

Chapter Twenty-Six, "The Lighthouse"

Manny and the Old Woman drove out of her neighborhood and onto the streets. Manny, at the wheel, uttered a silent prayer that they would encounter minimal resistance from the hordes of undead roaming, as well as destroying, the town.

He risked a look at the Old Woman. She seemed composed, calm, in her element. A cigarette dangled from her lips as she read from an old book. Her shotgun was in the backseat. An old doll sat in her lap. Its button eyes stared blankly up at Manny. He didn't like it.

"So," he said, looking back at the road and swerving to miss a Blind Dead who lunged towards them, "that an old spell book? One of a kind, or something?"

"Not in the damn least," the Old Woman said.

"What is it, then?"

"Town history and legends. There's a copy at the local library. But I suppose no one goes to the library anymore. Not in this town, at least."

"We already know the cause of all this, though," Manny argued. "The curse. Two vampires fighting for centuries. What are you going to find in there?"

The Old Woman looked up at him and took a drag from her cigarette.

"I'm looking up another town legend," she said.

"Another?" Manny asked.

"Son, you've lived in this town your whole life. Don't tell me you've never heard of the Sea Hag."

"Jesus, that's what we're doing? Now I've heard it all. The damn Sea Hag. She's a boogeyman, a scary story to keep the kids in line. No really believes in her."

The Old Woman wagged a finger at him. "The sailors do, my boy. They know she's out there, in the water. And both you and I know another place she's been known to haunt."

Manny shook his head. "Christ. The lighthouse. I haven't been out there since I was a kid. Will we even be able to get out there in this storm?"

"Not in this car, we won't. Not all the way, at least. We'll have to steal a boat."

"Steal a boat?"

The Old Woman indicated with her thumb and forefinger. "A little one. Just big enough to take the both of us out there."

"Okay," Manny said. "Fuck. All right, guess it isn't any crazier than anything else that's happened tonight. So, we're going. Fine. What's the doll for?"

"Think of it as a tool," the Old Woman said.

She closed the book, put it aside and reached into her purse, which was on the seat next to her, and pulled out a switchblade. Flicked it open. Manny started to say something then decided against it and just shook his head.

The Old Woman used the tip of the knife to cut off the button eyes of the doll, tossing them aside. She then cut off the doll's clothes and cast them to the floor of the car, leaving the doll eyeless and naked.

"Pull up alongside one of those things," she said.

She pointed at a Blind Dead shambling in the middle of the road ahead of them.

"One of those walking corpses?" Manny said. "Are you out of your senile old mind?"

"That's beside the point," she said. "We need a lock of its hair."

"You're putting me on."

"I wouldn't think of it. Now, here she comes. Take this."

She handed him the switchblade as he pulled up alongside the Blind Dead. Manny stopped the car and rolled down the window. The corpse turned towards them and lunged through the open window. Manny grabbed hold of it by the throat with one hand and struck at it with the switchblade.

"Get the hair!" the Old Woman ordered.

"I'm trying, dammit!" Manny said.

The Old Woman grabbed hold of a thick lock of hair and pulled. It ripped easily out of the thing's head with a sickening, wet splooshing sound. Manny buried the switchblade in the thing's temple and turned it before pulling it out. The thing still kept coming.

"Watch out," The Old Woman said.

Manny shot her a glance and saw that she had retrieved the shotgun and was now leveling it at the Blind Dead. Manny leaned back in his seat - out of the way of the gun - as the Old Woman pulled the trigger.

The Blind Dead's head exploded. Bits of brain and horrid black blood dotted Manny but most of it was projected out behind the corpse, onto the street below.

Manny gunned the car, got it moving again. The Blind Dead was caught in the rear wheel well and was crushed into hideous new shapes before being left behind in a pile on the road.

Manny shook off a thin layer of black blood and spit out the open window. The Old Woman carefully set aside the shotgun and stuffed the hair into the top of the doll's head.

"That ought to do," she said.

Manny handed her back the switchblade. She closed it and put it back in her purse. After a moment, she produced something else from her purse. Manny frowned when he realized what it was: a conch shell. Small, white and very old by the looks of it.

"We'll need this to summon her," she said.

"Whatever," Manny said. "Mind if I put on some music?"

"Knock yourself out."

Manny turned on the radio and adjusted the volume. He shook his head. There it was again. Patti Smith's "Till Victory." What were the odds? Was that song even a single? Would a radio station even be playing it? Manny didn't know but it made the ride out to the old lighthouse go by much faster. And even though he had to dodge six Blind Dead and run over a large pile of cockroaches, Manny found himself signing along to the radio, like this was some kind of commute to Hell.

They found a little boat moored to a dock near the old lighthouse and climbed into it. Manny did the rowing and they approached the old building slowly, steadily. The waves rocked back and forth violently but Manny hardly noticed. His mind was elsewhere.

The lighthouse had not been used in many decades. A modern, more sophisticated lighthouse replaced this old, Victorian relic a little farther up the coast. Not much shipping made its way here as it once did. So the old lighthouse sat - empty and dark - acquiring legends and ghost stories as the years went by. Manny had heard many of them, naturally, and, as a child, had ventured out here with a few friends. They each dared each other to go inside and explore. It was easy to get in, the door had been broken years before and no one had bothered to fix it. Most of his friends were too scared to enter.

But not him.

Manny, who was eleven years old at the time, went inside by himself. The place was not totally dark, not pitch black. There was just enough light to create twisted, demonic shadows across every surface. Manny remembered that there was an odd lack of cobwebs. Surely, an old, disused building was want to amass hundreds of spiders. Right? So where were they?

He had crept up the stairs that wound their way upwards. It seemed so far to him then, as little as he was. He only made it about halfway up before the fear set in. Goose-flesh broke out over his whole body, his senses sharpened to a pinpoint. What was that noise on the stairs above him? Was it footsteps? Was it laughter?

He forced himself to look up with some considerable effort. Standing framed in a doorway to some small living space was a nightmare. Manny could barely see her, for she was hidden in the shadows, but his impression was one of a deep shade of green.

And water. He fancied he could see water dripping from her ragged, tenebrous body.

That was all he could take. He ran back down the stairs and out of the lighthouse, running into his friends, who chided him and made fun of him for days.

After some time, he decided that he had imagined the woman in the doorway but now - approaching the lighthouse once again, by boat on this horrid night - he wasn't so sure. It all seemed very real once again.

They had to paddle out to the lighthouse as the storm had flooded the twisting rock path that led to the old building; washed it away. The boat seemed appropriate somehow, though, as if they were meant to travel to the lighthouse this way.

Finally, they reached the rocks below the lighthouse. Manny moored the boat to the wood struts at the base of the lighthouse and stepped onto land. He offered a hand to the Old Woman to help her out of the boat but she waved it away.

"Nope," she said. "I'm not coming."

"What?" Manny said.

"You have to do it by yourself."

"The fuck I do."

The Old Woman shook her head. "She won't listen to me. You've got to do it."

Manny was flummoxed. "She won't listen to you? Why the hell wouldn't she listen to you?"

"She hates me. And I hate her. But she just might listen to you."

"This just keeps getting worse and worse. Give me the damn doll."

The Old Woman handed him the doll and the conch. Manny cradled the doll to his body like a scared little girl, the conch held at his side casually.

"Now, remember what I told you," the Old Woman said.

"I know what to do," Manny said.

"She'll be hard to convince but she's vain. That should work to your advantage."

Manny nodded.

"Good luck," the Old Woman said. "You'll need it."

"Thanks," Manny said.

Reluctantly, he left the Old Woman sitting in the boat and made his own way up the stairs leading to the lighthouse door. The old building towered above him, as if it were a living thing, looking down at

him and smirking.

The door was gone, torn away at some point in the past. To Manny, it looked like an open mouth. Water from the recent rain ran down its sides like saliva and Manny could imagine its teeth just behind its lips.

He sighed and walked inside.

It was much like he remembered it as a child only even more foreboding, somehow. Shadows danced across the walls and the floor and up the stairs. There were no cobwebs, no bugs or crabs. And there was an eerie, unnatural stillness in the air, as if something was waiting for him around every corner holding its breath.

Manny started up the stairs. The weight of the pistol shoved into his pants was comforting to him, even if it was totally useless in the current situation. The doll and the conch felt even more useless but he knew that they were important. The Old Woman had convinced him of that.

Like she had told him, Manny walked up the stairs to the second level, to the little rooms provided to the lighthouse keepers, back when more than one shift worked this place. But none of that information was important to Manny. What was important was that this was the door where he had seen her as a child, the place where she had stood and scared the living shit out of him.

She wasn't there now. The door was just a door, old and rotting. Manny pushed it open with a creak and walked into the room. He looked around. A window provided some diffused moonlight which cast the room in shadows. It was Victorian and sparse: a bed, a wardrobe, a water basin, a stove. To Manny, it was depressing.

But none of this was why he was here. He put the doll down on the bed and brought the conch to his lips. He blew on it, producing a small, distant whine, eerie and alarming in the stillness of this place.

For a moment, nothing happened. Manny shook his head and brought the conch up once again, meaning to give it another honk. He stopped.

Standing in the corner of the room, back turned to him, was a figure.

It was a woman. She was faintly green, almost luminescent. Water dripped down her body. Her hair was soaked and twisted. Through thick strands of it, Manny could see her skin, which was sickly white. She was clenching and unclenching her hands and shaking ever so slightly. Her feet shuffled in place, as if she were trying to walk through the wall. If she was ghost, why wasn't she?

Manny was terrified but tried not to show it.

"Ma'am?" he said.

She seemed not to notice. Manny suppressed a gasp. Through the window - past her, thrusting up from the churning waves - he saw a massive, spectral-green sailing ship. It was impossibly close to the

lighthouse. There was no way they would have missed it on approach. No, it had appeared here, just now, at the moment the Sea Hag had appeared in the room.

"Ma'am?" he tried again.

She stopped shaking, stopped clenching and unclenching her hands, stopped shuffling in place. Slowly, she turned around to face him. She looked young and cold. Her lips shivered. Her eyes were trapped in black circles that contrasted with her dead-white skin. Her teeth chattered, filling the room with a staccato clacking sound that burrowed into Manny's brain.

"I..." Manny began, a terrible start. "I don't mean to disturb you, ma'am, but--"

"Why have you disturbed me?" the Sea Hag asked.

Her voice was an octave lower than it should have been, Manny thought. It reverberated around the room. One moment, it seemed to be coming from the Sea Hag, the next, from behind Manny.

"I need your help," Manny said.

"You need my teeth," the Sea Hag said.

"What?"

"My teeth. Always looking for my teeth, well you can't have them."

She smiled and it was the worst thing Manny had ever seen in his life. If he lived through the night, he would see that smile every night when he closed his eyes. It was like some kind of creature from another plane of existence was trying to emulate a smile and almost pulling it off but not quite getting it right and coming off supremely sinister. It was as if a puppeteer had pulled two strings and stretched the woman's face into a smile.

"I think I'll eat you," the Sea Hag said.

"Wait," Manny said, "wait. Someone has taken your place, you hear me?"

The Sea Hag cocked her head to one side, confused.

"My place?" she said. "Talk, talk. So many sea shanties. Is it my turn for the midnight watch? I don't want to see the Wave Walking Man again, is all. Have we eaten all of the cabin boy yet? I'm still hungry."

"The children aren't afraid of you anymore," Manny said.

The Sea Hag's face contorted in rage and she was suddenly inches from Manny's face. He saw things moving in the small gaps between her teeth, things wriggling. He didn't know what they were and didn't want to know.

"Fear?" she said. "You know fear? I've often walked behind him, picking up little pieces of him as he ages. Do you know? Have you seen?!"

"They're scared of something else now," Manny said. He kept his brave face on, kept on point. "The

walking corpses. They're afraid of them now. No one talks about the Sea Hag anymore. Do you understand me? They're scarier than you."

She clicked her tongue and Manny got the impression that something was in the back of her throat, something moving. He couldn't quite see it, though. Manny took a chance and grabbed the doll from the bed and held it out to the Sea Hag.

"Here," he said. "Use this. This is a tool. You can use this to focus on them. To find them. And eat them."

"Why?" she asked.

"Because they used the water," Manny said, feeling more confident. "They hid in the water, slept there and in the caves along the beach. They were in your domain. Teach them a lesson."

She was silent for a moment. Then she reached out to take the doll. For a brief second, their fingertips touched. It was hideous. Her flesh was soft, squishy. It felt to Manny like you could just push right through it. It was neither the flesh of a living person or a corpse, but of something else, some unknowable Other.

She turned and looked out the window, towards the ship; the waves beyond. She shook her head. Manny could hear her neck creek as she did. When she spoke, her voice was soft. Almost a whisper. "The Man Made of Shadows will not like this. Not at all." She turned back to him, that hideous smile in place once again. "But I like to disappoint."

After that she was gone, taking the doll with her. Manny didn't see her leave, she simply disappeared. Manny realized that he had been holding his breath for some time and drew in a refreshing lungful of air and sat down on the bed.

"Jesus," he said. "Jesus Ass-fucking Christ. Holy shit."

He sat there nearly a full two minutes before heading back down to the boat.

To Be Continued...

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