

Chapter Eleven, "The Night Shift"

In the dead of night, some time after Arthur's massacre at the gas station, Camille had another dream. In it, she walked down hallways that seemed endless. Again, she was naked, but this time she felt exposed, embarrassed. She tried her best to cover herself but it wasn't working. She passed an opening in the hallway that looked out on a grand hall. She was on the second floor and was looking at the large chandelier hanging down from a strong, circular ceiling. All at once, she knew where she was: she was home.

It was the house that she grew up in, the grand house - the old, dark mansion on the hill - most of it closed off to save on heating. She came from a once great family that had fallen on hard times. And this was the one thing they had managed to hold onto, this house.

But it was empty. Even though it was large, even though she was only walking through one, long hallway of it, she somehow knew this. It was empty.

It stood to reason. Camille was the only one left, the only one who had survived all the curses and creatures that her family had attracted.

She continued walking, knowing that she would find something here. Something unexpected.

Finally, she chose a door, one of the many that lined the endless hallway. She opened it.

Impossibly, it opened into a cave, the same cave she had visited in her last dream. There were only two people here this time but the cave looked the same: red velvet and candles everywhere.

One of the two people sat on the large throne on the raised platform looking over the cave. It was Papa. She was also naked and Camille blushed when she saw the woman's luscious body. The second person was robed and hooded, obviously one of Papa's eyeless followers. Cautiously, Camille approached the raised platform and the throne.

"Do you like it?" Papa asked.

She gestured grandly, taking in everything with her hands. Camille saw a few records strewn across the ground as she approached the throne: David Bowie's *Hunky Dory* and Meat Loaf's *Bat Out of Hell* among them. She frowned.

"I may have over-dressed it a bit, I think," Papa said. "But it's just dream dressing, so it doesn't matter. It doesn't quite look like this in the waking world, I'm afraid. Just a big cave, really. Shame. Come on, I don't have all night. You may be asleep at this time of night but it's just the time that I find myself most busy. A little nap is not what I need right now but, needs must and all that."

Camille mounted the raised platform, finding it difficult to do so and cover herself up at the same time. It was a lost cause.

"Ooh la la," Papa said. "Come on up here, you cute, hairy little thing."

Camille stood next to the throne, an arm across her breasts and the other between her legs, trying to remain as modest as possible under the circumstances. She tried to look defiant as well.

"No need to hide from me, dear," Papa said. "I know every inch of your body. We're going to be very good friends, you and I. You're going to help me."

"I'm not going to lift a finger to help you," Camille said.

"A clawed finger, you mean. Yes, I know your little secret, too. You made short work of my soldiers, you naughty little She Wolf, you. But that's in the past and what's past is past, don't you think?"

Camille shrugged.

"Tough crowd," Papa said. "Vampires and werewolves have never had the best of relationships, I'm afraid, my dear, but you and I are going to be as thick as thieves."

"Explain to me how we could ever possibly work together," Camille said.

Papa launched into her story. She seemed excited, elated. Caught up in her own words. "Well, you see, I'm currently engaged in what you could call an arms race. Asa and I have been fighting for some time now and lately, the last hundred years or so, we've been in a sort of stand still. Each of us has sent agents out to kill the other but no direct contact has been permitted. A cold war, if you will. But things are heating up. It's a funny story, actually. A year or so ago, I saw President Reagan on that new-fangled TV invention of yours. He was so...charismatic. If he was in an arms race with his enemy, why couldn't I be in one with mine? It made perfect sense."

"Only in your weirdo mind."

Papa brushed the minor insult off with a wave of her hand. "I'll forget you said that. I'm not crazy. I'm perfectly sane. Here's my plan. You join sides with me, we destroy Asa and her piddling soldiers, then we demolish this town."

"Then?"

Papa leaned forward in her chair. "Then we keep going! Can you imagine?! Next stop Providence. Where after that? Washington. God, that man is inspiring. Bless you, Mr. Reagan. Shame he'll have to die when we storm the White House... Unless I turn him..."

She looked genuinely forlorn as she idly chewed at a pointed fingernail, her top hat slightly cocked. Camille couldn't help but laugh.

Papa was on her in an instant, launching herself from the chair and moving with unnatural speed and agility. She grabbed Camille's throat with one hand, her face less than an inch away from the girl.

"Don't laugh at me," Papa said. "Many have laughed at me. Not many have lived to tell of it."

Her face was scary, her eyes hypnotic. Her expression changed, becoming friendly, seductive even. Her grip on Camille's neck relaxed a little. With her free hand, she pushed aside Camille's own hand and cupped the girl's crotch.

"Come on," she said, "let's be friends."

Camille closed her eyes, unable to fight the pleasure she was feeling. They kissed. Camille found herself giving in, bit by bit. She grabbed Papa by the hips and pressed her body against the woman.

She was just about to give in entirely when she realized that none of this was real. She could fight it; she could escape. The Alice Cooper song, "Escape", ran through her head, defiant and triumphant.

She opened her eyes and pushed away from Papa, breaking their kiss. From her angle, she could now see the second person better over Papa's shoulder. She gasped.

The soldier's hood rode up a little and Camille could see her face.

It was Kimberly.

Camille snapped out of the dream and into the waking world. She was disoriented and tried to get her bearings. The grandfather clock in the hall struck five. It wasn't quite morning yet and no light penetrated through the curtains. The television was on, showing nothing but static. So, she was in the living room downstairs. There was no light from a fire but she was quite warm, sweating even. Why was that?

She looked around and nearly jumped when she saw that she was nestled in Kimberly's arms. Everything came back to her.

Camille looked at Kimberly. It was rather astonishing, actually. It had been a wonderful evening, Camille was enjoying herself. And the two of them must have never moved during the night, so comfortable in each others presence. And now this dream, this foreboding dream.

Camille scurried away from Kimberly, to the other side of the couch. Her movement stirred Kimberly. Her eyes fluttered open.

"Is it morning?" she said, groggy with sleep.

"No," Camille said.

"Why are you looking at me like that?"

"No reason."

Kimberly smiled.

"Come on," she said, "what are you hiding?"

"Nothing," Camille said.

"Well, you look weird."

Kimberly yawned and got up. She scratched her head and looked at the clock.

"Well," she said, "I guess it's late enough to get a start on the day. We should probably get going anyway. Want to track down this Papa person, right?"

That's right, they had decided to do that today, didn't they? The dream was so disorienting that Camille had forgotten that.

"Yeah," she said. "I'll jump in the shower."

"Me, too," Kimberly said. "Don't worry, I'm not expecting you to jump in the shower with me. Not yet."

She smiled. Camille smiled awkwardly back and got up, heading up the stairs.

As usual, Camille took her time in the shower. The upstairs bathroom, which was connected to the master bedroom, was much larger than the downstairs one. It was old but luxurious, with strong, powerful pipes that kept the water hot no matter how cold it got outside. Camille stood in the shower and let the hot water cascade over her. She turned her head to clean out her ears as her mind wandered.

Could Kimberly be Papa's puppet, a trap designed to ensnare Camille, draw her into Papa's plan? It seemed unlikely. Papa could have placed Kimberly in the dream just to confuse Camille, make her mistrust the only person she could trust at this time. But, then, how did she even know about Kimberly?

That one was easy. She was inside Camille's head. She must have been able to enter people's dreams. It was a form of mind reading. And what would have happened if Camille had let Papa take over, let her seduce her in the mental realm?

It was too terrifying to comprehend. Camille was just glad that she had been able to shake the creature off this time. But what about the next time? She had to be in complete control of herself. It might prove difficult.

Fucking vampires, man. They were always a problem.

Kimberly sat in a booth in the Stonewall Diner reading the local paper with one hand and distractedly drumming with the other. An empty Pepsi sat next to a half-eaten cherry pie. The sun had only recently sunk behind the distant mountains, shrouding the town in darkness.

They had spent the whole morning asking questions, snooping around the town, investigating. It hadn't led to much, honestly. The only thing they uncovered was old wives' tales, something about a curse on the town. It had been told to them by an old tramp and was pretty fragmentary. They couldn't make much sense out of it.

Their snooping was put to an untimely end when Camille stopped by the diner around five, wanting to talk to some locals. While there, she was told that she had to cover Wendy's shift. The girl hadn't shown up for work today and neither Hedda or Manny could reach her.

Camille agreed to work a partial shift but couldn't promise that she could stay all night. She claimed to not be a night person. Kimberly had decided to stay at the diner until Camille was off. She could read the paper and her M.R. James book, which was in her bag. It wasn't so bad.

Camille came by Kimberly's table from time to time but mostly it was Hedda who filled Kimberly's glass when it was empty and asked if she needed anything else. She was a dear lady in her later forties, Kimberly guessed. They chatted a bit and Kimberly learned that Hedda had a young grandson at home that she was taking care of.

Hedda came by and refilled Kimberly's Pepsi. She sighed as she did so.

"I'm taking advantage of you, aren't I?" Kimberly said.

"No, dear," Hedda said. "I was just thinking of my no-good daughter."

"No good?"

Hedda shook her head. "No, dear, not good at all. She stopped by the house the other day, hadn't seen her in weeks. Barely said hello to her son. She was looking for money, as usual. She's into the drugs, you know? She says she's getting scared, that she's seeing things. Something about strange naked women wandering the town. I told her she always has a place at my house, if she gets off the drugs, but she won't have any of it. Probably the drugs that are giving her those strange hallucinations. But you can't force 'em, not when they're adults."

She shook her head in frustration.

"Anything else, dear?" she asked after a moment.

"No, thank you," Kimberly said.

"Okay, I'll be back by in a while."

Kimberly nodded. She was distracted. Naked women wandering the town. It couldn't be, could it? She shook her head. She had put down her drumstick a moment ago, not even thinking about it. The window of the booth she sat in looked onto the highway and a small portion of the parking lot, so she saw the man before anyone else did.

He staggered down the highway holding onto his right forearm. His left foot dragged and he was bleeding.

"Oh, God," Kimberly said.

She stood up and exited her booth. Opening the door to the diner, she called out.

"Here," she said. "Come inside, we'll help!"

The man looked dazed and turned his head from side to side. Finally, he focused on Kimberly and the diner. He walked towards the open door. Kimberly came out to meet him, taking an arm when he began to stagger.

Hedda, Camille and several customers joined Kimberly by the open door, trying to see what was going on. Manny came out of the kitchen, a large butcher knife in hand. He looked ready for trouble.

The man staggered into the diner and collapsed onto the floor, Kimberly tumbling over with him. Hedda immediately went down to help.

"What's wrong?" Hedda asked.

"We can help you, just tell us what's happened to you," Kimberly said, getting up onto her knees by his side.

"They're after me," the man said.

"Who? Who's after you?" Camille said.

"Them."

He pointed out the open door, down the highway. Kimberly looked where he was indicating. Six naked women walked down the middle of the road, shrouded by an unnatural fog. They looked wet, slimy. At their feet, cockroaches skittered across the asphalt, rats pranced between their legs.

"Christ, this town's going to Hell," Hedda said.

She didn't know how right she was.

Not yet.

Chapter Twelve, "The Stonewall Alamo"

"Pull him inside," Camille said. It was an order, really. She had taken command, it seemed.

Hedda and Kimberly pulled the man all the way into the diner. Camille closed the doors, locked them.

"This is not going to hold them," she said to no one in particular.

"Hey, wait a minute," a large truck driver said. "What the Hell's going on here?"

"I don't have time to explain," Camille said. "We have to shut this place down."

"It's just some nude, rank women," a local fisherman said. "What can they do?"

"You'd be surprised," Camille said.

"Camille, what do you know about this?" Hedda asked.

Camille took in everyone in the diner, looked at all of them in turn. Including herself, they numbered ten: Kimberly, Manny, Hedda, Carlos - who was the bus boy - the truck driver, the fisherman, Old Harold - who was always in this time of night - a man wearing a business suit, and the wounded man.

"What exactly are we dealing with here?" Manny asked.

"Those women aren't human," Camille said. "Not anymore."

"What?" Business Suit said. "Not human? What are they, dobermans? Come on, we're supposed to just take the word of some waitress?"

"That's my day job," Camille said.

"Oh, and what are you when you're not a waitress?" Business Suit asked.

"Let's just say I moonlight, okay?"

"And you're saying these women are some kind of threat to us?" Truck Driver said.

Camille nodded in frustration. "Yes."

"I don't believe it," Business Suit said.

"Then you better take another look at them."

He looked out the glass doors again. The women were closer now, the fog rolling in with them. He could now see what Camille and Kimberly already knew: that none of them had any eyes. They had been poked out.

"Holy shit," he said.

"What do we do, Camille?" Manny asked.

"First of all, we need to keep as quiet as we can," Camille said.

"Fat chance of that," Business Suit said.

"I got a rig out back that we can all fit into," Truck Driver said. "There a back door out of this place?"

"Course," Manny said.

"That's a good idea," Camille said. "We need to carry him."

She pointed at the wounded man. Kimberly looked at Hedda, who in turn looked at Manny.

"Manny," she said, "can you give us a hand?"

"Here, we'll take him," Fisherman said.

He waved Manny and Carlos over as Hedda and Kimberly moved aside. The three men picked the wounded man up. Manny put his butcher knife down on the nearest booth table. This was a mistake.

The wounded man screamed as the three men lifted him. His arms and legs flailed about. His whole body was shaking.

"What the fuck?" Carlos said.

He had the man by his legs, his attention tuned to the man's left leg. The others looked down as well. Something was moving under the man's skin. Something small, long and determined.

"What is that?" Fisherman said.

"They crawled inside my body!" the wounded man screamed.

The Blind Dead had been standing outside in the parking lot of the diner not moving, their heads cocked to one side, listening. When they heard the wounded man scream, they started towards the glass doors of the diner.

"Shit!" Manny said.

He was holding the man's right arm, where a second something moved under the man's skin. He looked around.

"Harold, get over here!" he called.

Old Harold was still sitting at the counter like nothing strange had happened. He nursed his beer and turned towards the commotion.

"What's the trouble?" he asked.

"Get over here and take a look at this."

Reluctantly, Old Harold got up off his stool and sauntered over to them. He looked on in mild interest at the person they were carrying.

"You used to be a doctor, right?" Manny said. "What the Hell is that?"

"What the Hell is what?" Harold asked.

Manny gestured to the man's arm. "That!"

Old Harold saw the something moving under the man's skin, frowned. He took a swig of beer before answering.

"Fuck if I know," he said.

"Thanks," Manny said, "you've been a real help."

"Anytime."

He walked back to the counter and sat back down.

"Sweet Mary, mother of God," Carlos said.

They all looked down at the man's left leg. At least a dozen more somethings moved along under the man's skin.

"Put him down now," Camille said.

"What?!" Manny said.

"Drop him now."

"You think I'd--"

He never finished his sentence. The wounded man flailed again, throwing them all off balance. They staggered and dropped him to the ground. He flailed wildly, left hand outstretched, grasping for something above him, on the nearest booth table. He grabbed the large butcher knife Manny had left there.

Before anyone could do anything, the wounded man sliced open his left leg, zipping open a huge gash from his ankle to his upper thigh. Almost immediately, the somethings burst out of the wound into the open air.

They were centipedes, long and black, their pincers sharp and deadly. They cascaded onto the floor from the bleeding gash and also onto the wounded man's body. The wounded man hardly noticed. When he was finished with his leg, he sliced open his right arm, where a dozen more centipedes erupted.

No one would approach him. They could all tell that the centipedes were not normal bugs. They were killers.

The wounded man screamed at the top of his lungs as three of the centipedes bit into the flesh of his chest, right through his shirt, and began to wriggle their way inside his body once again.

There was a crack and Camille looked at the glass doors, where one of the Blind Dead stood, hand against the glass, an expanding spider-web pattern in the glass where her palm touched.

Camille acted on instinct and grabbed the butcher knife out of the wounded man's hand. With one decisive stroke, she sliced his throat from ear to ear. Blood sprayed from the wound, pooling around him.

The man made several horrible gurgling sounds, his hands grasping at the bugs on his body. After a moment, he fell silent.

"Oh my God," Hedda said.

"He was a goner," Camille said. "Don't let any of them touch you."

She stepped on a centipede, smashing it. She pointed at the glass doors with the knife, looking like a Valkyrie in a waitress uniform, covered in blood.

"And be quiet," she said. "We're going out the back."

The remaining nine walked towards the back, avoiding the centipedes and trying to remain as quiet as they could. Kimberly, Hedda and Manny kept close to Camille as they headed into the kitchen.

"Who are you?" Hedda asked.

"Look," Camille said, "no matter what happens with me, no matter what I look like, how I act, just remember: I am on your side. You're going to see some strange shit--"

"Stranger than that?" Manny asked.

"Possibly," Camille said. "Just trust me. I'm here to help."

"You sure helped that poor man," Hedda said.

"He was dead already. They had him. There was nothing I could do."

"And what about us?" Hedda asked. "Are you going to be able to get us out of this?"

"I've faced more than six of those dead woman by myself. But they didn't have all those...vermin with them at the time."

"Yeah, what's with the bugs and rats?" Manny asked.

"Who could control them?" Kimberly asked.

"A vampire," Camille said.

"Vampires now?" Business Suit said. He had wandered near them, keeping his voice as quiet as possible while still being forceful. "What's next, werewolves?"

Camille just looked at him. She cocked her head to one side.

"Really?" Business Suit said. "It's the Goddamn Late Late Show in here."

They passed into the kitchen. There was a scratching sound at the back door. Camille looked towards the sound.

"Camille," a voice called.

It was coming from outside the diner, from the back parking lot, where they were headed. Kimberly looked at Camille.

"Camille?" the voice called again.

It was Papa's voice.

"Come out, join me, and I'll let the others go," Papa said.

They all looked at each other. Most of them looked concerned, panicked. Business Suit raised his eyebrows.

"Sounds like a good deal to me," he said. "Out you go, girl."

"No," Kimberly said and embraced Camille, blood and all.

"Get off her, you dyke," Business Suit said.

"Now, wait a minute," Manny said. He towered over Business Suit.

"Back off, Shaft, it's for the best."

"Who you calling Shaft, Billy Jack? Say what you really want to say."

"Fine, back the fuck off, ni--"

He never finished the word. Manny grabbed him by his suspenders and lifted him off the ground.

The man shouted in protest. Manny paid him no mind. He tossed him back into the dining room.

Business Suit landed on top of the wounded man's body. The chittering, horrid sounds of the centipedes drifted into the kitchen.

As Camille watched, the bugs engulfed Business Suit. They crawled into his ears, his nostrils and his mouth as he screamed in terror and pain.

"Oh, shit," Carlos said.

There was a loud crash as the Blind Dead smashed through the glass doors and swarmed into the diner. One of them approached the screaming form of Business Suit. She stood over him a moment, head cocked to one side. With a mighty stomp, she stepped on his neck. There was a crack as Business Suit's spine snapped. He stopped struggling.

All six of the Blind Dead walked towards the kitchen and the remaining eight survivors. They came like a wave of death, eyeless. Mouths open and screaming silently.

"I guess that makes the point moot," Papa said outside.

There was a whooshing sound and the back door swung open violently. Papa came floating swiftly into the kitchen, a foot off the ground.

She grabbed Fisherman by the throat and dug her nails into his skin. His carotid artery popped and blood sprayed out of his neck like a fire hose. He screamed as Papa tossed him aside.

Five more Blind Dead followed her into the kitchen. Their arms were outstretched for attack.

Camille's green eyes deepened, became more vibrant and she growled. Kimberly let go of her as the Beast took over. Hedda took one look at Camille, screamed and ran into a corner of the room.

The Beast was out of the closet again and she pounced at Papa, claws first. The force of the pounce sent both women tumbling out of the kitchen and into the back parking lot. As if knowing what was going on, the black clouds in the skies opened, pouring rain down upon them as they rushed towards each other.

In the kitchen, Manny grabbed a large meat cleaver, raised it above his head and yelled a battle cry. He brought the cleaver down on one of the dead women's arms, lopping it off in one motion. Carlos grabbed a plate from the sink and threw it in the face of another dead woman.

Old Harold went down almost immediately. Two Blind Dead took hold of him on the floor. Old Harold screamed. His left arm was torn off with a sickening tearing sound. A leg went after that. The other Blind Dead grabbed hold of his face and poked out his eyes with her thumbs. She twisted his head to one side, then the other. With another wet, tearing sound, the man's head came off.

A Blind Dead squatted down and grabbed hold of Hedda where she was hiding in the corner. She had been crying, attracting attention. The dead woman had her by the hair and pulled her up. She raised her free hand, ready to strike it down on the woman.

Kimberly came to her rescue. She grabbed a long knife off the wall and stabbed it into the Blind Dead's back. The dead woman let go of Hedda and tried to get the knife out of her back. Kimberly pushed it in harder and maneuvered the corpse woman towards the large deep fryer.

With an effort, she forced the woman head first into the fryer, one hand wrapped around the knife, the other on the back of the woman's head. There was a hideous sizzling sound as the woman's face was cooked. Kimberly screamed as hot oil splashed onto the hand holding the woman's head. She let go of the woman.

Hedda approached her.

"Here, let me help you," she said, taking hold of Kimberly's wounded hand.

She never got the chance to help.

There was a horrid ripping and cracking sound and, as Kimberly watched, Hedda's face burst open, her nose at the epicenter of the explosion.

A fist pushed through it from the other side. One of the Blind Dead from the dining room had crept up behind her. Kimberly screamed as brains and blood splattered her face.

"Come on," Manny said. "Come on!"

He hacked one of the dead women's heads in half and grabbed hold of Kimberly. Carlos had pinned one of the women to a kitchen counter with a meat thermometer through the hand. Truck Driver slammed his big, strong hands into the temples of one of the women and there was a satisfying crack as the Blind Dead fell to the ground.

"Come on!" Manny called again.

The four of them backed out of the kitchen and out into the back parking lot. Rain pelted down on them.

"Jesus Christ in a cardigan sweater, would you look at that," Truck Driver said.

The others looked. Lightning flashed, filling the sky with a bright blue light. Camille, in werewolf form, ran at Papa, who was floating in the air, arms spread wide, mouth open, sharp fangs bared. Camille jumped and tackled the other woman. The She Wolf wrestled the vampire to the ground. She swiped a clawed hand at Papa, who barely dodged it.

"Think we should help?" Carlos asked.

"I think she's doing just fine without us," Truck Driver said. "I say we get to my truck. Right now."

"Right..." Manny said.

"We can't leave her!" Kimberly said.

"Do you expect us--" Manny said but was cut off.

Four Blind Dead surged out of the open kitchen door, arms outstretched, and grabbed hold of Kimberly. The girl screamed as she was dragged back into the diner. Manny reached out to grab her but it was too late.

The door closed all by itself. Manny shot a look at the werewolf and the vampire. Papa held a hand aloft, pointed towards the door. She was smiling. The bitch!

Manny punched an open palm with a fist. They were cut off from Kimberly and the Blind Dead.

"Let's go!" Truck Driver said.

"We can't help her," Carlos said.

"It's too late," Truck Driver said.

He pointed at a group of Blind Dead coming around the building from the front. They were heading towards the sound of the struggle.

"Fuck!" Manny said.

The three of them ran as fast as they could towards the waiting truck, leaving Camille to fight the Horror alone.

To Be Continued...

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