

A VISIT

Mickey Pfarr

A CHILLED BREEZE SWEEPED OVER THE LAND, shaking the leaves that clung to their branches; the tall, brown grasses shivered with delight as the wind carried the promise of rain. I hadn't been here in years, but it still looked the same as it did when I was but a girl. The crickets were loud—so loud, I couldn't hear my own thoughts without their song influencing my stream of consciousness. I wrapped my arms around myself as the wind slammed into me, blowing my skirts around my ankles, forming to my legs and freezing my bones. The never-ending sea of grass and brush lay just ahead, beckoning to me with bony hands and claws. An old, weather-worn, wooden birdhouse guarded the entrance. It was vacant of any family of birds—had been since my last visit. The dark hole that served as a door for the animals was covered in a thick, white spider's web. I slipped out of my shoes, letting the cold seep into my bare skin. The grass was rough—I could feel it slicing up the soles of my feet. The air was thick with the smell of far-off rain. That kind of power, the natural kind that the earth and sky give off, is overwhelming. It tickled my nose in such a way that I had to rake my sleeve underneath my nostrils to be rid of it. I took a breath through my mouth, preparing myself. Okay. My feet slid forward, and carried me into the forgotten world.

The grass here was taller than me, and it blocked out whatever sunlight could escape the clouds. The walls of prairie grass closed in around me like soldiers, brushing their thorny branches and rough leaves along my skin, leaving a vivid trail of crimson in their wake. My blood fell to the grass, disappearing and soaking into the soil. The earth drank it up graciously, and begged for another taste. I forced my feet to keep going. Don't stop, I told them. Don't stop.

I moved slowly through the maze of endless brown grass and thorns until I saw a black shadow looming in the sky. The tower had long since been destroyed; the only remains of its stone and wooden structure was charred and black, leaving the ground covered in white ash. If the wind picked up enough, the ash would blow and fall, like unholy snow. I never knew what the forgotten tower had originally been— a storage house, maybe, or part of a castle—but I knew of the stories; people from all over this part of the country told them over and over again like parrots. “It’s the gateway to hell,” they say. “Lost souls gather around those ruins and prey on lost souls; looking for lives to replace the ones they lost.” This place, this forgotten, decayed carcass of a building, was where the wailing of the dead could be heard in melancholy choruses, and their wispy white shapes can be seen wandering hopelessly.

The land here was dead, that much was certain. The grasses were black shadows of rotten stalk against the grey sky, and a single ash tree stood by the charred remains, suffocated by the rotten plants around it. A single patch of bright red berries stared at me from its dead prison in the brush. I knew they were poisonous; only deadly things could survive in a place like this. A pretty little trap for anyone

stupid enough to come this far.

The world became eerily quiet as the sky turned to an ominous grey, casting everything into a blue shadow. I lifted my face, and I shivered as the first raindrop touched my skin. I gasped as the cold pierced through me. My body was alive, I could feel the blood pumping, awakened by the mystery and the cold. I stood still as the rain fell steadily down, soaking through my clothes. I could hear it pitter-pattering against the small pond—too shallow to even really be considered a pond, but too big to be a puddle. I followed the sound onto a mossy wooden bridge. This seemed to be untouched by the death around it, and was sturdy despite the deep green growing on the foundation and railing. The bridge didn’t reach the other side of the pond, but rather jutted out over it; the water was darker than night, with murky moss coating the surface and edges like dried blood on a bandage. This was the spot. This was where I almost drowned as a child. I took a deep breath—it smelled like mold and decay.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw something white step towards me.