

## **Chapter Four, "The Coffee House"**

As the storm raged above and the night nestled in around her, Camille had a dream. She stood in the center of a large chamber. It looked like some kind of cavern that a raving mad designer had decorated to the hilt. Long, red drapes cascaded down rock and earthen walls; dozens of lighted candelabra dotted every surface for as far as she could see; a large, ornate throne set on a raised platform looked down on the proceedings.

Camille was naked, though she did not feel vulnerable. On the contrary, she felt liberated, free. Wild. She wandered through the chamber. As she approached the throne, she saw dozens of robed figures on their knees, praying to the throne. But it was empty.

Puzzled, Camille continued approaching the raised platform. The robed figures stood up as she passed them and surrounded her. One by one, they pushed back their hoods. They were all women. And they were all eyeless.

Camille named them on the spot: the Blind Dead.

None of the Blind Dead attacked her but each of them reached out to touch her naked flesh as she passed. Reaching the platform, Camille mounted it and approached the throne. She ran her hands along the fine, sensuous red velvet. The throne was beckoning her to sit, drawing her in, and she couldn't resist.

Slowly, she sat on the throne, her body visibly reacting to the feel of the velvet. The Blind Dead got on their knees again, worshiping her as their deity. Camille wasn't going to lie to herself: it felt good. She liked it. She smiled. It was almost a smirk.

When she was at her most narcissistic, clawed hands grabbed her from behind, as if emerging from the throne itself. She tried to escape but couldn't break the grip. Another woman's face emerged from the red velvet of the throne and rested on her left shoulder. Camille could feel the stranger's breasts pressing against her back.

"You're certainly a cute, hairy little thing," the stranger said.

Camille screamed as the stranger bit down on her neck with her long, sharp fangs.

She awoke with a jolt but did not scream, at least in the waking world. She looked around, taking in her surroundings. It was morning. She had fallen asleep on the couch in the living room once again. After investigating the house after the scare that the Toothpick Man had given her, she had collapsed in an exhausted heap on the couch and hadn't moved since.

It was her day off so she took her time with her morning routine: bathroom, shower, breakfast, music. Not necessarily in that order.

The music that she selected was the "Nuggets" comp and she smiled to herself at the serendipity of the first song, "I Had Too Much to Dream (Last Night)." Breakfast was corn flakes and orange juice, both a little stale. The shower was heavenly, as usual.

After a bit, she decided to hit the town and just wander. Maybe she'd take in a movie or perhaps just look for lowlifes to take further note of. She had to drive again. It wasn't raining when she woke up but it was by the time she left the house.

It was when she was waiting at a red light in town, setting fire to the tip of a cigarette, that she saw the woman for the first time. It was almost as if she was looking at an old friend. Or someone even more important. Camille cocked her head to one side in curiosity. Her window was rolled down and she sniffed the air. Yes, there was something different about this woman. She smelled different.

She observed the woman as she crossed the street in front of Camille's car. Perhaps nineteen or twenty, with blonde hair cut extremely short. She was tall and boyish. Despite the rain, she wasn't wielding an umbrella or even warm clothes. Just a simple sports jacket over a white T-shirt, jeans and boots. A small duffel bag was slung over one arm. She twirled a pair of drumsticks in her hands.

On Camille's radio, "Your Move," by Yes, was playing. The strangeness of the song added to the strangeness of the moment.

Camille wanted to say something, wanted to attract the woman's attention, but nothing came to mind. She wasn't a guy, she couldn't just simply honk the horn, could she?

The moment had passed. The woman had reached the other side of the street and the light was green and the car behind her was honking at Camille, trying to get her to move. Camille sat where she was. The woman had turned to see what the honking was about and, for just a moment, their gazes met. They shared a curious moment. Their looks were suspicious but not unkind. It was as if they were sizing each other up.

Suddenly, the car behind Camille barreled around her, honking and blocking Camille's view of the woman. When the car passed, the woman was gone, like a ghost.

Had she imagined the whole thing? No way. That didn't make any sense. The woman probably just

turned into a shop or down a side street. Camille finally drove forward through the light and continued on her way, hoping that she would run into the woman sometime during her free day.

But it wasn't to be.

Most of the day passed uneventfully. Camille spotted a few assholes that she took note of, but there was no one that screamed out to be killed and eaten. She had lunch at a little cafe near the docks, reading an article on the death of Caleb Sands and chuckling. The police suspected a wild animal in the area but they weren't ruling out foul play, either.

She took in a movie, *The Thing*, at the little grindhouse downtown. She liked it much more than *E.T.*, which she had seen earlier that summer. Just a better alien, in her opinion.

Finally, as she was walking out of the movie and towards her car, parked around the corner, she saw a small storefront that she had never noticed before. The windows of the storefront had been blacked out and a simple sign proclaimed:

## **THE COFFEE HOUSE THEATRE**

Camille was intrigued. It was twilight and would soon be dark, but she felt safe. It had been a calm, relaxing day free of stress. She had deliberately avoided thinking about some of the troubling things from the previous day and so she was probably safe from the Beast tonight. So she walked in to check out the show.

Inside, she found a narrow but long building. To her immediate right, a woman manned a small ticket booth. In front of Camille, farther down the long, narrow building, a number of tables were arranged in front of a simple stage. She was reminded of the little coffee houses and bars that beatniks and folk singers presented their works in the '50s and '60s.

She approached the ticket booth. The woman manning it was an older-than-middle-aged woman with glasses and curly black hair. She looked up at Camille, not an ounce of interest on her face.

"Yes?" she said.

"I'd like a ticket," Camille said.

"\$2.50."

Camille got out the money and handed it over. The woman collected it and gave her a ticket.

"Would like a coffee or tea?" she asked.

"Just water, please," Camille said.

"We don't serve water."

"Okay. I'll take a coffee, then. Two sugars."

"We only serve it black."

"All right. Black would be fine."

The woman nodded and that was it. She didn't indicate if there was any kind of assigned seating or some such. Camille looked around and saw a number of people sitting at various tables, guessed that there was no assigned seating and chose an empty table not far from the stage and got comfortable.

Her coffee arrived after a few moments, delivered by a decrepit old man in a tuxedo. He was as frail as a skeleton, bald and liver-spotted. Camille was afraid that the weight of the coffee mug would be too much for him and he would simply topple over, breaking every bone in his body. But he managed it and set the coffee down in front of her, giving her a little thumbs up before leaving her side.

The lights, which were low to begin with, dimmed considerably as the small stage was illuminated by a single, bright spotlight. Music filled the long, narrow building. Camille brightened up. The music was Black Sabbath, a cut off their first album, that long one that ended the first side. What was that one called, again?

She stopped mentally searching for the title of the cut as a figure emerged from the black curtain backing the stage. There was applause as she did a little twirl in the middle of the stage.

The woman was strange and beautiful. She wore an elaborate suit of black velvet which had long tails and revealed quite a bit of cleavage. She wore white leggings and her skin was almost the same shade of white. She wore sharp black gloves and a top hat which she tipped as her little twirl ended, revealing a shaved head underneath.

Camille couldn't be sure but she felt that she had met the woman before. She seemed familiar.

"Ladies and gentlemen," she said in a lovely but strange and ageless voice, "I am Papa."

The audience around her applauded wildly. They must have seen the show before, Camille thought as she half-heartedly joined in on the applause.

Papa's act began. She pulled cards out of thin air, one after another. So, a magic show, then. It had been some time since Camille had seen one and this woman, strange as she was, was quite skilled. Camille squinted. Papa's sleeves were rolled up nearly to her elbows. Where was she hiding those cards, then?

All of the cards spent, Papa pulled her hat off, turned it once, twice, three times in her hands before knocking on one side of it, as if she were knocking at a door. Suddenly, three ravens flew out of the hat and into the rafters. There were gasps throughout the audience, Camille's included.

Papa put her top hat back on and pulled a cigarette attached to a long, black holder out of nowhere. She lit the cigarette with her free hand. The fire just emerged from her fingertips and set the cigarette alight. She smirked at the audience; playful, teasing.

"Child's play," she said.

Wild applause. Camille noticed that almost everyone in the audience were lighting up their own cigarettes, perhaps nudged on by Papa's smoke trick. Camille rummaged through her bag and grabbed her own pack. She put a cigarette between her lips and searched for matches but couldn't find any. She had given her last book to Wendy yesterday.

Suddenly, she noticed that someone was standing in front of her table. She looked up. It was Papa. She had hopped off the stage and was now leaning over Camille's table. She extended a hand and a small flame burst from her fingertips. Camille stared in awe. There appeared to be no trick, no apparatus, no hidden tubes anywhere. The flame simply appeared on the woman's fingertips.

Camille looked up at the strange woman. Her face was illuminated by the small, magical flame. She had penetrating eyes, almost hypnotic. She had no eyebrows. Her smile was too wide, too eerie. And she smelled wrong.

Reluctantly, Camille lit her cigarette with the magic flame as much to get the strange woman away from her table rather than any desire to actually smoke. Her task done, Papa bounded back onto the stage.

"Now," she said, "where was I?"

Her act continued, consisting of strange and dazzling variations on classic magic show illusions. Thirty minutes passed, all of them spellbinding, when it happened.

"I need a volunteer from the audience," Papa proclaimed. "Young lady."

She was indicating Camille.

Camille shook her head, afraid to mount the stage. There was something wrong with this woman. She didn't know what but her illusions were impossible and she didn't want to be anywhere near her.

"Come now, don't be shy," Papa said.

Camille felt herself being drawn to the stage. She stood up and walked towards it. Black Sabbath was back on and Ozzy was saying that his name was Lucifer and asking her to take his hand. Camille did so and took hold of Papa's hand and mounted the stage.

Once onstage, Camille looked at Papa expectantly. Papa made a flourish with her hands and something lowered from the rafters above.

It was a sword. Connected to two black ropes, it descended until it was right between Camille and Papa, pointing towards the latter.

"Take the sword," Papa said.

"I don't want to," Camille said.

"Take it!"

Camille slowly reached out, her hand closing around the hilt of the sword. She breathed deep, trying to collect her thoughts, trying to push Papa's hypnotic stare out of her mind.

"Pull it free of the ropes," Papa said.

Camille couldn't resist and did as she was told. The sword was quite heavy. It wasn't fake, that was sure. It also looked extremely sharp.

Papa spread her arms apart in a Christ-like position.

"Now," she said, "stab me. Right in the stomach."

"No," Camille said.

She was truly scared now.

"Do it!" Papa demanded.

Camille was drenched in sweat. She was breathing heavy. She could feel the Beast trying to push its way out, swim to the surface.

"Do it now!" Papa screamed.

Camille plunged the sword right through Papa's midsection. It went straight through. Camille felt it pass through flesh and bone, ripping through the woman's intestines. The very moment that the sword entered Papa's body, the spotlight shut off, plunging the little theater into blackness.

There were gasps throughout the audience. They were very loud but Camille could still hear another sound, a distinct sound, underneath it. The clang of a sword dropping onto a wooden stage.

The light came back on and Camille saw what she expected to see. Papa was gone and the sword was sitting on the stage floor, a pool of blood around it.

She wasn't expecting what happened next.

Someone grabbed her from behind, wrapped their hands around her. Camille could feel another woman's breasts pressing against her back and knew it was Papa.

"Gotcha," Papa said into her left ear.

There was thunderous applause from the audience. Camille struggled and broke free of Papa's grip, jumped off the stage and ran out of the theater, not looking back.

When she left, the audience slowly broke up, many of them talking animatedly about the illusions they had witnessed, trying to figure out how they were accomplished. There was one audience member, however, who was not talking at all. He sat by himself at the back of the audience at a table all to himself. He wore a patch over his right eye and a bandage covered much of his right forehead.

Arthur Samms took a sip of his tea and contemplated what he had just seen. Especially the young, cute girl who had mounted the stage at the end.

He had recognized her.

To Be Continued...

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