

Alessandra Grosso

Crystal Stair



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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

PREFACE

It's only the dreamers who ever move



Welcome to my story.

This book is a mere collection of nightmares, without any pretensions but to let you enter the intricate folds of my mind.

I think everyone has experienced nightmares in their life, whether asleep or awake; I can well say I'm an impressive expert on sleeping terrors. Close-eyed nightmares are my personal curse: I have been having them frequently since I was a child, and I could never explain the reason why.

My childhood was related to the constant fear that something catastrophic was about to happen, either to me or to the people I loved. I usually felt something akin to a cold breath on my neck that made my hair stand on end; that icy, slimy hand touching your back and making you startle, aghast. Now and then my vision would darken completely and, so as to feel more at ease, I had to go and lie down on my bed. Yet, even entering my bedroom I dreaded what I would find when I finally closed my eyes.

Things didn't improve at all in my teen years: soon after a dream I always woke up in a sweat, shivering. In the morning, then, I obviously had to face life again like everyone else, though still doubtful about my future. But it was whenever I had personal choices to make that the nightmares worsened. At those times my life easily became hell; I closed myself off entirely and always wondered what I had achieved so far and what I wanted next from my life.

Over time I have come to write my dreams down, alongside

my wishes, in order to analyse them and see if they ever come true. This has helped me to shed some light on such issues more than once.

Then, one day, I thought to myself that I would tell you all about my terrors, embellishing each one and including them in a collection of every spine-chilling thrill I have ever experienced.

I apologise for this chilly gift on my part, but my mind is likewise a cold and messy place. It is the mind of a woman, of a fighter who openly faced evil and chose to talk about it.

Though my words might sometimes wound the more susceptible souls, I don't mean to claim the moral high ground over any of you. Everyone has their own world view; we feel and shape everything around us accordingly. And after all the ordeals I have endured through life, I now strive to use my inner eye so as to create a more fruitful vision of the future. I would like to see a future full of dreams, studies, travels: dreams are basically wishes our hearts make.

As to nightmares, though...

Close-eyed nightmares have always been my speciality, and there are several reasons behind this phenomenon, but the main one is probably that I'm a tolerant and sensitive person; over the course of my life I have in fact experienced both thorns in my side and many a rainy day.

But I have always, always sought light, and I think the best way to illustrate this part of me is through my favourite poem: *Mother to Son*, by Langston Hughes. Its main subject, the crystal

stair, illustrates the confusing period I'm currently experiencing, and the desire to reach my full potential in life.

Alessandra

Mother to Son²

Well, son, I'll tell you:

Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.

It's had tacks in it,

And splinters,

And boards torn up,

And places with no carpet on the floor—

Bare.

But all the time

I've been a-climbin' on,

And reachin' landin's,

And turnin' corners,

And sometimes goin' in the dark

Where there ain't been no light.

So boy, don't you turn back.

Don't you set down on the steps

'Cause you finds it's kinder hard.

Don't you fall now—

For I've still goin', honey,

I've still climbin',

And life for me ain't been no crystal stair.

INTRODUCTION

Free men make decisions; slaves obey



The heroine's mission is to protect her life and eventually find freedom and independence, as well as an emotional balance, after dealing with all her nightmares – which are many, as many are the physical and psychological barriers she has to face, and which take their own terrifying shape.

The book first presents a very shy protagonist who runs away when in front of her monsters. Only later on does she begin to fight – still with the occasional flight if the situation is particularly dangerous. At the end of her complex inner process, though, there will be a distinct prevalence of fighting over fleeing.

This change clearly implies a personal evolution: she will always and only act in order to protect herself and what she believes is right.

Some people will help her, others will hinder her.

But now please, read on and enjoy.

PART 1

Shoot for the moon. Even if you miss, you'll land among the



ESCAPE AND FLEE

Life is a long lesson in



humility.⁴

I was running up the stairs to fetch the key that would finally free us. I instinctively knew that there were fifty-five steps to go up and fifty-five more to go down. Behind me, doors, gates and ancient grates were closing; I could only see darkness and despair all around.

I was growing troubled and distressed, short of breath; walls were fading in colour from honey to cream... I knew I was entering hell, but I couldn't slow down. As soon as I reached the last step, I sprang toward the room where the key to the last door must be.

In this rush, the key was everything. It was salvation, the symbol for liberation, our deliverance from darkness; but I knew the clawed monster would defend it fiercely: it wasn't going to be easy.

He had been a man in his previous life, a strong, powerful man; an abuser.

Facing him required in fact every bit of my strength. I could only feint to the side at once and attack with a wooden chair I found nearby; a mere chair against a monster that had been an icon in life. A life of excess, of drinking until early morning, of cocaine, women – millions of women – and child abuse, up to the day he was gruesomely burnt alive.

Having always been particularly sensitive, though, even now I could perceive his weakness.

And then I suddenly attacked: with a feint, I smashed the chair on his head. The wood cracked and broke, leaving only two of its legs in my hands. Deeply distraught, I used them to angrily spear the monster's chest and neck.

The hideous, burnt figure lay now on the ground; I guessed I could try to burn him to ashes once and for all. My attempt would certainly slow him down: he was terrified of fire, which

would finally cleanse his envy of beauty and innocence. It was the only thing he had nurtured in a life of manipulative, psychopathic tendencies.

Yet, although I was practically certain of his obsessive fear, I couldn't feel any pity for him; I had to defend myself first, and neutralise him in any way.

In his life, knowing that envy and resentment were not socially acceptable, he had disguised them as charm and intellectualism, but his thoughts had always been dark and malicious. Hunger is said to be sharper than a sword: I believe envy is even sharper, and throughout history it has caused discord, wars, and endless mourning.

I was then fortunate enough to find a lighter on the ground; it was surprisingly the one from my youth, which I called 'the Zippo of my sweet sixteen' – when I smoked secretly from time to time. I moved quickly, threw the burning Zippo at him and, once found the key, I took it and ran toward the staircase.

Fifty-five steps. I was young, and I flew up the stair. My knee hurt but I endured the pain: every step meant life, so I counted each one over and over again.

Once on top, I finally bypassed the banister and quickly handed the key to my companions – some sought the light, others wanted to pursue the abyss in the opposite direction.

The lock clicked open, but I could feel the monster starting to approach after a brief pause: he was trying to retrace his steps. We needed to leave that place and run toward the light, the same

I had always sought.

The elaborate, white-painted gate in front of me was the last hindrance, but it also reminded me of purity, since its grating was sturdy and thick, and protected me as the light did, so that the monster would stay away.

But what could this protective aura ever be? Mere light?

And what was this light? God Himself? Or Lucifer, as in 'light-bringer'?

Questions, questions... The answers were elusive.

The monster was furious, cursing in his daunting, throaty voice. The gate in fact had been closed and locked again, and everyone had escaped; the key was left for whoever chose to challenge him.

I didn't think there was anything else to do, so I ventured further, to a dark and gloomy church. Attempting to unravel its mystery, I found myself suddenly alone in the pitch dark of that dusty, crumbling place. I proceeded along the hall that probably constituted the right aisle and found a curious kneeling-stool at the foot of a statue.

How bizarre, I thought. What will it ever...

It was completely covered in blood.

A shiver; then a voice.

"There does *not* exist one and only one Death!"

What? Won't death actually be the end of everything? Won't we slowly vanish like smoke?

Will we go back or move forwards in time? To a recent or

remote past, or a parallel dimension altogether?

I realised to be already on the outside of the mysterious church, wandering among ferns. Majestic chain ferns, with shiny leaves that smelt of wildness and reminded me of my childhood country house by the lake.

The old house was now within reach, it seemed, but I was too curious to stop here; I longed to cross that green expanse, in the inquisitive attitude of early youth. My candour actually demanded: “explore!”, my wisdom: “think!”, my heart: “feel!”. So I went on, following my audacious nature.

And then a scene from my past suddenly occurred: a fierce clash between tyrannosaurs.

I fled – although I can attest that, before running away, I was offered a close-up view of the sharp teeth of the two animals – and noticed their stance changing from confrontational to outright offensive. With their colossal muscle-bound bodies they clashed, destroying everything in their wake. They uprooted trees and trampled on my beloved ferns, in the typical fight of the mating period.

I was in such a rush that I tripped over several stones tumbling on my path. The commotion drew the attention of the beasts that, immediately alert, turned their heads and went on the hunt.

They could perceive everything, from my smell to my fear, as many wild animals do.

I dashed away in despair, my breathing growing heavy. My

spleen hurt, under strain, but I couldn't afford to stop now: there had to be a way out, somewhere. And sometimes it is even more frightening than what you are fleeing from.

The only opening turned out to be a dark alley that progressed into a cracked tunnel, running within a natural cavity.

It was time to confront my claustrophobia. With a last-gasp effort I squeezed into it. Outside, the massive beasts roared, enraged, since they could no longer see their prey.

I crawled for a long time – the air stale, smelly and unpleasant to breathe. I also had a terrible fear of spiders and mice, and had always loathed both. In particular, mice terrified me since – as a child – I had once entered our hen house and discovered an enormous brown rat stealing eggs from a nest. But I was a little girl then; now, however, I was a woman and it was time to fight for life.

Fight to survive, or flee if the enemy is bigger than you: it was the process underlying human survival. It had always been, and I had to endure it – for myself, for the survival of the human species, for all mankind even.

Society had never been foremost in my mind. Prior to this, I used to be socially inept; an intractable, introverted person, invariably in dark clothes and rather depressed, with even suicidal thoughts. It was now time to overcome my emotional turmoil, though.

In the meantime, I was still crawling; scratching my arms and legs as I struggled to move forwards.

It was night when I re-emerged, an eerie, nearly moonless night; the sky occasionally ominous in its murkiness, and the clouds easily compared to big felines in terms of strength and colours.

I could still see a tyrannosaur wandering before my very eyes, as I observed it from a hidden natural terrace.

I climbed down only at daylight, feeling stronger, ready to explore and understand the true nature of things; my mind was open to all possibilities: discovering new creatures, interpreting odd dreams.

Dreams had always been everything to me; they were the realisation of all my desires, the perception of events before they occurred. On one memorable occasion, it had been the awareness that my plea for help would be ignored – by a beloved friend who had never understood me as a human being.

My dreams had predicted this betrayal, but I had ignored them in my stubbornness to go on with my life. I had slammed the door to my naturally sensitive inner voice.

The first time I had sensed the presence of this voice I was only a child; only recently had I truly become aware of it, only now that I was escaping and fighting monsters.

I started walking across an ascending valley. It was autumn, with red oak leaves everywhere, falling from the trees, and in the air smells of freshly fallen rain, wild moss.

In my close proximity a secluded spot came into view; I could

finally light a fire to warm up. Fortunately I still had a reserve of dried meat in my bag. I built the fire and comfortably enjoyed my camping; then I lay down to assess the night.

It seemed to last forever; I dreamt of crossing the seas on clunky sailing boats.

Upon awakening, everywhere only dew and frost. It must have been mid-September. As I walked, my boots sank into several inches of leaves that covered the ground – women’s boots, refined yet comfortable like old cowboy ones.

These musings diverted my attention from a cold and deep sting of nostalgia, loneliness and other sad, intimate thoughts. It was the same intimacy I could feel in the depths of that curious red oak forest, whose falling leaves were blood red.

I soon felt I was being followed, though.

This feeling of being spied on – the perception that something obscure was crowding me and planning behind my back – had been a recurring concern in my late adolescence, when someone had been leaving anonymous messages in my letter box. They seemed to be love messages, but were so ambiguous as to be disturbing.

Despite my foreboding I advanced in the woods, frequently looking over my shoulder since I still didn’t feel at ease; I perceived the mist, the dew and something else I couldn’t entirely identify.

And suddenly, my erratic feelings became nearly tangible; it

was real fright then, horror the like of which only children can experience.

I felt helpless and ran away from the man in black boots who was now chasing me, asking like a maniac: “Why?”

...Why? Rather, why are you asking me this question? I wondered.

While running, so as not to give in to panic, I was planning out my enduring survival: it was raw instinct, a sort of natural, prideful detachment that spurred me.

He might kill me, but he would never get inside my head; my mind fought while my body fled.

Running through tree roots, I hoped my merciless pursuer would fall. Not once did I look him in the eyes. Crocodile eyes, focussed and stealthily controlling their prey from under the surface of the water.

Intuition told me that the man was diabetic; intuition, and voices coming from other dimensions, far, far away. But I also knew it by simply looking at his foot wounds; his feet would have to be amputated soon.

My hope came from my determined spirit: the hope that he would tire himself out, that his disease would strike him suddenly while on the chase, that he had a crisis and collapsed to the ground.

I ran, as the tree branches grew lower and more tangled. I bent down then, trusting his tall stature to make the path all the more difficult for him; whenever I could, I grabbed the branches that

I left behind me, wishing they would slap his face.

I loathed what he was doing, particularly because of the despair he instilled in me. It was also pride, in part – I admit it: who was he to force me to flee, to gnaw at me when already in the grip of fear?

Meanwhile I went on running, but the speed race had soon become an endurance race, and his strong body seemed to tolerate it rather well.

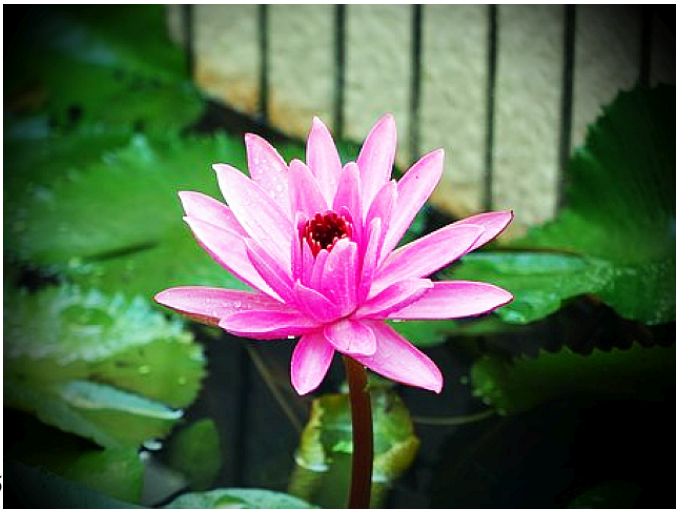
As for me, my sweat was falling to the ground along with big tears and I could feel my hope crumbling, until I saw someone new in front of me: my grandfather.

I was certain that, sensing my worry, he would project me into another dimension, perhaps a much more intimate and less dangerous situation, and would reassure me.

My certainty would soon prove either reliable or not.

SOLACE AND TROUBLE

The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their



dreams.⁵

It was really my dear grandfather – affectionate in his old age, mischievous in his youth.

He had always been a sharp, troublesome person; he was to some extent the typical Italian macho. Dark hair, dark Spanish eyes, sunburnt olive skin, broad shoulders, he wasn't very tall, roughly my height, but much stronger. Only the hands we had exactly alike, with long and slender fingers; the hands of a baker – this had actually been his lifelong job. He used to get up even before cockcrow to start his work, and he needed nothing but his full, warm baritone voice as company, one that was friendly and reassuring, and which I heard again on my dreamlike journey.

Our meeting was really comforting. He put his calloused hand on my shoulder and whispered not to worry, that everything

would work out: he understood me, and knew how difficult my days had been so far. Indeed, thorns and weeds grew along my emotional path, and blisters formed on my feet. I was very dejected.

He knew what I was going through. He had been a partisan leader and had fought Mussolini's regime. He loved freedom and this was why he had been given his name: Libero. He was free; he was ethereal. He was a spirit now, claimed by a sudden heart attack in 1996.

So sudden that at the time I hadn't even had the strength to see him before the burial.

Now, though, he was in front of me, just as I remembered him: olive skin, still dynamic and concerned about his granddaughter quickly becoming a young woman.

Yes, a woman; on the inside I would become a woman. I still perceived myself as harmless and naive, but I knew that much had still to occur and that life could be long and full of troubles.

It seems that for each of our talents, God gives us a whip for self-flagellation: mine is guilt. And it was guilt, alongside my tolerance of children, to result in another nightmare.

My pupils focussed on a child appearing out of thin air and instantly running after me; not even a smiling child: he had fangs and claws that could devour and tear into flesh. The little creature might literally rip me apart. He was also crying – a rather blood-curdling howl – which simply terrified me; it made me sweat and

shiver uncontrollably. I had always been very emotional, a true ‘feeler’ in fact – experiencing fear, in this case.

Feelers are sensitive and empathetic people. They love a quiet life, smiles and children; suffer from guilt; keep to themselves.

But I couldn’t shut myself away now since the angry child was chasing me and crying, screaming like the howling wind.

I was afraid to face the beast and, with it, the loss of innocence it stood for. I hadn’t once saved what was worth saving, so my conscience still hounded me. I could do nothing but escape, again.

And I didn’t have the heart to harm a child, so I just ran, despite my uncomfortable heeled boots. They caused a dull pain at my every step, along with skin wounds and blisters. It was a constant torment.

I then fell on my elbows, and was forced to crawl with even more effort on the brown wooden ground; slippery and hostile, it was as cold as the child’s eyes. I knew I deserved this coldness since I hadn’t sufficiently protected children in my life nor loved them enough, and that was why they were all coming back to me in the shape of this monster. A bitter yet productive meeting: I had to pay for my mistakes but I was also ready to admit them.

At that moment another upsetting vision came forwards, of a little girl bound in a rope and being bounced against walls; what was worse, I couldn’t prevent her from getting hurt. She was slippery, seemingly covered in oil – going in all directions, unpredictable.

She was the very picture of the confusion I felt inside my head.

I didn't know whether to protect her or save myself from the monster that was still chasing me, the little boy trying to grasp me and howling: "Why, *mum*?"

The word paralysed me, since – although I love children – I have never seriously entertained the possibility of being a mother and starting a family myself. I have always regarded it as something too far in the future, far from me; a limit to my expressiveness and – I hate to admit it – a loss of elegance for the female body. Although taking care of a child may be rewarding, each time I had my friends' daughters toddling around I feared that the pests would break something or hurt themselves.

But then, there are children and children. There are babies who are peculiar since birth. I mean, we all have our quirks; but children abusing animals, for example, is a clear warning for everyone. It is a fact that some serial killers used to mistreat animals as children, and I thought it was the case of the child chasing me in what had become a dirty woody cabin full of chambers.

From his violence in breaking random objects I could sense that he had never received love, but also that he carried evil within: having been abused, he now enjoyed abusing. It was a kind of evil that spread by touch like an illness without chance of survival, that would chase you down relentlessly and destroy you slowly, in the end. It was as dreadful as it was persistent.

I knew I shouldn't keep on running away, but react sooner or

later, yet I still didn't feel sufficiently strong myself to make such a decision.

I had to prevent the boy from harming me, and the girl from harming herself. I needed a plan, a strategy to subdue the monster and save her.

Meanwhile, my shoulders hurt too: it was my usual reaction to stress. For instance, anxiety before exams had always led me to contract my shoulders inadvertently, with negative repercussions on my shoulder blades and cervical muscles.

Still, I had to act now.

I moved so that the little girl wouldn't collide with the wall but with me; I hoped that the push would soon decrease. The rope that bound her was torn but very resistant. I tried to grab it, but the child – still covered in a thick layer of oil – slipped away from my hands each time. It was a dark substance, like tar, and it cost me further exertion.

I felt dissected by my pursuer's eyes, and feared death coming any instant, with each single breath. The little boy was my conscience, and as such he gave me no peace.

Conscience is what keeps you awake at night, looking endlessly at an unchanging ceiling. It makes you go through your whole life – past and future – in an instant; then you have to choose.

I chose to save the child. I might die, I might be torn to pieces, but I had to pass this test.

I hoped I would gain strength on my way and learn not to flee

any more, unless it was strictly necessary. Something within me was changing, and maybe it was for the best. What encouraged me in my fight was – paradoxically – a wish for peace and justice, that innate conjunction of goodness and dignity of the heroes in the stories they told me as a child.

On my part, it meant never accepting evil, without any compromise, because previous compromises had led to fleeing, to humiliation and low self-esteem. I couldn't stand depression any more, I needed to fight it. In fact, I wanted to save the girl also because I saw myself in her uncertain sway, torn between one decision and another, confused and insecure.

I had to act on impulse when she was in my proximity. I would try to cut the rope, but by what means? Maybe the penknife I used to slice my reserve of dried meat, as well as the berries I was so fond of. It was small and rather ruined, but it would serve its purpose, since the monster wasn't far from me.

I launched myself head first, thinking that she could be my daughter and that it was my moral duty to save her – or to try at least. The knife easily cut through the first part of the torn rope, then got stuck.

The more I tried, the less I could move it.

When I heard laughter behind me I felt a sudden chill inside my chest, a shiver running down my back and making my arms tremble – not my will though. At that moment, my little pursuer appeared in front of me, his eyes green and terrible.

He had hidden small tacks inside the rope.

Livid with anger I set to removing them, while trying to counterbalance the rope's motion with my weight. I desperately tried again and again, pricking my fingers and cursing at the sharp pain.

And finally the rope broke. The girl could only fall to the ground, but at least her incessant sway had stopped.

Looking at those horrible green eyes for what I hoped was the last time, I mustered up courage and pointed at the child lying on the ground. Then I yelled at the monster, since I had nothing but my voice: "That's your doing, now I have nothing left, *nothing!* We were meant to share a bond in the future, so you took her away from me! Now kill me if you wish... What else do you want, my blood?"

I challenged him fiercely, but in the meanwhile he had changed. Claspng my hands, he told me I had done the right thing: I had passed the test; I was getting stronger.

My strength I had forged and sharpened with patience, as a blacksmith hammers iron and shapes it into swords and pieces of rare value. But even hard workers make mistakes, and that is perhaps humanity's common ground: that shuddering breath of insecurity which compels us to flee or to fight, capitulate or win.

This time I had won, but the journey continued and other challenges would arise. On the one hand I looked forward to it, yet on the other I still feared the unknown.

Nevertheless I went on in my worn boots, to other challenges and other places.

Behind me lay barren lands typical of the Arctic tundra, with a pungent birch smell and tall spruce haunted by winter snow. The evergreens – which were previously all around me – now receded and gave way to a curious labyrinth.

I approached some elaborate ruins that bore the weight of as many years as the layers of lichen covering them. Although collapsed, their contours still stood out against the background. If I was to go into the labyrinth, I would have to follow them; so with patience, tenacity and spirit of sacrifice I bent my will to fate.

In fact, fate hadn't been very generous so far given the sequence of challenges I had had to endure, which had hardened my spirit and my skin, strengthening my body but tiring me out completely.

Struggle I knew well, my everyday friend and companion, like a woman who never deceives: awesome yet merciless.

Still, not as enticing were the writings I read on the walls, unholy signs and pentacles that seemed to have been drawn in blood.

They were ever more frightening, warning not to enter, not to venture further, not to try the awful path ahead. They commanded to leave my desires behind as they wouldn't come true: only death lay in wait.

All alone I was crossing a new, hostile land made of sand, small cobbled areas and moss growing in the cracks of the ancient

ruins. Anything, any possible thing could happen at that moment.

Not too far from me lay remains of tortured bodies and discarded skulls, some with hair still on them, yellowed by time. I also had the distinct sensation of not being alone.

Suddenly came an alarming creak, then a crash.

A revolving panel appeared in front of me. I pushed it open, and what I found left me speechless.

It was myself. Myself, but in a somewhat different way.

It was myself I saw, yet I couldn't believe it.

I would finally have someone to talk to and ask for advice. She could maybe tell me where she came from, what she had done and would do.

She looked like me down to the smallest detail, except for her finer clothes. She had had many adventures, albeit not as challenging as mine. From a beautiful garden in a faraway world she had stumbled and fallen through the dimensional door I had just opened. She had then been thrown from one world to the other, and was thus completely shocked.

Now there were two of us in this parallel dimension, two heroines in the chill of the night and among dreadful ruins. Two different people, yet twins; two little souls in the night; two lit candles that could rekindle each other or die competing for the brighter flame.

And I know female competition is devastating. It leads women to come to blows for the love of a cheat or lose their job when

failing to gain favour with the boss. This sort of competition is usually as powerful and deadly as poison. I could only fear it.

I carefully studied my clone's – my twin's – attitude but she proved to be very friendly and understanding. She followed my lead and was open and kind to me. As we ventured further and further into the ruins, our mutual harmony only deepened.

That brief moment of serenity, however – the moment I realised that I was no longer alone and may hope for a brighter future – was soon perturbed.

THE CAVE MONSTERS

His body was horrifically red from burns, veins clearly visible under his skin. He was very tall – more than a dozen feet – and had big, sturdy limbs that moved with the sound of shattering boulders. His eyes were a bright yellow; he could see and scent every sign of life in the dark. He fed on fear, but his mouth was full of sharp teeth, the better to bite human flesh with.

He had been living hidden for centuries – preying on both young and old – in the heart of the ruins where the paths grew more tangled. He was there now as he had been when the ruins were still a magnificent castle.

An unwanted child born out of violence, he had been cursed seven times from the very first moment of his life. He had survived only through a deal with another demonic creature, a monster that abhorred innocence.

Their names were Damnation – the cursed one – and Revenge – his equal.

Revenge was a refined, intelligent hunter who had chosen a deal with Damnation over a death at the stake. Damnation had brought Revenge back to life, and the latter had returned among the living with an ever-growing thirst for blood. He wore a tattered shirt on which his name was still readable, written in white chalk and outlined in the red blood of his victims.

The two hunters immediately sensed the presence of the humans and hid in the dark with neither a word nor hesitation. They knew that two good souls were wandering nearby, having lost their bearings: they perceived our fear and could detect our insecurities by smell alone.

The two of us were so glad to be together that it was almost our demise: at first we nervously scouted the area and its crumbling remains, but then, perhaps, we got carried away and just went on without a clear direction. Several times we reached dead ends and, after going in circles, we realised we were lost.

We couldn't find our way back, so we moved forwards. The ruins were in better condition the further we walked, as if we had entered a rather newer wing of the castle. The walls were greyish and thick, damp; water dripped from the ceiling and collected in pools on the ground.

There were also large dark rooms, damp as well, and almost bare. When not on the walls, condensation formed a fine mist in the distance. Intrigued, we tried to understand the nature of everything around us, as well as our feeling of being spied on.

In that arcane maze, our souls were full of two contrasting emotions: fear of the unknown and need to explore it. This desire belongs especially to early youth, and in a certain sense we were adolescents again, confronted – regrettably, in the present case – with new explorations.

Inner emotions and outer dangers notwithstanding, as human beings we required food. These were lean times but we still had supplies, since my other self had hunted and picked berries earlier on.

We retreated to a corner to dine on that little meal, which could only be delicious in my eyes; our teeth were cutting blades making short work of the food. We cleaned up after ourselves and were once again on our way, hoping not to have unpleasant encounters from now on.

While walking we paid particular attention to the appalling images and the warning signs on the walls; but where could we escape? Where could we find a shelter? How could we leave the labyrinth altogether?

We unexpectedly chanced upon weapons and bullets and took them with us; they could prove useful in the immediate future.

We also found a collapsed encampment. It seemed to be the aftermath of an attack, the corpses dragged away, if the smears of blood on the ground were any indication; yet we found nothing left of the victims.

Again we took anything useful, including a small first-aid kit: we didn't know what was waiting for us but still wanted to be

prepared. If they wanted to kill these two women on their own... well, they would have to work hard for it.

Now armed, we advanced following the blood on our way, in the hope of helping whoever had been so brutally attacked. We feared the worst though: they must have lost enough blood to be already dead, or very close.

Abandoning the large room, we then entered a darker and narrower hallway. Only a few torches lit up the road but we went on, inciting each other.

The narrow corridor opened to a wider room with very high ceilings; at its centre was a large walled-off chamber. At first sight we couldn't see any way in, and it was rather sheer luck because – drawn by our smell – the monsters were soon alert and coming after us. We had only enough time to hide behind a rock.

They were hideous and dirty, covered in blood. Simply ghastly.

And, unexpectedly, at once they were fighting, as peculiar beams and fireballs sprang from their hands and hit each other's bodies. When struck, they complained with loud baritone screams.

What they were saying was incomprehensible to us, but I assumed their fights were frequent and usually born out of loneliness and boredom – now, though, they fought over food.

However, little by little their focus seemed to be shifting from our smell to the sole fight. They had perhaps lost interest in us,

and only hurt each other: now was the perfect time to attack and eventually look for survivors. Hopefully there was still someone alive here, and if we weren't too late, maybe the first-aid kit could save some lives.

So we decided to approach the monsters from behind and shoot aiming at their wounds, in order to weaken them, if not to kill them. In my mind I could clearly see our silent advance; our commitment.

We opened fire a moment before they noticed us. Despite their gigantic size, our bullets were still painful for them, so we fired all our weapons; but too soon, it all ended too badly.

I saw death; I saw it in the dark eyes of the woman who looked exactly like me and who had just been fatally wounded; I could see through her eyes and feel life slowly leaving her.

But I needed to leave. She understood immediately and looked at me with forgiveness. My escape was accepted and justified.

In the days to come I would dream of her and feel her pain once more; the creature who came from far away that I would never see again, my own image from a parallel dimension. On my skin I would feel the shock of the fire vortex swallowing her up, the cold of the raw floor; I would look upwards with her eyes, knowing that there was no hope left in this world.

Since the monsters were still alive and could still hurt me despite their numerous wounds, my newly found companion then blew herself up in order to kill them in one fell swoop. It was very painful for the monsters, who were now screaming and roaring

with rage. Out of the corner of my eye I saw them on their knees, and part of me hoped to be finally rid of them.

I crossed the wide room and found myself in the chamber where Damnation and Revenge tortured their prisoners and sacrificed them to some underworld god. Several bodies had been skinned and hanged by their feet, so that the blood – and life with it – could drip away. It was horrific and tragic, the worst scene I had ever seen.

The sight made my skin break out in goosebumps and tears cloud my eyes; I felt an unknown terror licking at my body. I shook at the slightest sound, and every trick of the light sent a shiver down my spine. I kept telling myself that I had a moral duty to assist people in need, that it was my nature and I should follow it.

At that moment I heard a moan coming from a large sack nearby, and tried to deduce what it could be. It was risky: it could be an innocent prisoner or even a creature like Damnation and Revenge.

I followed the quiet moaning. It was probably the voice of a man asking for help, but I couldn't understand what he was saying or who he was talking to.

As soon as I opened the sack, out came a handsome man. His eyes were blue-green and his hair blond; he showed the typical Nordic features that had always driven me crazy; his powerful arms seemed to be meant for me and my protection only.

He smiled at me gratefully and tried to talk to me, but I still

didn't understand what he was saying.

However we soon realised that we had to escape quickly, since Revenge and Damnation were howling in our direction and looking for their payback. They were already very close to us.

We ran straight away.

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