

THE TRUE HISTORY OF THE
STRANGE BRIGADE

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THE TRUE HISTORY OF THE
STRANGE BRIGADE®



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AND WAS JERUSALEM BUILDED HERE?

CASSANDRA KHAW

“BURN IT.”

In the pale, poor light of the dormitory, old Mrs. Phillips’ face was all jutting angles, lines that went nowhere. She frowned at Gracie, a wrinkled hand outstretched, like she was offering salvation in the seat of her palm.

“You want to know what *I* think you should be doing?” said Mrs. Phillips—widowed and forgotten and fierce—without particular rancour. “I think you should find yourself a few cans of paraffin, a good match, and something to eat as you stand on a hill, watching all of this burn to a bad dream. You heard me, Gracie Braithwaite. Burn it. Burn it *all* down.”

* * *

“A JOB, MISTER?” GRACIE raked a cool eye over the new arrival, a frown stitching her brows together.

He was tall, elegantly dressed, every inch the London bourgeoisie. His collar and his cuffs were precisely creased, but his stare was something else. Gracie knew that look. She’d seen it in the cellars of her brothers’ favourite pubs, crocodilian and stuporous, the look of an animal who knew good things came to those who wait. The man pressed the pink tip of his tongue between his teeth and cocked a wider smile.

“A job,” he repeated smoothly, and Gracie had to stifle another spasm of loathing, bite down on the impulse to kick the man in his shins and take off. Manchester churned behind them, incurious; the smell of smoke coiled in the air. “A job at the greatest show on earth.”

“You sure don’t look like P.T. Barnum to me, sir.”

That surprised him. “Sorry?”

Gracie stood up straighter, jaw set. Her father’d once despaired of that chin of hers; too much like his, not enough like his wife’s. But after Gracie added a back alley’s worth of scars and a broken nose to her face, he gave up his grumblings, along with any hopes his daughter would tame at a man’s command. “Sucker every minute. That’s what he said.”

“No. No, he didn’t.” The stranger’s face pulled into a frown.

“What?”

“Barnum never said that.” And a chill fed itself up Gracie’s spine, a slither of unease, slow and dangerous. “He was, first and foremost, a businessman, you

understand. While his clientele tolerated a certain amount of impertinence, they were customers and the customer is someone you never insult.”

His expression ripened with a savage, sudden glee, and the man, who was built like a razor, like a wire stretched out, leaned down to whisper into Gracie’s ear. “You can have that for free, Miss Braithwaite. Everything that follows will cost you.”

He reeked of French cologne and incense. Not the kind that swung from Catholic thuribles, vapours rising thick as the dream of the New World, but a fainter smell, softer and sweeter, woody and weird and foreign. Still, the blend wasn’t quite enough to hide something worse, something closer to the bone. A stink that reminded Gracie of cows in summer, hoof-deep in their own manure, flies spiralling around their horns. A burning, animal odour, which sang to something older than common sense.

Run, it said. Run far.

“Mate”—Gracie fanned the air in front of her nose before she pinched the bridge—“you *stink*.”

“Do I?” For a moment, the man’s eyes burned a colour she’d never seen, a gold so bright it hurt a little to look upon its light. He bared his teeth at Gracie and she scowled in reply, even as he stood straighter, silhouette blocking out the noonday glare. His eyes, hazel again, sparkled with glee. “I suspect, my girl, it is not my fault but yours. Do your brothers wear cologne? Does your father bathe?”

“Excuse me—”

“No, no. That’s unkind of me. I beg your forgiveness.

I'm sure he does, but I suppose the question needs to be asked. How often? A week? Twice? Do you ration your soap, my girl? Is it rationed for you?"

The words poured like oil, sleek and suffocating, and if it wasn't for the conversational lilt to his baritone, Gracie might have punched him then. Instead, she swallowed and listened, habit usurping reason. After all, she'd seen this scene play out ten thousand times before: her father with his head bent, sheepish, his boots scuffed, two buttons missing; a man at the door, enviously rotund, cravat at his throat and a hat on his head, badge and balding pate gleaming in the sun.

It was like a stage performance, a show at the Old Vic, with its players, its beats, its pauses all lined up, waiting to go. And Gracie knew the role her family played in this production: they were the blue-collar extras, hanging on the lip of a command. When people above their station spoke, the Braithwaites listened. Defiance belonged to men and women without hungry mouths to fill.

Still, Gracie couldn't help but itch beneath her collar, sweat pearlting on her chin. She gritted her teeth. "That's our problem, not yours. If you don't mind, I'd be leaving."

A purr this time, baritone smoothing to velvet. He encircled her shoulder with an arm before she could speak, smiling prettily the whole while. "Miss Braithwaite, we've known your family for years and years. Would you really walk away from a job with me and mine? What with everything that's going on with your daddy? Poor Mrs. Braithwaite, too, already fat with your eighth little brother? Do you think she could afford your pride?"

“She wouldn’t want me to whore myself in London. I know that much.” She shrugged his arm loose, glaring. “Why don’t you—”

“Fourteen pounds, eleven and eight. A week.”

The sum stole the air from Gracie’s lungs, and she sank down into herself, fingers splayed over her sternum. What had her mother said—everyone has a price? It was a devil’s dowry, enough to buy ten Gracie Braithwaites and all of her brothers. The man had to know this. He *did* know this, Gracie decided, walking her gaze over his pencil smile. There was something unpractised about the expression, like he was teaching himself the trick of it as they conversed.

“Twat.”

“Ah, child, what would your mother say about that mouth of yours?”

“She’d say she raised a girl who knew when someone was trying to be a wanker, that’s what she’d say. I’m still not going to spread my legs for your diseased, plague-riddled—”

“*Miss Braithwaite.*” It was a whisper, no louder than that. No threat, no venom, nothing but faint disappointment, but it felt like Gracie had cannonballed into a gulch choked with ice. He clicked his teeth in that London way, shook his head.

Gracie did not apologize. She had enough dignity for that.

“You will not be whoring yourself for my company. In fact, I feel compelled to say that you are the *last* thing my fellows would hope to bed. I do not know about your

brothers, your uncles; I suppose they find dirt attractive. But those I call my peers? No, ma'am. They prefer their women nubile, lithe, skin as pale as ice nailed to bone. We like them big-breasted too, if you'd excuse my language. Pregnant with milk, if we happen to be lucky. A skinny, cat-boned thing like you? No, no. That's not at all for us, my girl."

"What do you *want* with me? You could get a whole mining facility to turn their backs on their mothers for that amount."

"Yes, but would they be as discreet?" He chuckled. What was his name again? She had to know his name. There was no way that she didn't. Yet Gracie couldn't put two syllables together, two sounds to evoke an image of them exchanging courtesies like normal people. They'd been talking for so long. Surely, he'd allowed a name. Her spine writhed in place. "We *need* you, Gracie Braithwaite. We've waited and watched, and then waited longer. We spent decades waiting for you to come into your own. And now that you have, no one will do but you."

Gracie thought of wine and whiskey, cheap booze smuggled from Ireland, blazing like a lie. She'd just been a little bit too young when she swigged from her brother's bottle the first time, and they'd laughed like foxes as she coughed through that first mouthful of smoke. The man's company reminded her of the fugue from that first evening, how its edges had blurred, had become crowded with nightmare possibilities. She swallowed.

"What would I have to do?"

Piously the man—the marionette in the three-piece

suit—clasped his palms together, as though in prayer. Even Gracie, an atheist from the marrow out, found the gesture profane. “An honest woman’s work, of course. Miss Gracie Braithwaite, sweet summer girl of ours, I’d pay you a king’s ransom if you’d bend the quick brilliance of your ladylike fingers to your gender’s god-given task. We’d like you to *sew* for us, beautiful child. Plain and simple. Needle and thread. Body and soul. Say yes, baby girl, and we’ll make it worth everyone’s while.”

GRACIE SAID YES, of course.

There was no universe where she would not have.

THE FACTORY BELCHED columns of salty black smoke, ash fountaining in clouds so dense that they couldn’t disperse into the overcast afternoon, but instead lingered in the air and in the skins of the women milling within the compound. Gracie wondered how the oldest of them might look, if there were grandmothers on staff with eyes and teeth and hair the colour of burnt soup bones.

Gracie shuddered and spat the charred taste of the air from her mouth, discomfited by the sudden image of an old woman in silhouette, silently knitting her shadow into a mountain of shirts. There was something inherently *wrong* about the idea, something so fundamentally unholy about the notion that Gracie couldn’t help but cross herself, a guilty prayer mumbled beneath her breath.

Somewhere ahead, someone began to sing in a high

sweet voice, a mournful ballad about one highwayman or another, and the bargain he made for a shipwrecked love. Something about scrimshaws and stitchings of silver, a noose of hide that someone'd braided from the skin he'd pared from his own calf.

“Into Hell’s mouth,” Gracie sighed. She plodded onwards. Rain began to fall, a cold soup that smelled to Gracie of London. She had lost two brothers to the city, was midway into losing the third: the youngest of them, straw-haired and sullen, with a mouth like a sculptor’s despair. It felt like treason to say so, but Gracie wasn’t sure he would survive the capital.

Still, there was hope. Assuming the money the man—
—what *was* his *name*? Why couldn’t Grace remember? They’d both signed the contract; she’d watched as he wrote on the yellowed paper, his penmanship beautiful as heartbreak—

—had promised did not vanish like faerie gold, Gracie’d have an excuse and a half to keep the boy home. He would no doubt complain, but he’d thank her one day, when he was old and loved and still innocent of grief.

Swallowed by her musings, Gracie took no notice of how the singing slowed at her approach, and how the women’s eyes—not one of them was any colour but linen and soot—grew wide as the doors to the factory opened, and how they cringed as a straight-backed girl, hair the hue of menstrual tissue, descended the steps.

“Grace Dominique Braithwaite.” Her smile was bright as the coming of Christ, was red as his wounds. “We’ve been waiting for *you*.”

* * *

Miss VELVET DID not walk; she *prowled*.

Her gait was long and certain, and shared more with the wolf's long-legged lope than a lady's mincing tread. It stood in contrast with her wardrobe. The impractical jodphurs, the high equestrian boots, oiled and fur-trimmed. Miss Velvet's corset made Gracie wince, as did her cropped ruby jacket, buttoned beneath high breasts. Someone else must have chosen the pieces; Gracie couldn't imagine Miss Velvet deciding on this florid arrangement herself. Yet the woman bore her ensemble without complaint, even a kind of truculent dignity, enviable in its cut-glass precision.

“—been around for at least fifty years now. We've seen entire families come and go, marry into money, forget that they ever were a part of our humble household. But we understand that is the working-class dream. No foul, no harm.” Despite her carriage, Miss Velvet's voice was soft and sweetly breathless, an ingenue's lilt, absent of coquetry. “Sometimes, they come back. Introduce their children to us for apprenticeships.”

“Do you get many boys—?”

“No. No, no, no. Never male children. Girls, Miss Braithwaite, are more intuitive, more malleable, more—” Miss Velvet fluttered a gloved hand. “More worthy of attention, I think. There's a power to be found in knowing that you are always second best, always a little bit weaker than the rest of the world. I'm sure you know what I mean.”

Gracie, who grew up with seven loyal brothers, who

could throw a right hook faster than a man could lie, did not. But she thought it might be impertinent to say. “If you say so, miss.”

“Mm. We’ll get along perfectly. Anyway. Where was I? Yes, the factory’s practically an institution, a shining beacon in Lancashire’s fiefdom of poorly ventilated, poorly regulated factories. *Our* girls have weekends. There are benefits too, possibilities for advancement, and if you make the mistake of becoming gravid with child, we can accommodate for that too. Especially if the spawn is male.”

Gracie narrowed her eyes. She’d expected grime in the factory’s corners, penumbral hallways half-lit by bare bulbs, rotting beams and whimpering from behind closed doors. Not this industrial austerity. No music, no sound but for the clack of careful footsteps, nothing but the machinery’s humming gospel, which seemed to seep through the bones to sing in her marrow. “Th—the spawn?”

“Son,” Miss Velvet said, with a million-dollar smile, gaze lidded. “We acknowledge the difficulty in raising sons. So rambunctious, so *loud*. If you were to have the ill fortune of giving birth to a boy, we’d do everything we can to streamline your existence, to make it easier to attend to your duties. Rest assured that your son would be loved, provided for like he was our own.”

A pale girl, hair bound in an off-white scarf, trotted by the pair.

“You don’t have to worry about that. I don’t have any plans for—”

“Excellent, excellent. Miss Braithwaite, we’ll get along just perfectly. Have I said that already? Because I feel the need to do so. It is a thing that humans do not do enough. Appreciate each other. Appreciate themselves.”

There it was again. *Humans*, not people. *Spawn*, not son. The tiniest aberrations in word choice. Gracie decided she wouldn’t be half-surprised if this was merely a reflection of cosmopolitan fashion; this calving of one’s self from the unwashed proletariat. She could see it being funny for these people, even satisfying, to act as an entomologist might. Certainly, London acted like it was a world of its own, a perfumed paradise, separate from its rural relatives.

Why not its reluctant exports?

Still—

“Glad to hear—well, glad to hear that you had to share that, Miss Velvet. But d’you mind awfully if we talked about the *practicalities* of my position here? I’d hate to be a waste of a good salary.”

“Yes, of course.” Miss Velvet, much to Gracie’s bewilderment, was beginning to *purr*. There was something else, Gracie thought. Something to the way Miss Velvet chewed on her words, as though there were extra syllables seeded in every sentence, colloquialisms of mandibular motion that only the rarefied understood. “Of course, of course. But that’s hardly my area of expertise. You’ll want Mrs. Phillips for that. She is the caretaker, the kindly mother of your particular division. Everything you need to know, you’ll hear from here.”

They took another turn, then a second, a third, before at last Miss Velvet walked Gracie up a spiral stairwell, two

storeys past identical-looking floors, every last corridor lit exactly the same way. The effect was dizzying.

“Careful, Miss Braithwaite.” The girl’s voice, warm against her ear. A smell of leather and tannic acids, skin curing beneath a blistering blue sky; the stink of guts beneath that burning animal scent, a coppery aftertaste. “You’ve only just arrived. We have so very far to go.”

Gracie swallowed. “I hear you.”

“Good.” Miss Velvet grinned and said no more.

The two marched on in silence. Down the throat of a passage that appeared no different from the others, its walls scalloped with thick wooden doors. Miss Velvet halted at the end of the hall, narrow frame haloed by grey light. She turned—two sharp taps of her heel against the brick floor—and dove into a bow, a hand to her frilled collar, the other arm outstretched.

“Your dormitory.”

Feeling like something was expected of her, some reciprocal ritual, Gracie bobbed an anxious curtsey, eliciting a cool trill of laughter.

“We’ll have so much fun, Miss Braithwaite. I look forward to the days to come.” And with that, Miss Velvet took her leave.

THE DORMITORY WAS plain: a single wide window stretched across a wall, the glass so dirty that the world outside smeared into shadows; cots with scant bedding; several small cabinets; laundry lines drooping under fresh-washed undergarments, water bleeding from their hems into

shallow pools. Everywhere, there were women, milling under the steepled ceiling, and a damp musty odour, as though of hounds come slinking from the rain.

“Hello?” Gracie said, setting her father’s one good suitcase, crammed with all the hand-me-downs that would fit, onto the floor.

A silence curled around the room. Linen and soot, Gracie thought, not for the first time. They were all the colour of linen and soot, nothing in between. Would she look like that one day too? While Gracie worried at the idea, an old woman rose from her chair. When she spoke, it was with a faint Bristolian brogue.

“Another one.” The woman laid down her knitting needles, shooed away a cat that had taken residence between her ankles, a burly black tom with pound coins for eyes, one ear long chewed down to a withered stump. “What’d he promise you?”

“Benefits, a pension plan, and opportunities to purchase the family plot in the next five years,” Gracie declared promptly, pleased by her own informative alacrity. Emboldened, she continued, bantering the terminology of landlords, not entirely certain whether the context fit, but she figured it wouldn’t be a problem, not if she spoke with enough wit. “It’s a seller’s market these days, you know? Rents picking up. Even if it’s a bit of an investment now, value will appreciate.”

“No doubt,” said the old woman, still unnamed. Her hair hung in unkept ringlets; someone’d thought to braid them at some point, but she’d since allowed the plait to fallow, the tips uncoiling into a grey mess. Despite her

age, she stood unstooped, her posture almost mocking in its straight-shouldered geometry. There had to be at least fifty years between Gracie and her counterpart, and she wore all of it like honours from the King. “At least you’ve sold your soul for practical reasons.”

“I think,” Gracie said, “I take some offence at that.”

The woman smiled. “I’m sure you do. The name’s Mrs. Phillips, poppet. I suggest you take some time to think long and hard about what your goals are in life. Whether you’d rather be the lone wolf, full of vim and vinegar, or the one who survives to the end of this story.”

Anger spasmed in Gracie, instinctive. She’d not come here to be mocked; and more than that, she tired of riddles, of meanings slithering between mealy-mouthing platitudes. All that unspoken truth, odorous and seasoned with a winking malevolent delight. Everyone who wasn’t poor Gracie Braithwaite knew the score. But Gracie kept her bile down, kept her mouth shut.

Then, after a time:

“I’m here to work.”

Mrs. Philips regarded her with a cold, pale eye. Linen and soot, Gracie thought, looking the old woman over from head to toe.

“Good.”

IT WASN’T DIFFICULT work.

Gracie had expected much worse. More back-breaking labour, the kind that loosened one’s ligaments, undid the cords that tethered bone to muscle, rubbed tendon against

calcium until the body was reduced to mere wires and will. Work that'd make old age nothing but a decade of whimperers.

But her chores weren't anything like that. Oh, they weren't *easy*, per se. The hours were endless. Gracie woke before dawn, went to sleep with the nightjars. Meals were regular but tasteless: porridge leavened with strands of some unidentifiable meat, chopped carrots, occasional bits of onion, celery and other vegetables, all cooked to mush.

In between, Gracie developed an almanac of new scars as she basted, sewed, stitched, unseamed a thousand lengths of good leather, each sheet more beautiful and delicate than the last. Lambskin, Gracie told herself. Maybe slink, uterine-soft. From time to time, her drudgery diversified to more taxing endeavours: kitchen chores and the movement of crates and sacks, every container innocuously branded with symbols that made no sense to anyone but Miss Velvet, who cooed over every fresh arrival.

The oddness of having but one ostensible administrator was not lost on Gracie. She spent the first week attempting to oust plain-clothed overseers, conspirators among the other women, but none revealed themselves. It was Miss Velvet and no other, not even the man who had officiated over Gracie's employment.

Occasionally, there'd be visitors, convoys of festively dressed gentry, all smiling, every one of them euphorically pleased with the very act of breathing. They spoke with the cadence of the opulent but conducted themselves like children, seething with questions that made no sense. One,

a round-faced woman attired in violet, asked for Gracie's tailor, praising their avant-garde aesthetics. Miss Velvet had led her quickly away. "Rich people," she'd giggled.

Gracie eventually surrendered her investigations, focused instead on surviving to the end of each week, where a decadent Sunday roast inevitably waited. Potatoes crisped in duck fat, thumb-thick slabs of roast beef, Yorkshire puddings, mountains of roasted carrots, sweet corn, enough gravy to drown every one of Gracie's fears.

"Who the hell were those people? On Wednesday? Bit of a weird bunch, don't you think?" Gracie moved her peas around her plate, glancing over a shoulder.

"Customers."

"They don't look like the sort who'd shop here."

"They're still customers," Mrs. Phillips said placidly, jaw tightening. "Not for us to discuss their tastes."

"Speaking of tastes, what *are* we making, anyway?"

Mrs. Phillips didn't miss a beat. "Attire."

"Well, obviously." Gracie sucked on the pad of her thumb. She had sliced the meat open on something in the latest shipment of leathers: a jag of ivory, the shape and size of an infant's toenail. "But what kind of attire? Don't you think it's strange that we're working on sleeves and flaps, pant legs but no trousers, panels for jackets that we've never seen?"

"No." Mrs. Phillips sipped at her pea soup. "And if I were you, poppet, I'd stop asking questions I don't want the answers to."

Ab, Gracie thought. There it was. Tacit acknowledgement of the truths that she hungered for, and the insinuation

that Mrs. Phillips knew them all. Now, all Gracie had to do was crowbar the answers from the old woman's chest and everything would be as she wanted.

"That's up to me, isn't it?"

"No."

"Freedom of choice and all that. The young are allowed to make their own mistakes. Everybody chooses how they live their lives and all—"

Anger kindled in Mrs. Phillips' lined features, eyes thinning. She put down her spoon, curled her palm, as though begging for some relief from Gracie's relentless audacity, and then sighed, a long, wounded noise. Somewhere, someone was singing again, that song about highwaymen and the bargains the desperate make.

"Don't you have a father, Gracie Braithwaite? A mother? Seven brothers who love you more than life itself? And a little newborn sibling, who'll grow up to think you're the sun and the moon itself?"

"Yeah, but I don't see why—"

"Let it go, Gracie."

"Let *what* go?" A third voice intruded, appallingly jubilant. Before Gracie could register how Miss Velvet had come so close unnoticed, the administrator pirouetted into view, a hand clapping down on Gracie's shoulders. The woman smiled, lips a bright pink today, the hue of raw beef.

"Her belief that she might one day marry above a station, find a good London man—"

Gracie's lips curled. If she married, it'd be to a man like her father, someone who knew the calendar of the soil and

the migrations of the earthworms, who could not only coax a horse to drink but would lay its head upon his lap in perfect trust. The very thought of wedding a pansified dandy, palms soft as a newborn's, both horrified and repulsed her. She said nothing about the matter, however.

“—that might forgive her rough tongue and love the fact she can carry a calf in each arm.” Mrs. Phillips rose, clasped a withered hand around Miss Velvet’s wrist. The administrator smiled, all small white teeth.

“We are so close now, Mrs. Phillips. I remember when you were afraid to touch me.” Today, Miss Velvet wore white like a bride might; with stirrings of lace and seed-pearls galore, a little fascinator shaped like a tiara atop her crimson hair.

“I was afraid of a lot of things once. But then, Mr. Phillips—God rest his poor soul—had the poor taste to die, and now the only thing I have left is hate.”

Gracie went still. The air cooked with the tension from the two women, one small and quick and grinning, the other so ancient that her flesh had lost all elasticity, furrowed and canyoned wherever it’d been brushed. *Hate*. Mrs. Phillips had said ‘hate,’ and Gracie would bet all the souls of her brothers that she meant it exactly.

But for all the rich loathing in Mrs. Phillips’ voice, Miss Velvet seemed unabashed. Indeed, if anything, it excited an unctuous pleasure in her. Miss Velvet peeled from Gracie’s shoulders, oiled up to Mrs. Phillips, gloved fingers walking a path around the old woman’s left clavicle. “Your hate is such a beautiful thing. If I could parcel it in silk, wrap it up in a box, I’d make a gift of it

to sweet Saint Peter. Do you ever wonder, Mrs. Phillips, what dead men sing when no one's around?"

"Whatever they like you to sing, poppet." Granite would have been more pliant at that moment, less cold.

"Yes. Yes, you're right." The problem with Miss Velvet's smile, Gracie decided, wasn't that it looked like it had palsied into place, or was pinned there with fish-hooks slotted through her cheeks. The problem was her *teeth*. There were too many of them, and they were all the wrong shape, molars rather than incisors and bicuspids, no fangs in sight. Bovine dentition, small enough to stud an infant mouth. How had Gracie not noticed?

"But in the meantime..." And suddenly there Miss Velvet was again, fingers kneading Gracie's shoulders, the heels of her palms jammed into the slope of her scapulas. With a snarl, the young Braithwaite attempted to extricate herself, but it was too late. Miss Velvet's grip could have manacled a stallion. "I've something to show you, Miss Braithwaite."

WHAT GRACIE BRAITHWAITE would remember most of that day, when the nightmares had dulled to routine and she, at last, had a private room that did not reek of mould, would be the smell. The wretched animal stink; warm grease, fresh skins only beginning to cure; a rind of sweat overlaying it all.

And the darkness, red-tinged and seething with strange shapes.

She'd remember that as well.

“These are—”

“Products,” Miss Velvet said gaily. “But I suspect the word that you might have been looking for was ‘people.’”

There was no mistaking the upside-down silhouettes for anything else: men and women and children, pared of entrails and extraneous hairs, pomaded coifs holding still even as the bodies stuttered along the production line. From where Gracie stood, she could, from time to time, see the fine sutures in their skin. She thought she recognized her own handiwork. Nausea welled within her.

“Oh.”

The wan light gleamed in Miss Velvet’s small teeth.
“Yes. You see now.”

“You can’t do this,” Gracie said, because there needed to be words in her mouth, and she needed to say something, or she’d begin to scream. “This isn’t right. This is—this... These are people.”

“Were.” A disdainful flap of the overseer’s hand. “And I would hesitate to call them people, really. They were, as the French might put it, the bourgeois. I think? It doesn’t matter. These *donors*—yes, I like that word more—were all part of the great British Empire, a fiefdom built on telling other countries they aren’t quite clever enough to live without our supervision.”

As Miss Velvet spoke, the promenade of corpses continued to tick forward. Masked figures, bellies obscured by mottled blue aprons, inspected each cadaver in turn. Those still pregnant with viscera were scooped clean, the fetid remnants chucked into enormous kegs. Looms clacked and chattered in the shadows. *Custom suits*,

Gracie decided detachedly. “There are *children* here.”

“Who’d grow up to be well-fed, well-read, well-intentioned, but ultimately only interested in people that look and act and smell like them.” Miss Velvet twitched a shoulder. “Despite what the church would have you think, Hell has no love for the haughty. In fact, you might argue that it is our business to rehabilitate the proud, or at least make them think about what they’ve done.”

Once, when they were much younger, Gracie and her brothers had argued the economics of morality, whether Lucifer was truly a reprobate, or if he’d been maligned—was instead the assiduous concierge of a prison with no exit policy. Once, they’d debated the phenotype of demons, their disposition, and how an encounter might take place. They’d agreed there would be fire. But Miss Velvet was only smiles, and somehow, that was worse.

Gracie swallowed. “That isn’t up to—”

“No, it absolutely is up to us. We are Hell and its myriad subsidiaries. Our purpose, the very reason we were massaged into shape, given intellect and wit to distract ourselves between working hours, was to sift between the dross of your souls, and determine who merits an eternity singing praises to Heaven, and who”—Miss Velvet’s eyes flicked to a point behind Gracie’s shoulder, smile blissful—“*doesn’t*. ”

A scream, as though choreographed.

“By the way,” Miss Velvet resumed, a finger angled to the floor. “I suppose this is as good a time as any to note that you have no say in this matter. None whatsoever. No matter what you might think, you are the lowest of the low in this food chain.”

“So, you’re threatening me, then?” Gracie squared her stance, fists balling at her sides. Violence, with its bruising poetry, its choir of split bones and cracked bones, she understood.

“No. No, you understand me.” Miss Velvet wagged that elegant finger, an eye winking shut. “There are no threats here. You cannot threaten someone who has neither authority nor ability to reciprocate in kind. To *threaten* someone, you must be, in some way, afraid that the other party might be able to do you harm. You’re a lamb, Miss Braithwaite. You are a hircine fetus, expunged from the womb and given a meagre talent in conversation. You are nothing. Therefore, you cannot *be threatened*, because you are not *worth threatening*, and I am tired of this discourse. Ask me something more interesting.”

“Something more interesting? Okay, fine. Why the hell is all this, then?” Gracie demanded, feeling like more was needed of her, a response more profound than slack-jawed observation, than the scream worming at the base of her throat. “Are you planning an invasion or something?”

“That knowledge,” Miss Velvet said, smacking her lips, “is what they call ‘above your pay grade.’ I like you, Miss Braithwaite. I genuinely do. I really like you. But there are things we can’t talk about. One of them is that. But we can discuss an adjunct purpose. The skin suits, you see, facilitate tourism.”

“*What?*”

“Well, I suppose ‘tourism’ isn’t necessarily accurate. The word suggests pleasure and pleasure alone, which is certainly not true. Most of our clientele are here on work

trips, I suppose. Half-work, half-pleasure. I really don't know how you humans categorize these things. But that is the nature of our arrangements. The skinsuits are multi-purpose, and also modular, I'm proud to say."

Miss Velvet blinked. Sideways, as a cat might; the membrane that closed over her cornea was heavy, mottled and ridged in a way that strained against the socket. Gracie winced reflexively, before deciding there was no need. Though it had not been explicitly stated, it was clear: Miss Velvet was one of them.

"Are we next? Once we get too old, do we join them?" Confronted with an uncertain end, Gracie lost her capacity for all emotions but one: defiance. Fortunately, it was tempered by an inherited sense of practicality. The lie most often told by the rich is that the working class is uneducated, but the truth is substantially more complex: Gracie had no knowledge of Socrates, no grip on Chinese medieval philosophy, and little understanding of the spice trade, but she knew when to speak—and more importantly, when not to.

Bodies were being boxed into crates; first ironed and then folded along the joints, then folded again, into neat halves and quarters, and finally swathed in paper and stashed away. "No. Yes. Perhaps. Who knows? The world is such an interesting place. But more likely than not, the answer's no. We've found that there is no point in dressing ourselves as plebians. No one pays attention to people like you, I'm afraid. To be blunt: we prefer to inhabit people who matter."

People who matter. Gracie's gorge rose.

“I’d also like to suggest that you don’t contact the authorities. For one, your story will sound ludicrous. For another, there’s at least a forty-nine-percent chance you might encounter one of ours, and imagine what kind of words they might say about your treasonous behaviour? In case I hadn’t made it clear before, let me say it again: you do not matter at all, Miss Braithwaite. So, be a good girl and do what your family has always done.”

“And what’s that?”

“Serve.”

“You really expect me to keep working here?” Indoctrination only went so far, Gracie thought ruefully, itching to do more than prattle. “You think I’m going to do what you say, now that you’ve shown me the terrors of Hell?”

“Quite frankly, Miss Braithwaite? Yes. No, wait; that’s not right. Let me rephrase, Miss Braithwaite. I don’t expect you to keep working here in the holistic sense of the word. I expect you to wake up tomorrow, give your privates a quick scrub, and then come down here to perform quality-assurance. I wasn’t lying when I said you have deft hands.”

“Well, I won’t. You can kill me. I’m not afraid. Come on, then, give me the worst that you’ve got. I’ll make sure you never forget—”

“Ah, this is the part I love the most. Where the mouse tries to negotiate, and the cat bobs its head and waits until its dinner arrives at the correct time. Miss Braithwaite, let me tell you something: you will say ‘yes’ in the end. You will say ‘yes,’ because it is not a question about you. Because as

brave as you are, as faithful to the romantic idea that one may die for their beliefs and be lauded by those they leave behind, you are also a woman who loves her family.”

Miss Velvet, so much taller than Gracie remembered, stalked closer. Her tongue still lolled from her smile, florid and obscene. The muscle stroked a route up Gracie’s trembling cheek, even as Miss Velvet leaned down to say:

“Would you give them up, Miss Braithwaite? Would you condemn your mother to an uneasy birth? Would you let eight brothers nurse on her teats, empty her like a waterskin? And when your father kills himself in despair, would you let those sweet brothers of yours, driven by desperation, whore your poor mother out? And the newborn! I suppose there’s a market for orifices that young. Why, I should think—”

“Enough!”

“I won’t lie, Miss Braithwaite. I am enjoying this so much. After all, I am a demon; and demons, by nature, have a predilection for despair. Sadism is embedded into our molecular code, or—oh, don’t mind me.” Miss Velvet withdrew, expression nearly carnal, her delight as blasphemous as anything else in the mill. “I make no apologies for my lusts. I do, however, wish to extend my appreciation. Rarely have I tasted hopelessness so sweet.”

Miss Velvet’s tongue, unremarkable save for its excessive length, laved across her teeth, before it started to metronome, like the tail of a skinned cat. “Yes, you start here tomorrow.”

* * *

GRACIE CRIED THAT night for the first time in as long as she could remember, while Mrs. Phillips' cat kept watch, and the women in her dormitory tiptoed and murmured, faces slanted away, the soft rustling of their dresses like whispering ghosts. At some point that evening, Mrs. Phillips came to sit beside Gracie's shuddering body. She spoke no platitudes over the girl, knowing they'd be neither needed nor welcomed.

The reason for this was obvious to anyone who had at least an ear, an eye, or some rudimentary ability to decipher human emotion. Gracie was not weeping because she was afraid—or even because she was heartbroken by the horrors of the world—but because she was *angry*.

And she cried because sobbing was less suspect than screaming, than fists beating themselves to shrapnel. When she was done, hours after the last candle-wick had been pinched by scarred fingers, Gracie sat up.

“Burn it,” said Mrs. Phillips.

AS IT TURNED out, the fire was the easiest part. Two brothers who’d worked both ends of construction, two brothers who made their money in war; you pick things up from siblings like that. No, the problem wasn’t rigging the factory to detonate, or even disguising her endeavours, but something that Gracie hadn’t expected.

“WHAT DO YOU mean, you don’t want to leave?” Gracie tried not to shout but already, she was catastrophising, listing

opportunities for failure, body clenched in anticipation for the moment the door would erupt, disgorging monsters. “You have to go.”

“Go? Where?” demanded a rail-thin woman—Abigail, Agatha, some name that made Gracie think of radio plays, her accent effortlessly metropolitan—as she wrung her hands, mouth tapering into a frown. “Where d’you want us to go? Back *there*? Back to our husbands? Our in-laws? You don’t understand at all, Braithwaite. It’s easy for you.”

Gracie crossed the space between them in three long strides, fingers digging into the woman’s blouse. With one fluid move, Gracie heaved the woman up, pinned her against the wall, bared her teeth, even as she fought down the urge to bludgeon sense into her adversary. Yet despite the manhandling, the other woman held Gracie’s gaze without apprehension, a coolness that further antagonized her.

“They’re *demons*. ”

“There are worse things out there.”

“You tell them, Agatha,” someone shouted across the dormitory. “You think Miss Velvet is bad? I don’t. She’s a saint. She saved me from a murdering husband. If it weren’t for Miss Velvet, I’d be dying in that hospital.”

“There are institutions out there.” Gracie dropped the woman, swearing beneath her breath. None of this was how it was supposed to go. Over the last week, the factory had all but piled its secrets at Gracie’s feet, seeming to exult in her horror, Miss Velvet most of all. Yet it was neither the entrails nor the work that had Gracie so traumatised, for all that they chafed against her moral compass. She

had been raised with farmers, and knew that everything came back to blood.

It was the other women. It was their slope-shouldered exhaustion, their ennui, the way they donned their white masks without complaint, and the way they shambled back to the dormitories hours later, businesslike in their ablutions, no trace of repulsion, no tears. They were *alright* with this, with being accomplice to the post-production efforts of standardised slaughter, with purling skin and gut into new bodies, homes for the estimable damned.

“There are places to get help.” Gracie kept going, even though hope was pouring between the slats of her fingers. “You have family—”

“Sometimes, family’s the *problem*,” Agatha snapped, quick as a crime, adjusting her wimple. The mask came on next: white, with no ornamentation at all, only pinholes for eyes.

“I—” Gracie dropped her hands. “Fine. Forget the rest. How can you all sleep at night? All of you. You know what they’ve done. I don’t understand how you can stomach this—this—”

“Far as I can see, the only thing they’re doing is taking from the rich and giving pensions to the poor.” Agatha shrugged a thin shoulder, securing the mask in place. Her voice clattered against the thick leather, hollowed of anything recognizable. “You’re young, Braithwaite. One day, you won’t be; and when that time comes—well.” A sharp inhalation. “You’ll see why it matters that the demons give receipts.”

At that, the women began to file out of the dormitory,

some adorned with masks, others not, until all that remained was Mrs. Phillips, her cat, and Gracie, her chin drooping.

“I think there’s something you need to understand, poppet.” Mrs. Phillips—it was her turn at the canteen that day—tied an apron around her waist, pulled a hair net into place. “You’re not going to save us.”

“Then *what’s the damn point?*”

“The point is everyone else. The point is shutting down this operation. The point is cutting a hole into these cock-nosed bastards, because who knows, maybe the sepsis will do them in this time. We’re too far gone, poppet. If there’s anyone still worth saving, they’ll know to leave on their own. But the rest of us, well, it won’t be bad.” The smile faltered, nonetheless, and not for the first time, Gracie found herself wondering exactly how old Mrs. Phillips was, how old any of the other women were.

“You’ll burn.”

“We’re just linen and scrap these days.” At Gracie’s startled expression, the old woman laughed, a bark of pale noise. “Don’t look so surprised. You’d never wondered? Why we’re all the same colours, why none of us ever goes home? The demons take from the rich. But they bleed the rest of us, too. It’s just a question of degree, Gracie. It always is.”

THEY HELPED HER board up the factory. Gracie didn’t expect that either. The women filed out of their dormitories, silent as guilt, their skin ashen and their eyes pale in the

moonlight. They looked like the dead to Gracie, who said nothing to them in return as they worked in tandem, applying nail and plywood to the doors.

The staccato beat of their hammers was barely audible, however. Inside, their employers were throwing a gala, celebrating some deal or another, and the clink of champagne glasses was loud enough to carry into the black-soaked night. Music played, a discordant wailing straight from hell, a bastardization of Mozart and some Irish jig, a little bit of a funerary jingle. Shadows flickered in the windows, bodies spinning in a caricature of waltz.

When the women were done with their labour, they filed back inside through the one door that Gracie kept free. The latter followed behind.

Inside, the factory smelled of dried semen and skin, leather steeping in vinegar, and something like old eggs. What little light existed left the edges of the shadows red-rimmed, flame-haloed. Gracie moved slow, fingers gliding over the walls. She'd left kegs in every room, tripwires too; it'd only take a spark.

A door that Gracie had never seen opened inches from her face, and light cut the darkness into a rectangle. She held her breath. Waited until a silhouette staggered into view, head lolling forward. Gracie could see the stitching along its spine, the needlework exquisite, so fine that you might miss it if you didn't look where to look. The figure stretched and the skin pulled taut along its forearms, straining over too many bones, too many angles.

It took Grace a moment to make her decision. These things weren't even human. She repeated the words to

herself as she carried the figure into the darkness, a hand at its throat, a hammer in her fingers. *Not even human*, she told herself again as the skull concaved into brains.

NO ONE BUT a cat stood with Gracie Braithwaite on the gentle hill that night, after she'd bolted the doors of the factory and lit the fuse. The air had smelled of salt and textile and skins curling in the heat. *Linen and soot*, Gracie thought to herself, crouching to stroke the tom's lean spine. Linen and salt and fat, crisping in an inferno. Gracie, although she did not know it then, would never eat meat cooked on a grill again. Nothing that carried with it the taste of charcoal.

She stood and bit down on a green apple. Mrs. Phillips had made her promise.

"Are you Gracie Braithwaite?"

Gracie looked over her shoulder, tensing, watching as a silhouette loomed closer. The voice was male, its pronunciation crisp in that way that made her instantly distrust its owner. "Depends on who's asking."

"Sergeant Colin Jurgens."

"That means absolutely nothing to me."

The newcomer marched closer. He had a soldier's poise, a soldier's walk. Gracie could hear the rattle of a sabre in its scabbard. Old-fashioned, Gracie thought wryly, turning to face whatever was coming next. The man didn't look like anything that she'd expected. Smaller, slim at the shoulders, with long hair messily restrained in a ponytail. Older, too, than Gracie had expected, and stranger still,

more incandescently alive than she thought possible. She'd become accustomed to thinking of soldiers as tired men, chewed down by time, morassed by the things they'd seen.

But this stranger fairly *bounced* with glee.

"Quite right," he said. To Gracie's confused horror, he began wagging his eyebrows. "That's because I represent an entirely unknown organization."

"If you're here because of the fire, I—" Gracie paused, halfway towards articulating something brusque, before she shrugged, hands jammed into the pockets of her overalls. She glared. "Sodding hell. I'm tired. I don't care. You from the station? The halls of Hell? Whatever. Do what you will. I'm done. I did my share."

"Do what—" The man spluttered. It took Gracie a moment to realize that he was, much to her chagrin, laughing at her. "Ma'am. Ma'am, you mistake me. I'm not here for anything of the sort."

"You're not a demon, then?"

Colin pulled at his moustache, looking so positively aggrieved at the suggestion that Gracie almost laughed. He shook his head. His uniform was unlike anything that Gracie had seen and briefly, giddily, she wondered if he might be an envoy from Heaven, sent to congratulate her on her actions.

"Absolutely not." Probably not, Gracie decided; that hangdog look was nothing celestial. "We *fight* demons, in the Strange Brigade."

"Sorry, I think I might have misheard." Gracie took another bite from her apple. The cat circled her ankles again before padding over to Colin, tail coiled

questioningly. The soldier promptly went down on one knee, patted him without embarrassment. “Did you say the Strange Brigade?”

“Yes.” Something in the burning factory split in half, gave way, came crashing down into the blaze. “The Strange Brigade. Actually, officially, we operate under the much less interesting moniker of the Department of Antiquities. Politicians; I’m sure you understand.”

“No. No, I don’t.”

A flush crawled over his bridge of his nose, settled along his gaunt cheeks. “Hrm. Yes, quite. That’d make sense. Sorry. That was rather presumptuous of me. Age, you understand. Age has its privileges, also its problems.”

“You’re still not making any sense.” Gracie ventured closer, feeling out of her depth. “What are you talking about?”

“The Strange Brigade, my girl, is the British Empire’s first and last defence against supernatural threats that would, uhm, threaten the Crown. We are proud, we are few. We have faced man-eating lions. We have confronted mummies, vampires, no small number of hellions, and even pruned a garden overrun with carnivorous roses.”

“Right.” Gracie frowned. “And what’s this got to do with me? Don’t tell me. You want me to join with you, then?”

“Spot on!”

“I see.” Gracie breathed in. “The position. Does it come with benefits? I expect a posthumous pension plan that extends to all my family members, including any and all adjunct relatives, such as in-laws and cousins.”

THE TRUE HISTORY OF THE STRANGE BRIGADE

And Colin laughed, brassy and rich, a sound like a future coming together. “My girl, I can already tell we’ll get along famously.”