, moving figures.

Swept up into the mob, Arabel was suddenly distracted.

She sensed the excitement of the gathered masses, the general mood of revelry. But just beneath, a thinly-disguised tension roiled below the happy façade.

There was a grey and swirling energy present. She could see it, feel it, almost taste it—like chalk. Her mouth felt suddenly gritty and she was incredibly thirsty. She swayed, off-balance.

Shelaine’s concerned face swam in front of her eyes. “Are you unwell?”

“Do you see that? The grey energy?”

Shelaine put her arm around Arabel. “I just see the night sky. And the lanterns inside the market.”

Arabel steadied herself as unease filtered through her awareness. “Something’s wrong. But I don’t know what it is.”

Trumpets announced the commencement of the ceremonies as fourteen female trumpeters and flutists in blue and gold robes emerged from the Priory. The familiar notes of the festival’s theme song rang out.

Erupting into cheers, whistles, and hand claps, the crowd chanted in time with the trumpets. “No one is lost, no one is lost, no one is lost—”

The musicians advanced toward the Great Torch in the center of the courtyard.

Wielding flaming batons, dozens of gyrating fire-dancers shimmied into view. Enscorced in shiny black costumes with white skeletons painted on them, they swirled dizzying fire circles against the night sky.

A troupe of jugglers ran out behind the fire-dancers. Clowning for the crowd, they wore white costumes with black skeletons painted on them. Back and forth, overtop one another's heads, they threw, and caught, oversized white milk bottles.

Grey energy wove in and out of the excited, unaware faces, smearing them with tendrils of transparent soot. Arabel stared at the townspeople, transfixed. Did no one else see the malice?

Sudden brightness returned her attention to the procession.

A massive plume of rising black smoke announced the flame to kindle the pyre. Confined within an enormous titanium cone, it symbolized the power of light to eradicate darkness. Carried by six flame-bearers in silver tunics, the muscle-bound men balanced it overtop their heads. Using long, strategically-placed wooden handles, each man sustained a portion of the vast weight.

The crowd roared approval at the illumination as the musicians sounded their final note. Lowering their instruments, the trumpeters and flutists positioned themselves to the left of the Great Torch.

Ranging themselves around the musicians, the fire-dancers froze in position, flaming batons raised skyward. Last to assemble, the jugglers clambered into alignment with the dancers, milk bottles held aloft in comic parody.

Reaching the Great Torch, the flame-bearers knelt and lowered the cone, tipping it downward. Greedy licks of fire immediately consumed the kindling. Arabel heard the collective sigh.

Then, the screams.

Draped against the base of the Great Torch was a naked female cadaver. The thin white arms and legs of the corpse were garish under the red glow. The delicate mist did nothing to alleviate the horror of the spectacle.

“Oh, no!” Shelaine clutched Arabel’s arm. “The poor girl!”

“Who is it?” a man yelled. “Who’s the dead girl?”

“Can’t see her face!” a woman cried.

“Who is it?” another voice demanded.

The musicians and jugglers scattered into the crowd. Smoke spirals followed the path of the fire-dancers as they also broke formation and fled.

“Cover her up!” A man’s voice rang out. “It’s indecent!”

“It’s *murder!*” an old woman screeched. “Just like the ‘dark times’! Murder, I say!”

The old woman began to keel. She rocked back and forth, clutching her arms to her chest. Others joined in, unleashing their collective grief against the impervious crackle of the conflagration.

A small woman standing next to Arabel suddenly fainted, lurching toward the ground. Her partner barely managed to cradle her head before she hit the cobblestones. Arabel and Shelaine jumped back to make room.

The unconscious woman’s companion lifted her quickly, carrying her away from the perimeter of the Torch. Others pressed closer, drawn to disaster and death like flies or vultures.

The grey energy was spreading malicious glee.

Arabel watched it hover above the crowd, caressing the unease with confusion. She wanted to close her ears to the discordant babble of sound filling the courtyard as fear and anger disgorged themselves in the screams and shouts of the afflicted.

The authorities finally appeared.

Mayor Aldritch and Chief Constable Bartlin pushed their way in front of the Great Torch, camouflaging—but not dismissing—the gruesome sight.

The Chief signaled his men to cordon off the area. “Don’t touch the body! Move back!”

Several youths didn’t listen, pushing forward, instead. A small girl stumbled, caught at the last moment by an observant older sister. Hemmed in by the mob, Arabel and Shelaine complied as best as they could. The heat from the flame was staggering.

The Chief raised his baton. “Move back, I said!”

The mayor’s voice cut across the din. “Does anyone have information on this heinous crime? Tell us now, if so!”

“Do your own job!” a man yelled back.

The crowd was loud, filled with obnoxious righteousness. Arabel felt confused. The grey energy was scrambling her brain.

“Check the Travelers!” someone cried. “They’re always causin’ trouble!”

A general roar of dissent erupted from the revelers. Chief Constable Bartlin waved his baton again in the air.

“Enough! Clear this area now!” he barked. “Report to the jailhouse tomorrow at five a.m. if you’re inclined to aid the investigation! We *will* find—and punish—whoever did this! Be warned!”

“Go home!” Mayor Aldritch’s voice cracked as he tried to be heard over the mob.

“Proceed in an orderly manner! The festival is canceled!”

Arabel leaned against Shelaine for comfort and warmth. “I’m going to volunteer.”

“Who would do such a thing?” Shelaine’s voice wobbled. “I think I’m going to throw up.”

Arabel thrust her water flask into Shelaine’s hand. “Have a drink. Might help.”

Territorial screams pierced Arabel’s ears as grey energy continued to circle the body. Sorrow and bloodlust surrounded them.

The Night of Lost Souls was no longer a celebration of reunion with the Other Side. It was now a night of murder.

Bathed in waning moonlight, the jailhouse looked eerie as Arabel approached. She increased her pace, desirous of warmth after walking the last half an hour in the cold. Re-tying her black cape closer around her neck, she was surprised at the number of volunteers milling outside the squat brick building.

Four officers moved people into pairs, assembling search parties. Arabel’s heart sank. There’d be no opportunity to warm up inside the building today. Just as she resigned herself to frozen limbs, one of the officers spotted her.

He pointed. “You! Spade!”

Her face flushed instantly as attention diverted toward her. She saw the odd looks. Heard the whispers, the nicknames she’d endured since childhood.

Witchy girl. Pixie maiden. The weird girl.

Momentarily paralyzed, she drew in a deep breath, ordered her unwilling limbs to move. Her legs felt leaden as she neared the officer, but not because of the temperature. It was the familiar humiliation. The ordeal of being different.

This—this pervasive feeling of *shame*—was why her grandmother wanted her to stop attending funerals, talking to animals, reasoning with ghosts. She was supposed to fit in. Be normal.

Whatever that was.

“Spade, you’ll team up with Northey.” The officer pointed to a tall blond youth. “Keep an eye out for any sign of struggle. Or blood. Also, look for belongings of the corpse. A handbag, shoes, hair ribbons, that sort of thing. Anything to give us an idea of her identity. You’ll be searching in Ravenswood Glen, up by the Traveler’s domain. One of the officers will drop you there by wagon.”

The officer peered into Arabel’s eyes, as if he doubted her intentions—or integrity. “Do *not* transgress onto Traveler property. Understood?”

Arabel nodded. Her throat felt too dry to answer. The officer ambled away.

Her new search partner thrust out his hand. “I’m Sylvious. Pleased to meet you.”

Arabel shook his hand—and his mind opened up to her.

Her black hair is so shiny! I really want to touch it. Such deep blue eyes! Ah, we’ll have the whole day together. The woods are tricky. People get lost all of the time—

“Pleased to meet you, too, Sylvious.”

With an inward groan, Arabel did her best to shutter her mind-reading abilities, to close off the transparency of Sylvious’ overly-amorous energy field. It was going to be a long day.

The Copse housed the Traveler's camp in the forested depths of Ravenswood Glen. Rumors abounded in town about the mysterious Travelers—amid plenty of distrust—but Arabel merely felt curiosity.

She knew the perimeter of the Copse well enough, but she'd never been to the camp. One needed an invitation to visit.

The air was scented of cedar. Arabel moved slowly, inhaling the fragrance of the woods, training her eyes on the ground. Above her head, a crow squawked.

She glanced up, saw the bird sitting on a broken tree branch. Staring back at her, she could have sworn it *winked*.

She pointed to a well-trodden path among towering cedar trees. "We can't go past there."

"I know where the boundary is!" Sylvious asserted. "We certainly don't want to get too close to the Travelers."

"I'm sure we've nothing to worry about from them."

"That's not what my folks say. I hear they practice magic out here. Do spells and such."

Arabel's frustration rose. "Let's just concentrate on helping the dead girl." Turning from Sylvious, she moved into the tangle of old trees.

"I've found something!" Sylvious shouted a few minutes later. "Come quick!"

Arabel dashed toward his voice. Reaching a small clearing, she saw that he'd found a black dress.

"This could be hers, since she wasn't wearing a scrap of clothing at the Torch," Sylvious said. "It's torn badly. But no blood." He passed it to Arabel for inspection.

Touching the material, she crumpled, like a fist had punched her in the gut. Stumbling back against a series of protruding tree roots, she almost fell, but Sylvious grabbed her arm.

Her fingers fisted around the cloth in a grief-fueled rage. “He gave her this dress so she’d look especially pretty when she died. When he killed her.”

She didn’t recognize the killer, but she would never forget his face. Nondescript brown hair, a small nose with a discernible bump. Eerie, blank grey eyes.

The unsettling discovery forced Sylvious to forgo any attempt at seduction. “Let’s go back,” he said. “It doesn’t feel safe here.”

The leaves rustled their assent, whispering intangible sorrows.