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SEANAN McGUIRE

Snakes and Ladders
An Incryptid Story
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by

Seanan McGuire
“Mama, Mama!” Alice raced down the stairs at the sort of heedlessly suicidal speed native only to small children and creatures in immediate danger of being eaten. Frances Healy—who had long since learned that no amount of shouting would slow her daughter down—did her best to conceal her wince. One good tumble and their trick-or-treating would be over before it had the chance to get properly started. “Mama, look! I’m a cowgirl, Mama, look!”

“Yes, you’re definitely a cowgirl,” said Fran diplomatically. Enid had done a remarkable job of cutting one of Fran’s old circus vests down to fit Alice. She’d even used the leftover sequins and fringe to bring a denim skirt made from a pair of Alexander’s old jeans up to proper levels of Wild West acceptability. Combined with a straw hat, some tin guns from the five and dime, a “lasso” made of coiled clothesline, and pigtail braids, Alice was the living embodiment of what people who had never seen the Mississippi thought of all the people living west of it. The galoshes were a little out of character, but it had been raining on and off for weeks. One night of faux-authenticity wasn’t worth the trouble of dealing with a sick six-year-old.

“You’re a cowgirl, too!” Alice crowed as she reached the bottom of the stairs.

Fran grinned, bending to sweep Alice into a spinning hug. “That’s right, puss!” she said gleefully. “I am!” She was wearing jeans rather than a skirt, and in her case, the vest hadn’t required any alteration: she was still essentially the same size she’d been when she followed Jonathan Healy home from Arizona, some sixteen years before. Her boots, gun belt, and pistols were all real. Both of them were “being cowgirls”—something Alice had been begging for since the start of the month—but only Alice was wearing a costume.

Anyone who saw them together would have been unable to miss the fact that they were mother and daughter. They had the same flax-gold hair, and the same stubborn cant to their chins, like they might decide at any moment to challenge the universe to prove its worth…and like they might win when they did.

This was the first year that Alice really understood the idea behind Halloween. They’d gone trick-or-treating the year before, but she’d mostly clung to Fran’s leg and stared at the other children in their monster costumes, occasionally entreating her mother to shoot them fast, before they got hungry and attacked. After she had asked loudly why they weren’t carrying any throwing knives in the trick-or-treat bag, Fran had decided that maybe Alice was still a little bit too young, and called it a night.

Kindergarten had changed everything. Suddenly surrounded by a peer group that was enthusiastic about things like costumes and candy, Alice had embraced the idea of the holiday, especially after Mikey Caldwell said he was going to be a mobster, and she realized that the right costume would mean getting to carry guns, just like her mommy and daddy. The fact that her guns were tin and only fired harmless pop-caps really didn’t matter; they were hers, and being allowed to wear them openly made Halloween the best holiday in the history of absolutely ever.

“Alice!” called Enid, from the kitchen. “Come and get your treat bag!”

“Coming, Grandma!” Alice shouted, and squirmed, laughing, until Fran freed her to go racing off down the hall, galoshes thumping on the hardwood floor. Fran watched her run with a smile on her face. A night when she could take her daughter out and not worry about what might be watching from the woods? Halloween was pretty much all right by her, too.
The front door opened, and Jonathan stepped inside, stomping the mud off his boots and onto the wicker mat placed just inside the threshold. He laughed when he saw her, asking, “All right, have we fallen backward through time, and you’ve only just arrived here from the rodeo? Because I don’t exactly relish the idea of introducing you to my parents again.”

“Now, Johnny, I was perfectly well-behaved,” said Fran, taking off her hat and fanning herself with it. “Not my fault they got testy.”

“You accused them of thinking that you weren’t good enough for me, and threatened to hop onto the first train back to Arizona.” Jonathan stepped over and slid his arms around her waist. “I believe there were some threats of violence.”

Fran smiled guilelessly. “Just making sure they didn’t get the wrong idea ’bout me.”

“No, dear, they knew right off the bat that you were violent, dangerous, and quite possibly entirely insane.”

“You say the sweetest things,” she said, putting her hat on his head.

Fran and Jonathan were still standing in the foyer five minutes later, when Alice emerged from the kitchen with a fabric sack clutched triumphantly in one hand. They had their arms wrapped around each other, and were kissing with enthusiasm. Alice wrinkled her nose, turning to shout toward the kitchen, “Grandma! They’re doing it again!”

Laughing guiltily, Fran and Jonathan let go of one another, stepping just far enough apart that Alice couldn’t accuse them of “doing” anything. After a pause, Fran reached over and retrieved her hat from Jonathan’s head. “What’ve you got there, puss?” she asked.

Alice solemnly held up her sack. “S’for tricks and treats.”

“It certainly is,” Jonathan said. Enid had taken an old pillowcase from the rag bag, patched the holes, and covered the stains with orange and green felt pumpkins and black felt bats. It would have been an elegant piece of work even without the protective white-on-white runes he could barely make out stitched around the top. “I’m sure you’ll be able to collect a great deal of candy in there.”

Alice beamed.

“Guess we’re ready to go, then,” Fran said, jamming her hat back down on her own head. “Come on, Ally, let’s make tracks.”

“Are you quite sure you don’t want me to accompany you?” Jonathan asked. He sounded almost plaintive, and for a moment, Fran wavered. They rarely got to do much together as a family outside the house; what with his job at the library, Alice’s school, and the local cryptid population, there just wasn’t time. And yet…

As long as it had been since the three of them had done anything together, it had been even longer since she’d been able to spend a night with her daughter. Alice was getting older every day, and Fran was starting to fear that one day she’d blink and her little girl would be getting married and moving off to start her own life, leaving Fran wondering where her baby’s childhood went.

“Sorry, darlin’, but this is mother and daughter time,” Fran said firmly, and took Alice’s hand. Alice beamed, the pillowcase dangling by her side as she leaned against her mother’s leg. “We’ll be back after supper. Alice, tell your daddy good-bye.”
“Bye, Daddy,” Alice dutifully repeated.

“Have fun, Alice,” Jonathan said. He bent to kiss her forehead before straightening, looking from his wife to his daughter, and saying, “The two of you be careful out there.”

Alice wasn’t sure why her mother laughed so loud when he said that, but she giggled along, just because, as Fran led her through the front door, out into the crisp autumn night. Jack-o-lanterns decorated the porch and walkway, and garlands of wheat, aconite, and late-blooming hemlock hung over every window. The air smelled like apple cider and distant bonfires.

“Ready for Halloween, puss?” Fran asked, and Alice, still giggling, hauled her down the steps, racing toward the night.

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Fran brought their impromptu parade to a brief halt at the end of the driveway, letting go of Alice’s hand in order to rummage under the tarp in the back of Alexander’s truck. Alice took a step backward but made no effort to continue without her; seven years of living at the edge of the woods without getting eaten by any of the many things that thought little girls tasted good had taught her that obeying parental authority was usually a smart idea, while wandering away into the dark was a good way to get your picture in the newspaper.

“Just a second,” Fran said, and rolled the tarp back further, pulling a large canvas duffle bag out of the back of the truck. Slinging it over her shoulder, she turned to offer her hand to Alice. “All right, Ally. We’re ready to go.”

“What’s in the bag, Mama?” Alice asked, taking her hand.

Fran hesitated. “Well, sweetheart, you know how you want to fill your bag with treats?” Alice nodded gravely. Fran smiled. “My bag is full of tricks.”

“We balance!” said Alice, sounding delighted.

“That’s right,” Fran said. “We do. Come on; the night is short, and there’s a lot of candy to be hunted down.” They started down the driveway, Alice happily babbling every step of the way about all the candy she was going to collect, all the costumes they were going to see, and how her costume was definitely the best, because her costume came with guns, which meant she could beat all the monster costumes, if she had to.

Fran chuckled under her breath as she listened to Alice chatter. Jonathan might make noises about raising her to be a proper young lady, one who’d be more interested in marriage and keeping house than taxidermy and the proper methods of killing a werewolf, but you only needed to listen to her for a minute to know that it was already a lost cause. Maybe he’d been hoping for a lady; what they got was a Healy, and Fran, frankly, wouldn’t have had it any other way.

The Healy house was reasonably isolated—by design, according to Enid; they’d purposefully purchased the most out-of-the-way farmhouse they could find that was still inside the town limits, to minimize the risk from nosy neighbors—and they had to trudge most of the way down the road before they started seeing houses with their lights on, porches marked by the traditional Halloween jack-o-lanterns.

Alice hung back as they reached the first house, suddenly shy. “Go on, goose,” said Fran, planting a hand between her daughter’s shoulders and shoving lightly. “You don’t take risks, you don’t get
treats. I’ll wait right here until you get back.”

Alice gave her a wary look. “You promise?”

“I double-promise. Now go on, scoot.”

Still looking somewhat dubious, Alice nodded and went trotting down the gravel driveway to the front door, where two ghosts, a stripy cat, and a football player were already gathered, waiting for their rewards.

Fran crossed her arms, and smiled, watching Alice’s braids bobbing up and down as she bounced in place, pillowcase held out at arm’s length. They grew up so fast. It really did seem like only a few weeks ago that she was risking Jonathan’s wrath by carting a teething infant with her to see the lake monsters, and now…

They just grew up so damn fast.

A needle of regret lanced through her heart. Daniel would never grow up, would always be three years old and lost. Alice was her second chance. She’d be damned before she’d waste a moment of it.

“Mama! I got a popcorn ball! Mama, Missus Walters gave me a popcorn ball!” Alice practically flew back down the driveway, feet sending up small sprays of gravel. “A real popcorn ball!” From the amazed delight in her eyes, it would seem that a “real popcorn ball” was somewhere between the Holy Grail and the Arc of the Covenant in the holy reliquary of little girls.

“Well, congratulations,” said Fran, shaking off her brief melancholy before reclaiming Alice’s hand and starting to walk toward the next house along the way. “Will you be keeping it for yourself, or sharing it with the mice?”

Alice’s eyes went wide. Not quite quickly enough to hide the guilty expression that flashed across her face. “Mice, Mama?”

“Mice. The ones you’ve got hiding at the bottom of your pillowcase.” Fran leaned forward, calling into Alice’s sack, “Y’all all right down there?”

“Hail Priestess!” shouted a small, squeaky chorus of voices from the bottom of the bag.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” Fran said, straightening.

Alice was staring at her like she’d just performed a miracle even more astonishing than the popcorn ball. “How did you know?” she asked, sounding awed.

“You didn’t have any candy in your bag before, but you were obviously carrying something,” replied Fran. “Out of all the things you’d smuggle out of the house, about the only thing you wouldn’t have shown me already s’the mice.”

“Hail the wisdom of the Violent Priestess!” exalted the mice. Alice giggled.

The Aeslin mice were just another part of life with the Healys, one Fran had found surprisingly easy to get used to, once she got past the idea of talking cryptid mice who worshipped them all as somehow connected to the divine. They were actually cute, in their tiny, constantly worshipful way. The trouble was that they were also damned annoying.

Frances bent again to open Alice’s trick-or-treat bag, looking down at the small cluster of mice
gathered at the bottom. “Now, I’m not going to insist that we turn around and take y’all straight home,” she said, “but I’ve got a few simple rules I need you to obey. There will be no hailing, no hymns, no shouting in exultation, and absolutely no leaving the bag under any circumstances. Do you understand me? I don’t mind you coming along for the ride, but I will happily feed you to the biggest, meanest cat I can find if you don’t behave yourselves.”

“Yes, Priestess,” said the mice, meekly.

“Just so we understand each other,” said Fran, letting go of the bag. “Damn mice.”

Wide-eyed and shocked, Alice scolded, “No swearing!”

“Sweetheart, when you’re grown up and have to deal with stowaway mice, you have my permission to swear at them just like I do.” Fran jammed her hat back onto her head. “Come on, now. We’re almost to Main, and we want to get to the big houses before all the good candy’s gone.”

Fran had possessed a slight ulterior motive in taking Alice toward Main, rather than up to Elm. Both streets connected to Central, which cut through the center of town and would, most importantly, take them past the elementary school, where there would be flocks of small children and the area would be as absolutely safe as anyplace in Buckley could possibly be after the sun went down. Heading for Main, however, also meant passing the intersection with Old Logger’s Road, and while Fran would never have taken Alice there to trick-or-treat, well…

She had reason to believe they might wind up meeting someone down there, what with it being Halloween and all.

The sky stayed mercifully clear as they walked, with Alice racing from house to house, and back to Fran’s side for the spaces in between, her pillowcase slowly growing in mass as she filled it with candy. Her energy, in the way of very small children faced with the opportunity to stay out late and acquire potentially limitless amounts of sugar, seemed to be unending. Fran followed at a more sedate pace, content as long as she could keep the pale flash of Alice’s braids in sight, and for her part, Alice seemed to understand that getting more than a house or two ahead of her mother was a bad idea.

Fran was standing by the fence at the Winslow place, watching Alice jockey for position in a swarm of bedsheet ghosts and wedding-dress princesses, when she started to feel like something was watching her. She turned to scan the sidewalk. The street was far from empty; not only were there scattered parents waiting for their own small monsters to return with their spoils, there were also roving bands of older trick-or-treaters, children between eight and thirteen, walking down the road in either direction. None of them seemed to be paying her any particular degree of attention. She was just another Halloween escort, as common as mud on a night like this.

But they were near the intersection with Old Logger’s Road. Looking steadfastly back toward the house, where Alice was now at the front of the throng, Frances said, “You can come out now, Mary.”

There was a long pause. Then, behind her, a voice said, “How’d you know I was there?”

“You were watching me, but I couldn’t hear anybody moving in the direction the watching was coming from,” said Fran, beginning to rummage through her bag. “That meant it was either something dead or something dangerous. I figured it was worth the wager.”

“Oh,” said Mary, sounding mystified.

“All the books said the ghosts would be out and about on Halloween, which makes a measure of
sense, this being the night when the walls between the worlds get even thinner than they usually are around here. So I thought we might run into you.” Fran continued to rummage. “We’ve missed you. There’s always a place for you with us.”

“I know,” said Mary. “I just…I needed to learn some more about what I am now. You know how it is.”

“I don’t really, but I reckon I will one day.” Fran stopped rummaging, pulling out a red velvet cape with a hood lined in brown rabbit fur. She turned to hold it out to Mary—Christ, Mary Dunlavy, who still looked exactly like she had the first time she came to sit for Alice, sweet sixteen, with her long white hair and those mooncalf eyes that seemed too big for her face, and she’d been so young, so young when she crashed and burned and everything changed forever—as she asked, “Would you like a costume?”

Mary grinned, her expression of delight mixed with relief as she reached out to take the cape from Fran. Her clothing warped as she slung the red velvet around her shoulders, her blue capris and white blouse becoming a red dress that fell past her knees. Fran raised her eyebrows.

“That’s a new trick for you,” she said.

“I’ve been learning about all the things being dead lets me do,” said Mary. “My clothes just look like I want them to.”

“It’s a nice trick,” said Fran. “I talked to Alexander, an’ he said that since you’re a road ghost, even if you’re not a hitchhiker, you can probably get some extra substance out of a borrowed coat. Sympathetic magic, an’ all that. I don’t really understand it, but I guess I don’t need to.” She paused before adding, in an unconsciously mothering tone, “You looked cold.”

“I was,” Mary admitted. “That’s something they don’t really tell you about the afterlife. That it’s cold.”

“Well, you go ahead and warm up, then, and you can come trick-or-treating with us, if you’d like. I’m sure Alice won’t mind.” As Fran spoke, Alice turned to wave from the porch, and then to scamper down the driveway toward them. “She’s missed you.”

Mary smiled. “I’ve missed her, too.”

Alice came running up, red-cheeked with excitement. “Mama, Mama, they gave me a whole chocolate bar!”

“That is surely cause for a ticker-tape parade,” Fran said solemnly. “Look who’s here!”

“Mary!” said Alice, seeming to notice the other woman for the first time. Turning, she flung her arms around Mary’s legs. “I missed you!”

“Hi, sweet girl,” said Mary.

“Where’ve you been?” Alice pulled back, frowning at her former babysitter. “You left.”

“Honey, Mary’s dead, remember? She’s been off learning about how to be a better ghost.”

Alice’s frown deepened. “Then why’s she dressed like Little Red Riding Hood?”

“Because she wanted to walk with us,” Fran said. “There’s no trick-or-treat for dead people, so she
has to watch you.”

“Oh.” Alice’s eyes went very wide, and she rummaged in her pillowcase, pulling out her much-lauded chocolate bar and holding it out to Mary. “You need this more than I do.”

Mary blinked, taking the chocolate bar. And then, helplessly, she began to laugh. “Well, yes,” she said. “I guess I do.”

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Half an hour later, their impromptu trio—or troop, if they were counting Alice’s bagful of illicit cryptid mice—was making their way along Main, heading for the intersection with Sycamore. Alice had decanted her bag into Fran’s about half a block before, before sprinting off ahead to join a bevy of kids from her kindergarten as they descended on a house rumored to have particularly good candy. Fran munched on a caramel apple as they walked, while Mary had pilfered an assortment of small chocolates, and was unwrapping and eating them, one by one.

“I miss chocolate so much,” she said. “There is no chocolate in the lands of the dead. It’s awful.”

Fran shook her head. “If you ever wanted to convince me that you were in Hell, this’d do it. You free to babysit next week, or are you goin’ back to the afterlife to keep learning about ghostin’?”

“I think I have the basics down by this point,” said Mary. “I’d be happy to babysit. Friday night?”

“Thursday through Monday okay? We’re going to Chicago to see some family friends, and it’d be better if we could leave Alice with someone who’s actually allowed inside the house.”

“You should really find a babysitter you’re willing to let past the front door,” said Mary, half laughing.

Fran rolled her eyes. “Oh, yeah, that’s an easy task. ‘Hello, teenage girl who wants to make some pocket money, do you want to come over to our house full of guns, swords, knives, various other types of weaponry, and monster taxidermy? We’ll pay you two bucks an hour.’ I think we’d be brought up on charges of child abuse inside of the week.”

Mary laughed again. “Oh, come on. It’d be fun to watch, and most babysitters are more open minded than you’re giving them credit for being.”

“Says the ghost of a sixteen-year-old girl,” said Fran, continuing to munch on her caramel apple.

“Honestly, I just wonder how you keep Alice from hurting herself.”

“Oh, that’s easy enough; the talking mice that live in the attic and worship the Healy men as gods keep a pretty good eye on her. We’d let them babysit, ’cept they’re too small to work the stove and they couldn’t get her to the hospital if anything did manage to happen, God forbid.”

There was a moment of silence before Mary said slowly, “Every time I think I’ve reached the bottom of the well, you go and dig down further. I’m still not comfortable with the talking mice, you know.”

“Oh, I know. Alice has a bunch of ’em in her trick-or-treat bag. You should say hello when she comes back. They call you ‘the Phantom Priestess,’ an’ as far as they’re concerned, you’re part of the family.”

Mary sighed heavily. “All right. I’ll say hello to the talking mice.”
“Y’know, for a dead girl, you sure can be a stick in the mud.” Fran took another bite of her apple, turning to watch as the cluster of trick-or-treaters up ahead started to scatter. “I think maybe we should stop off at the diner and get ourselves some ice cream sodas, and then head on home. Johnny’ll be glad to see that you’re doing all right for yourself, what with the vanishing into the afterlife for more’n a year and all.”

“I didn’t mean to worry you,” said Mary, cheeks reddening.

“You know, I never get tired of watchin’ a ghost blush. It’s just so bizarre,” Fran said. Then she paused, expression going slowly blank. The trick-or-treaters from Alice’s Kindergarten had scattered, returning to their respective parents and sitters in ones and in twos. Most were still visible, making their ways to the next houses along their individual routes. She could see ghosts and goblins, princesses and policemen, werewolves and witches, vampires and Frankenstein monsters…but no cowgirls. Not a single one.

Catching her expression, Mary turned to scan the sidewalks, before asking the one question—the one brutal, unaskable question—that Fran couldn’t bring herself to ask out loud.

“Fran?” she asked. “Where’s Alice?”

Halloween was officially and forever the best holiday ever in the whole wide world, period, as far as Alice was concerned. You got more presents for Christmas, and there were colored eggs to find on Easter, but her parents didn’t like Santa Claus or the Easter Bunny, or really any of the holiday folks that seemed to visit everybody else she knew. Halloween didn’t have any weird cryptids trying to break into the house and making Daddy line the fireplace flue with spikes or paint lamb’s blood above all the doors. Halloween just meant costumes and candy and surprises, like Mary showing up, even after stupid Mikey Caldwell said dead meant you didn’t get to visit anymore. Showed what he knew. Dead just meant you couldn’t go trick-or-treating, and while that was sad, it was different from no more visiting ever.

Most of the houses were giving out little candy bars, fistfuls of taffy, rock candy, chewing gum, and candy corn, although she’d also acquired six popcorn balls, three caramel apples, a dozen full-sized chocolate bars, and eight whole pennies of her very own. And her costume was definitely the best. The others were all monsters, and she had the guns. Monsters couldn’t do anything against guns.

One of the kids at the front of the pack rang the doorbell, and the entire mob shouted “TRICK-OR-TREAT!” as the door swung open. As they started to move forward to get the candy, a hand clamped itself over her mouth, and another over her eyes, and she felt herself yanked backward, away from the other trick-or-treaters. She could hear them laughing as she was hauled back into the bushes beside the house, out of view; none of them had noticed her abduction.

Kicking, Alice tried to scream, but the sound was muffled by the hand clamped over her mouth. A third arm grabbed her feet, yanking them down, and she felt rope being wrapped tight around her ankles, tying them together. She kicked again, trying to throw off the ropes, and something hard slammed into the side of her head, hitting hard enough to bring tears to her eyes. Alice moaned, suddenly afraid.

Unlike most children, who learned early to be afraid of monsters and scary stories and shadows in the dark, Alice had learned that sensible monsters and clever shadows were far more interested in being afraid of her, or at least in being afraid of the rest of her family. She’d never been worried about getting hurt or being careful, not when she knew her mother or father, or best of all, her grandparents
would be right behind her. But this was something new. Her mother was right there, and yet somehow, they’d taken her, and they were tying her hands together, and her head was throbbing where they’d hit her. They’d hurt her. They actually *hurt* her.

If they could hurt her, what else could they do?

“If you scream, I’ll cut off your left hand,” said a voice next to her ear. It was a calm voice, filled with a no-nonsense seriousness that made Alice go cold. “Now, I’m sure you have people with you who’d follow the sound of you screaming, and might even find you before we could get away from here. But I’ll cut off that hand before they can reach us, and nothing they can do will ever put it back again. Do I make myself clear?”

Mutely, Alice nodded. She was still clutching her trick-or-treat bag, and the weight of it was the only reassuring thing left in the world. As long as she had the bag, she wasn’t alone with strange people who wanted to hurt her, because as long as she had the bag, she had the mice.

“All right,” said the voice, and the hand across her mouth was withdrawn. Alice took a deep, unsteady breath, grateful for air that didn’t taste like sweat and someone else’s skin. She didn’t scream. She had the bag. Her mother would find her. And she liked having both her hands.

“Good girl,” said the voice. “Oscar, get the blindfold on her.” The hand across her eyes withdrew, and she caught a quick, blurry glimpse of the back of the house, and several people standing in a rough circle around an empty hayrick. Then a band of cloth was being tied around her eyes, and she was being thrown—literally *thrown*, like she was nothing more important than a sack of potatoes—into the back of the cart. It knocked the wind out of her, and she huddled there, blindfolded and bound, clutching her trick-or-treat bag, as they heaped foul-smelling straw all over her in great, uneven handfuls.

It felt like forever before she heard the voice say, “That’s enough. She’s hidden. Come on, now; we only have four hours to prepare everything before midnight comes and this night of grace is ended.”

There was a general murmur of assent, and the cart under Alice began to roll.

She squirmed. The ropes binding her ankles and wrists were too tight; even if she could somehow manage to roll out of the car, she wouldn’t be able to do anything other than lie on the ground and wait for something even worse to come along and gobble her up. Worse yet, the men might catch her again, and decide they needed to start cutting things off. “Never assume people are bluffing, Ally,” her mother always said. “People only bluff when they’re out of ammo, and unless you’ve been counting shots, you can’t be sure of that.”

She wasn’t entirely clear on what that meant, but she was pretty sure it meant, at least partially, “Don’t be dumb when men who want to cut your hands off already have you tied up, because that’s the worst time to be dumb in the whole world, even worse than when the teacher calls on you.”

The wagon made a lot of noise as it rattled across the ground. Alice licked her lips, grimacing at the taste of moldy straw, and whispered experimentally, “Hello?”

There was no response from the men pulling the cart.

Alice waited as long as she dared—longer might have been better, but if she waited too long, she’d never be able to get the warning out in time for Mama and Mary to find her—before bowing her head toward her trick-or-treat bag, and whispering, “I think I’m in trouble. Speak really really soft, or you’ll be in trouble, too.”
There was a rustling noise, and then one of the mice was squeaking near her ear in a parody of a whisper, saying, “We are no longer with the Violent Priestess, O Younger Priestess.”

Unable to stop herself, Alice started to cry behind her blindfold, whispering fiercely, “It’s bad men, mouse, bad men took us. You have to tell Mama.”

“I am sorry, Priestess,” replied the mouse, “sorry and shamed, but we cannot.”

“What?” Alice asked, stunned. The mice were supposed to help her. That was how it worked. “Why not?”

“Because you are the Younger Priestess, Priestess, and the words of the Violent Priestess must come first, and she has Forbidden Us to Leave the Bag,” said the mouse, with true regret in its squeaky tone. “We are sorry.”

Alice frowned, trying frantically to come up with a way for the mice to tell her mother what was going on without leaving the bag. This sort of thing never happened to Cinderella. Sure, all her mice got turned into horses, but they didn’t say they wouldn’t help her get the lintels out of the fire just because her mother said she wasn’t supposed to play in the ashes. Really, this sort of thing never happened to anyone in fairy tales. Maybe they got eaten by trolls or kidnapped by witches, but…

Kidnapped by witches! Alice gasped, and then froze, waiting for a sign that she’d been heard. The wagon continued to creak noisily on, and no hands came plunging down through the straw to strike at her or cut anything off. “I know what you can do, and it doesn’t mean leaving the bag,” she whispered.

“Tell us what to do, Priestess,” replied the mouse, “and we will try.”

“First, you gotta chew a hole in the bottom of the bag. And then…”

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“Ally!” Fran cupped her hands around her mouth, fighting to force down the panic that was rising in her chest like a living thing. “Alice Enid Healy, you come out of wherever it is you’re hiding right now, do you hear me? This isn’t funny! Alice!” Mary was halfway down the block, going through her own variation on the same mantra.

The other parents on the street shot sympathetic looks toward Frances and Mary as they hurried on, clutching their own charges a little closer and steadfastly not stopping to offer assistance. This was Buckley, after all. Start worrying about what might happen to other people’s children, and the odds were too good that you’d lose track of your own.

“Alice!”

The people at that last house didn’t even remember seeing her. The one cowgirl in a town full of monsters, and they hadn’t seen her. Somewhere between heading up the driveway to their door and the door opening, she’d simply disappeared. And Fran hadn’t seen it happen.

The panic was getting worse, and that thought didn’t do a thing to discourage it. She, Fran, had taken her little girl out trick-or-treating, had carried all the precautions she could think of, and she had lost her. Alice was gone.

“Mary, come back over here and follow me,” she called, turning to stalk grimly back to the house
where Alice had disappeared. The owners had drawn their shades and taken in their pumpkins; they hadn’t offered to call the police, oh, no, not over a missing little girl, not when they could tell themselves she’d just wandered away into the night, but at least they’d stopped passing out candy. They’d make that small sacrifice to doing the right thing.

The ghost-girl dropped her hands and ran to catch up with Frances, holding up her skirt around her knees to keep it out of the mud. The habits and patterns of being alive died harder than the living themselves did. “Did you find something?” she panted.

“Mary, there’s no point in sounding out of breath when you haven’t got any,” said Fran, stopping at the top of the path and looking coldly at the surrounding area, looking for something out of place. Anything. Nothing was fast enough and untraceable enough to have snatched a little girl from plain view without leaving some marks behind.

“I have so got breath,” Mary said, sounding hurt. “As long as I’m physical like this, I’ve got as much breath as you do. I know you’re worried, but that’s no reason to start getting mean.”

Fran paused, glancing toward her, and sighed. “You’re right. Just…be quiet a moment. Let me think.” Mary nodded, quieting, and Fran resumed scanning the area.

There were a lot of muddy footprints on the path and porch, and a lot of muddy tracks on the lawn where it nudged up against the drive and walkway. The kids hadn’t always been careful about where they stepped. The house itself was fairly small, with leafless bushes flanking the porch to either side. Fran paused.

The bushes to the right of the porch were undisturbed, their branches too sharp to encourage trampling by random children. But the bushes on the left were bent slightly back, like something had been dragged through them—something about the size and shape of a six year old girl. “This way,” she said, and plunged into the bushes, ignoring the way they snatched at her clothing and hair. She could hear Mary pushing through them behind her, moving much more reluctantly. For a dead girl, she was awfully reluctant to get herself scratched. “Put some life into it, Mary!” she snapped, and went crashing onward.

The bushes opened up into the backyard of the house. Fran could see shapes moving in the kitchen window, but she ignored them; if the owners wanted to call the police on her for trespassing, they were more than welcome to do so, and then she’d take a great deal of pleasure in explaining how they’d failed to call the police for the disappearance of her little girl.

As was frequently the case with houses on Sycamore, there was no back fence; the yard sloped down to the lake shore, grass gradually giving way to the rocky, hard-packed soil bordering the water. You could walk the length of Sycamore by way of that shore, never coming into view of the street above. Looking at that slope, Fran felt her heart sink. There wouldn’t be any tracks. There wouldn’t be anything to follow.

Mary squirmed out of the bushes behind her. “See anything?”

Fran shook her head. She was going to have to go home, get the others, and start a full-scale canvassing of the woods, and, God help them all, the swamp. If Alice had been taken into the swamp, they’d be lucky to find anything at all…but it was seeming more and more likely that they’d be forced to look for her there. She couldn’t have wandered away, and anything that hadn’t devoured her on the spot would be retreating to its lair before it ate.

“Fran?” Down by the water, Mary raised her arms and waved a mad semaphore, calling, “I think you
should come and see this?”

Numbly, Fran walked down to join her, already rehearsing what she’d say to Jonathan and the others. *We just went trick-or-treating,* she’d say. *I thought we’d be safe,* she’d say. And then they’d beat the woods until morning, and if they were lucky, they might find something they could bury.

“Well!” Mary said, pointing to a speck of color on the ground, wedged between the gray and jagged shapes of the shoreline rocks. Fran knelt, picking it up, feeling it out between her fingers.

It was a piece of candy corn.

Hope rose in her chest as she scanned the lake shore. There was another speck of color about five feet further along. She covered the distance in two long strides, bending to pluck that piece of candy corn from the rocks as well, nestling it next to the first in the hollow of her palm. Why would a trick-or-treater have been wandering along the lake, dropping candy corn as they went? They wouldn’t have. No parent in Buckley who wanted to have children that lived would have allowed it.

“Oh, Ally, you brilliant little thing,” she murmured, almost running to pick up the third piece of candy corn. The fourth and fifth were visible now, bright little specks of brilliant orange, leading her onward. “Didn’t have any breadcrumbs, and so you found another way to tell us where to go. I’m going to kiss you forever, right after I kill you for scaring me.”

“Is this the right way?” asked Mary, moving up behind her.

“Ever wanted to see a gingerbread house?” Fran asked in reply, and started down the shore, following the candy corn trail into the dark.

*

The wagon carrying Alice ground to a sudden halt, sending her jolting through the straw and slamming her back and shoulders, hard, against the wooden side of the wagon. She cried out involuntarily, and the voice of the man that had grabbed her hissed, “You be quiet, girl, or you won’t enjoy what happens to you!”

Alice wasn’t enjoying what was already happening to her. She’d been snatched in the middle of trick-or-treating, threatened with losing parts of her body that she didn’t want to lose, tied up, loaded into the back of a hayrick that smelled like mold and nasty wet straw, and—worst indignity of them all—forced to convince the mice to throw her hard-earned candy out the back of the wagon to give her mama a trail to follow. She tried to think of something she’d like less than what was already happening, and she couldn’t. She was pretty sure she didn’t want to.

Something rustled the straw above her, and she heard the mice scamper deeper into the recesses of her trick-or-treat bag, hiding themselves among the remaining candy. Then hands were grabbing her roughly by the hair and shoulders, and she whimpered, again involuntarily. A fist struck her across the side of the face, even as the voice snapped, “You keep that brat quiet, you hear me? Her folks may be come-latelies, but that won’t stop people taking an interest if they hear a child carrying on out here.”

Another voice, this one slow and sullen, said, “I don’t see why we can’t just slice her tongue out.” Alice’s eyes widened behind the blindfold, and she clamped her mouth as tightly shut as it would go, clutching for her trick-or-treat bag as the hands lifted her up out of the straw.

“The ritual says she needs to be as intact as possible,” said the first voice, in the same sort of patient
tone that so many adults used when they were talking to children. Alice didn’t like it any better when it was being used on the adults themselves. “The more intact she is, the better our control will be. Don’t you like the sound of that? Control?”

“Reckon I do.”

“Good. Now come on.”

Alice barely managed to keep her grip on her trick-or-treat bag as she was thrown over the second man’s shoulder, and then they were walking away from the wagon, and from the ending of her makeshift trail.

_Hurry, Mama_, she thought, too terrified of the “something worse” that had surely taken the place of cutting off her hand to scream. _I’m scared._

The men kept walking.

*

The candy corn trail led the length of the lake shore. To Fran’s delight, it turned away from the swamp, heading back toward Old Orchard Road. Maybe Old Orchard represented the worst part of the town, but she’d take it over the swamp any night of the year; sometimes the people who got lost on Old Orchard Road came back alive. And the people who frequented the Red Angel weren’t bad folks, exactly, no matter what the town said about them—they were just poor, unlucky, or unusual enough to be considered “not our kind” by the hide-bound bastards who held the reins of the town. If she asked them for help, they’d likely help her, especially once they heard that a child was missing.

It always seemed to be the people with the least to lose that held onto their understanding of what it meant to be a decent human being for the longest. If Alice had been taken somewhere on Old Orchard, she might be able to work up a decent lynch mob, should the need arise.

They were crossing the hard-packed mud between the lake shore and the highway when the trail of candy corn ran out. The kernels had remained evenly spaced all the way around the lake, appearing about every four to six feet; there was no warning or tapering off before the sudden stop. Fran froze as the trail cut off, staring at the unmarked ground.

“Fran?” said Mary, uncertainly.

“Yes?”

“There’s no more candy corn.”

“Yes, I see that.”

“Did she run out of candy corn?”

“Or whatever’s taken her noticed she was dropping it.” She liked the idea of Alice running out more than she liked the notion of some slavering beast suddenly realizing that its snack was leaving a trail behind. At least there was no blood. She could take comfort in that much, even if she couldn’t take comfort in anything else. There was no blood; for the moment, at least, Alice was almost certainly still alive.

The one thing she couldn’t allow herself to do was think about the “still” in that statement. If she stopped to think about the “still,” she wouldn’t be able to keep going.
Mary bit her lip. “So what do we do now?”

Fran turned, scanning the area. No tracks, no further trail to follow… but in the distance, she could see the lights of the Red Angel glimmering electric yellow through the fog that was rising to circle the lake. “Now we go and ask the locals where they think we need to go.”

Mary looked at her expression and was afraid.

*

The man carried Alice across a corn field—she could hear the dry stalks going crunch-crunch-crunch under his feet, and under the feet of at least three more men—and through a door that creaked on its hinges. There was no more crunch-crunching after that, only the dull thud of footsteps on solid floorboards. They paused as one of the men moved to raise a trapdoor, and then they were going down, the man holding onto Alice with one hand as he descended a steep, rickety ladder.

“Don’t drop her,” cautioned one of the men.

“I won’t,” said the one that was carrying her. “I smash her skull in, she’s no good to us anymore.”

Despite herself, Alice whimpered. She hurt all over from the bumpy ride in the hayrick and the places where she’d been hit, the mice had thrown most of her candy away to make a trail she wasn’t even sure would be followed, she couldn’t see, and now bad men—she was sure they were bad men, at the very least, since good men didn’t usually threaten to cut little girls’ hands off if they made noise—were talking about smashing her skull like it was something reasonable.

Alice liked her skull. More importantly, she liked her skull not smashed. She’d seen things with their skulls smashed, and as a rule, if they did anything other than lie around and get rotten, her parents shot them. She didn’t want her parents to shoot her for having a smashed-up skull and still moving around, and she didn’t want to be a dead thing, either. So she whimpered, even knowing what was likely to happen as a consequence, and steeled herself against the blow she was sure was coming.

There was a metallic creaking instead, like the trunk of a car being opened, and she was suddenly flying through the air, losing her grip on her pillowcase as she tumbled, end over end, to slam, hard, into what felt like a series of densely rolled rugs. The wind was knocked out of her, and so she simply sagged there, struggling to breathe, as the men laughed, slamming the door shut behind her.

“Don’t struggle too much,” one of them called. “Might go fast, if you don’t.” And then their footsteps were moving away from the door, moving back up the ladder, leaving her alone in the dark behind her blindfold.

She forced herself to count slowly to the highest number she knew—fifty-six, which was where she always forgot whether it was fifty-seven or fifty-eight that came next—and then, when she lost her place, started back over again from one. By the time she finished counting all the way back up five times, the footsteps hadn’t returned.

Lowering her voice so she hopefully wouldn’t be heard, Alice whispered, “Hey! Hey!”

A moment later, a squeaky voice replied, “We are here, Priestess.”

“I’m all tied up. You gotta untie me.”

“How?”
Alice paused. The mice were good with the paws, which were really more like tiny hands, but they were too small to manage anything the size of the knots she’d been bound with. “Chew through the ropes,” she said, finally.

“The teachings of Beth, the Kindly Priestess, tell us that Nice People Do Not Chew Through the Support Cables,” said the mouse. A grave murmuring followed its words.

Alice groaned inwardly. Running up against one of the catechisms was just about the worst thing she could think of right now, which was saying something, seeing as she was tied up and sprawled on top of a bunch of lumpy old rugs that were anything but comfortable. “They aren’t support cables, they’re stupid ropes, and they’re hurting me!”

“But the Kindly Priestess—”

“I’m your new Priestess, and I say when somebody’s all tied up an’ they ask you for help an’ they’re not a bad person or a dead thing or…or…” She fumbled for a moment, trying to think of something else terrible, before finishing, “or from the Covenant, you chew through the ropes an’ you let them out!” The last words came out on a high, indignant note, and she bit her lip, waiting for the sound of the door swinging open and the men making their return.

It didn’t come. Instead, the mouse said, almost meekly, “You are right, Priestess. Truly, we have forgotten that there are teachings yet to be learned. We are shamed before your sight.” The other mice murmured shame behind him, their tiny, squeaky voices downcast.

Alice bit back hysterical giggles. “You’re not shamed before my sight,” she said, as sensibly as she could. “I’m blindfolded. Now c’mon and chew through these ropes.”

“At once, Priestess,” said the mouse. Tiny feet scampered toward her, followed by the sound of teeth gnawing through rope. It was a matter of seconds before her feet were free, pins and needles filling them as the blood began to flow normally again, and then her hands were free, and she pushed herself upright, reaching for the blindfold.

“Priestess—” said one of the mice, anxiously.

“In a second, I can’t see,” she said, fumbling with the knot at the back of her head.

“Priestess, we smell snake.”

“Get back in the bag, then,” Alice said. Then the blindfold fell away, and she was squinting in the light, which was dim and filtered through the ceiling above her, yet still seemed to be impossibly bright after the artificial darkness.

She was sitting in a root cellar, with a slatted ceiling of pine boards overhead, and a hard-packed earth floor visible beyond the slightly raised mound that she was currently on the top of. Half the room had been portioned off with a steel gate and tall iron bars, turning it into a prison cell, or a cage. Pushing herself further upright, Alice looked down and frowned. The rugs she’d landed on didn’t feel like rugs; they were too solid, with a slick, scaly feel to them, and there really only seemed to be one of them, wound around and around like a giant cinnamon bun.

A hissing sound was coming from behind her.

Alice turned slowly, eyes widening in the darkness, and screamed.
Frances Healy didn’t so much knock on the door leading to the basement of the Red Angel as “blow it off the hinges.” The two women had approached by way of the lake shore, taking the lower route to the part of the bar whose cryptid clientele was an open secret among certain portions of the town’s population. “If you want to find a fellow with horns or purple skin or whatnot when he isn’t all tied up with sucking out the livers of the locals, you go to the basement of the Red Angel,” Alexander Healy had said, more than once, usually while occupied with stripping the skin off something that had, up until recently, been a part of that selfsame clientele. “They’re generally polite enough down there. Not looking for trouble, unless you come in making it.”

In the years since she’d moved to Buckley, Fran had only found reason to visit the Red Angel three times. There was a sort of uneasy truce between the Healys and the bar; as long as you stay where you belong, it said, I won’t be forced to kill you. Tonight, Fran was starting to feel like killing a few things might be exactly what she needed. That’s why when she found the door into the lower bar locked, and no one willing to open it for her, she didn’t hesitate before pulling a shotgun out of her sack, much to Mary’s wide-eyed dismay, and shooting the goddamn door right off of its hinges.

The cloud of dust and shattered wood was still settling as Fran stepped through the hole she’d made and into the room filled with frozen, staring cryptids. “Evening, boys,” she said, pushing her hat back on her head. “Don’t suppose you’ve got a moment to help a lady, have you?”

Something snarled off to her left. Without turning her head or abandoning her otherwise relaxed position, Fran swung the shotgun around, aiming it squarely at the cat-headed barmaid, who froze, whiskers flattening back against her cheeks. In the silence, the sound of Fran pulling the pistol from her belt and clicking off the safety with her free hand was very, very loud.

“Now, I recognize this isn’t good manners, and I’m sorry for that,” she said genially, “but Mary an’ me—y’all remember Mary Dunlavy, don’t you? Died a few years back, out on Old Logger’s Road? You go ahead and say hello, now, Mary, don’t be shy—we’re in a bit of a hurry, on account of some two-bit son-of-a-bitch went and carted off my Alice. Now, I said to myself, I said, Fran, ain’t no way the good folks of Buckley would’ve have broken the truce just to make off with a little girl who’d be as much trouble as mine is. But then I thought...maybe y’all didn’t do it. But maybe y’all would know who did.”

The silence in the room was as deep as an ocean. Fran’s eyes narrowed. “Y’all have me outnumbered; I’ll give you that. But I have a lot of bullets, and I’ll bet you wouldn’t enjoy playing the ‘who does the crazy Healy woman shoot first’ game. Now, does one of you want to share with Auntie Fran, or does Auntie Fran start shooting?”

For a moment, the silence held. Fran shrugged, saying, “Suit yourself,” and was pulling back the hammer on the shotgun when a voice from the back of the room said, “There’s a new snake cult in town.”

Fran relaxed her finger, turning toward the voice. “Is there, now?”

“Shut up, Carl!” shouted a voice from somewhere else in the crowd.

“Don’t reckon I will,” said the first speaker, and stood. He was a towering figure in logger’s flannel and denim, whose height and excessive body hair only betrayed his Sasquatch blood if you knew enough to look for it. Pushing his cap back from his slightly too-pronounced forehead, he said, “Now, look. These folks aren’t my favorites, what with the shooting and all, but it’s not like they come into our places lookin’ for trouble, most the time, and times like this’un, I can’t exactly say as I blame
“Keep the numbers down!” called someone else. Fran swung the muzzle of her shotgun in the direction of the voice, but couldn’t find a target in the crowd.

The logger snorted. “That ain’t neighborly. You think a mama bear’s less inclined to bite if you kill her young? You shut up now, let me get these nice folks out of here.” Folding his arms across his barrel of a chest, he turned back to Fran and Mary. “The cult’s brand new. They just summoned themselves a god not three days ago.”

“Saints preserve us from idiots and their damn snake cults,” muttered Fran. More loudly, she said, “What makes you reckon this could lead us to my Alice?”

“Well, seems to me that since it’s all humans, and they just got their god into town, he hasn’t got too much power yet.” The speaker paused to unfold his arms and take a drink from his tankard, which was large enough to hold near-on a gallon of beer at one go. “Seems to me if I were a human looking to fuel up a snake god, get me some proper power, I’d need sacrifices. And I’d want to snatch them on a night when there were lots of options wandering around. Make sure I got something fresh.”

“Makes sense,” Fran allowed. “I’m going to overlook the part where you equated snatching my daughter to doing the grocery shopping, provided you do me one tiny little favor.”

Narrowing his eyes, the logger gave her a suspicious look. “And what’s that?” he asked.

Fran smiled. In that moment, she looked more like a monster than anyone else in that room. “Tell me where.”

*

Alice had never seen a snake god before, except in the pictures in Grandpa’s books. She knew enough to know that they came in all different shapes and sizes, from little slithery ones that looked like normal snakes all the way up to ones big enough to swallow whole houses like they were mice, and she knew enough to know that none of them were exactly friendly to people who weren’t worshipping them. She wasn’t clear on what you did to worship a snake god, since every time people talked about snake gods and their followers in her presence, it was in the context of methods of taxidermical preservation, but she was pretty sure it wasn’t anything good, since her mama didn’t normally get all slitty-eyed and angry about good people existing.

The figure looming in front of her had the torso, head and arms of a naked, hairless man, with skin covered by the same shiny brown and green scales as covered the twenty-foot length of its tail. The thickest part of it—the part Alice had mistaken for rolled-up rugs—was bigger around than the rain barrel by the kitchen steps. It couldn’t swallow a house, but it could swallow a little girl, easy, without stopping to think about it. Alice took short, panting breaths, trying to swallow her panic. “Never let a wild animal know that you’re afraid,” that was what her grandma always said. “They’ll just get aggressive if they realize that you’re scared.”

Well, she wasn’t going to be afraid of any stupid ol’ snake god. No matter how much bigger it was than her, or how long its tail was, or how big its mouth was…

The snake god seemed to come to a decision, because it leaned forward, reaching for her with scaly, heavily-muscled arms.

Alice screamed again, and the snake god clapped its hands over the spaces where its ears should have
been, hissing furiously. Still screaming, Alice started to scramble away, pedaling backward as fast as she could. Her galoshes couldn’t find much traction on the snake god’s scales, and it took several wasted, ineffectual kicks before she slid into an untidy somersault, tumbling into the rotten straw piled on the hard-packed earth of the basement floor. Her ankles were still pressed against the tail of the snake god, and so she rolled to her hands and knees, crawling toward the wall. She wasn’t clear on where she was going to go, but she was planning for “as far away from the giant snake that maybe eats little girls” as possible.

She had almost made it to the wall when an arm wrapped around her waist and a strong, scaly hand clamped itself over her mouth, cutting off her screaming on one final, drawn-out shriek. Kicking futilely, she was lifted into the air and turned around to face the snake god.

His eyes were yellow, with thin black slits for pupils, and he had no ears, but other than that, his features were almost human. The scales got smaller as they reached his chest, and by the time they got to his face, they were so fine and small that they looked like very shiny skin.

His tongue flicked out, like a snake’s does when it’s tasting prey.

Alice Healy was, in some ways, a remarkable little girl, especially considering that she was only six years old. She was clever, courageous, and possessed of a capacity for invention and self-preservation that many adults would have done well to emulate. She was, however, still only six years old, and since the beginning of the night, she had been kidnapped, blindfolded, hit repeatedly, threatened, and now thrown into a cage with a giant snake-man who was, presumably, intending to eat her. Even remarkable little girls have limits, and it was something of a relief when Alice’s resolve, tested beyond all reasonable bounds, finally gave out, and she tumbled mercifully into unconsciousness.

*  

Mary hurried to catch up with Fran as she stalked down Old Orchard Road, heading for the turnoff to the rural post route that wound away from town, deeper into the circling woods. “Are you sure we shouldn’t be going for, I don’t know, the police? Or at least one of those big angry mobs with torches?”

“Angry mobs are for vampires and mad scientists bent on breaking the laws of God and man, and the police ’round here aren’t good for much of anything ’cept justifying whatever just ate those campers as an angry bear with rabies,” Fran said grimly. She had put the shotgun away, which didn’t reassure Mary as much as she’d expected it to; Fran was walking with her hands just above the pistols that dangled from her belt, and something about that stance made her look even more likely to shoot something at any moment than she had before.

“What about calling home? The rest of the family?”

“No time,” Fran snapped.

The directions they’d received from Carl the Sasquatch were sketchy at best; he said the newly-founded snake cult was keeping their god in one of the abandoned old buildings on the rural route off Old Orchard. Even the desperate and the destitute of Old Orchard weren’t willing to move onto the rural route, where the darkness that crept out of the woods had actually finished the long, slow process of reclaiming the town that man had made. There had been too many unexplained deaths there, too many disappearances for even the blunted sensibilities of Buckley to tolerate; no one had lived out there for almost twenty years, and the few remaining structures were collapsing slowly inward, done in by neglect and decay. It was the perfect place to hide an underpowered god, as long as you weren’t particularly concerned about tetanus.
They’d walked almost the full length of the road when Fran stopped, expression going blank, and bent to pick something up, holding it at chest-level so that Mary could have a proper look. Alice’s hat.

“Come on.” Fran turned toward the nearest building, a crumbling old barn whose closed doors were surprisingly intact. “I think we’re almost there.”

*  

“Priestess?” The voice was small, worried, and about an inch from Alice’s ear. “Priestess, please bestir yourself, and rise. We grow concerned, for did not the Patient Priestess say, lo, That Child Would Not Nap If the Devil Himself Commanded It?”

Alice kept her eyes screwed shut. She didn’t like worrying the mice—the mice had a way of worrying you right back when you upset them, and while she might be bigger, they outnumbered her—but when faced with a choice between worrying the mice and acknowledging the existence of a giant snake-man who probably wanted to have a little girl in his trick-or-treat bag, she’d take worrying the mice any day of the week. They could be mad at her later.

Dolefully, the mouse squeaked, “The Priestess does not wake. Woe!” Behind him, equally doleful, all the other stowaway mice intoned, “Woe.”

“We could shake her by her feet,” said an unfamiliar, clinically interested voice. It was male, and there was a certain worrisome sibilance to its ‘s’s. Alice whimpered. “Or perhaps she’s faking. Do Priestesses fake unconsciousness, little mouse priest?”

“No!” squeaked the mouse indignantly. “For is it not said That Girl Knows No Fear, and Dammit, Fran, She’s Going to Get Herself Et, and This Is From Your Side Of the Family, Jonathan, No One In My Family Has Ever Hugged A Basilisk Before?”

“Perhaps your teachings are wrong, little mouse,” said the voice.

That was the last straw. Alice could play dead if it meant not getting eaten, but she couldn’t do it if it meant listening to someone say nasty things about the mouse teachings. A whole lot of them were based on things she’d heard her parents and her grandparents actually say, and that made saying bad things about them the same as saying bad things about her family. Suddenly more annoyed than frightened, she opened her eyes, sat up, and turned toward the voice, putting her hands on her hips and saying, “Now you be nice.”

The snake god blinked at her. “What?” he said, finally.

Alice continued to glare. “You be nice,” she repeated. “You don’t need to go saying bad stuff about the teachings. The teachings are good.” She paused. “Except for the ones about making sure I stay in bed all night. Those ones are just silly.”

“The Priestess wakes!” cheered the mice, a bit belatedly. “Hail the waking Priestess!”

“I...don’t think anyone has ever ordered me to be nice before,” said the snake god.

“Well, then, they were being silly,” Alice said, with a small, firm nod. “Everybody oughta be nice. Or else.”

“Or else what?” asked the snake god, nonexistent eyebrows knitting together.
“My mama shoots ‘em,” Alice said. Giving the snake god a speculative look, she asked, “Are you gonna eat me?”

The snake god shuddered. “Not only do I have no interest in being shot by your ‘mama’ for a failure to be nice, I don’t eat little girls. I try not to eat anything that converses with me; it seems rude.”

“Oh,” said Alice. She paused to consider this before nodding and offering her hand to the snake god. He eyed it like he expected it to bite. Alice frowned. “You’re supposed to shake it, dummy.”

“Why?”

“So we can make ’ductions.”

“What is a ’duction’?” Now the snake god was frowning at her. “I’d rather not make something I’ve never heard of before, if it’s all the same to you, small priestess of overly religious mice.”

“Hail Priestess!” shouted the mice, helpfully.

Alice sighed, looking put-upon. “’Ductions are where we shake hands, and I say ‘hello, I’m Alice,’ and you say ‘hello, I’m some funny snake-man name,’ and then we’re friends.”

“Do friends get shot by one another’s ‘mamas’?” asked the snake god. Alice shook her head. “Very well, then.” He took her hand, and shook it carefully. “Hello. But I’m not some funny snake-man name, really; I’m Naga.”

“Hello,” said Alice, “I’m Alice Healy. I’m not a snake-man at all. I’m a little girl. And these are the mice.”

“Hail!”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” she finished. After a pause, she added, “You can stop shaking now.”

Naga did.

Alice pulled her hand away, and looked around the small, dark room. “Now that we’re friends,” she said, “how do we get out of here?”

*

They knew they’d reached the right barn when they saw the two men standing sentry by the door, their rifles held at ready. Fran promptly ducked behind the nearest snarl of bushes, hauling Mary after her.

“Now what do we do?” Mary whispered, eyes wide. “They didn’t say there’d be men with guns!”

Fran gave her a weary look. “You’re a sweet girl, but there’s a few facts about the nature of your current condition that haven’t really sunk in yet, have they? You’re dead, Mary. Dead means a lot of things, and most of them are bad, but what it really means is that guns aren’t a problem anymore. Not unless they’re loaded with blessed silver ammo that used to be part of a sanctified cross. Or rock salt. But neither of them’s all that likely.”

“…really?” said Mary, blinking.

“Girl, have you not been paying attention to what ‘disembodied’ means? You can’t get hurt when
you’re not forcing yourself solid, and even when you are, you can’t get hurt for long.” Fran shook her head. “My daughter may be dead, and here I am lecturing a ghost on what she can and can’t have done to her. God have mercy, sometimes I think I married into the wrong sort of crazy.”

“But you’re not dead,” said Mary. “They can still shoot you.”

Fran looked at her, and slowly smiled. “Mary-girl,” she said, “have you ever heard of a decoy?”

Despite having been dead for several years, and all Fran’s reassurances that dead girls were remarkably difficult to hurt, Mary couldn’t help feeling like she was doing something that wasn’t just stupid, but actually suicidal, as she walked up the last little stretch of driveway toward the two men standing sentry at the barn doors. She’d left her borrowed cloak behind the bushes with Fran, and the bitter winter cold that now attended almost every moment of her afterlife was creeping back into her bones, chilling her right through. Her feet made no sound as she walked through the fallen leaves that littered the ground; dead girls don’t leave footprints.

One of the men caught sight of her when she was barely five feet away. He turned, cocking his shotgun with a sound that seemed almost as loud as the gunshot itself would have been. The barrel of the gun looked big enough to fit her fist through. His partner looked over at the sound of the gun cocking, and then he was swinging his gun around as well, both of them pointing directly at her.

“You’re trespassing,” said the first man. “You ought to hustle right along, little girl.”

“Uh…” said Mary. Her mind had gone blank in the face of the guns and their empty, passionless stare. She was cold, she was dead, and now men were pointing guns at her.

But Fran had been kind, even though she was dead. And Fran needed her to do this.

Mary jutted out her right hip and planted her hand against it in what she hoped would look like a saucy gesture. It was a saucy gesture when the cheerleaders did it, anyway. “Golly, mister,” she said. “I didn’t know this was private property. You fellas look real lonely out here. You guardin’ something? Can I see? I won’t touch. Not unless you ask me to.” She giggled, trying to conceal her anxiety. They weren’t going to buy it. They couldn’t possibly buy it. And somehow, even though she was dead, and miles away, to boot, her mother was going to hear what she’d just said, and come to slap that dirty mouth right off of her face.

The barrel of the first shotgun lowered slightly as the man holding it straightened. Mary blinked, surprised. They were actually falling for it. “What’s your name, girl?” he asked. “You look familiar.”

Of course she did. They always ran pictures in the paper when somebody died. The obituaries were practically a who’s-who in Buckley. Mary took another step forward, and smiled. “Mary,” she said.

The second man’s eyes widened. “Mary Dunlavy?”

“That’s right, baby.”

“But you’re dead!” The guns were up again, the triggers more than half-cocked.

*Can’t be hurt*, Mary reminded herself fiercely. Forcing herself to keep smiling, she said, “That doesn’t mean I don’t still need a date for homecoming.”

The guns went off with a sound like thunder. Mary flinched, but the pain she’d half-expected didn’t
come. Looking down at her undamaged body, she blinked. “Huh,” she said, over the sound of two smaller, more contained shots. “I guess I really am invulnerable.” She looked up to where the men were standing, wobbling on their feet as bloody flowers slowly blossomed on their shirt fronts. “Guess you aren’t, though. Sorry.”

The men fell. Fran stepped to the front of the barn, holstering her guns at her hips. “Let’s go.”

“Did you have to kill them?”

“Did they have to snatch my daughter and try to sacrifice her to their snake-god?” Fran’s voice was flat, entirely empty of all sympathy. “They made their choice. Not everything that isn’t human is evil, Mary. But not everything human is good.” She jerked her chin toward the barn. “Go see if there’s anything else inside.”

“But the door is…”

“You’re a goddamn ghost! Do I need to get you an instruction book? Walk through the door!” Fran made an angry shooing gesture with her hands. “Just go!”

Eyes wide and frightened, Mary dove through the wall.

Fran waited until the ghost was through before kneeling and starting to go through the pockets of the fallen men. She recognized one of them—he worked at the chemist’s, and always tried to short-change her when she was in with Alice and he thought she’d be too distracted to notice—but the other was a stranger. All the better for her. She didn’t like killing people, but shooting to wound was a luxury that she’d never really been able to afford. You shot or you got shot. It was as simple as that.

The keys to the barn door were in the stranger’s pockets. She pulled them loose and straightened, turning to face the barn, and wait.

Alice had come along after she and Jonathan had given up on having any more children, but Fran had never had any regrets about that. There had never been anything to regret, because the reward for everything was Alice, her darling daughter, who showed the best of what was in both her parents, and only the very slightest traces of the worst. There had been other pregnancies before Alice, and there had been Daniel, her beloved baby boy…but none of them had lived. It was just Alice.

Fran didn’t know what she’d do if that ghost-girl came out of the barn with phantom tears running down her cheeks, if Mary came through that wall and said they were already too late. It would be worse than a few dead cultists, she thought; much worse. Because there’d be no reason to stop shooting, if Alice was dead.

She was still standing there, waiting, when Mary poked her head back through the wall, eyes wide and dry, and said, “I think you should come and see this. Did you find a key?” Wordlessly, Fran held it up. Mary pulled her head back through the wall, and Fran undid the lock, and followed her inside.

* 

“Mama! Mama!” Alice waved so frantically that for a moment, it seemed like she was going to snap her arm clean off. “You came!”

Fran’s first overwhelming rush of relief at the sound of her daughter’s voice—she was alive, Alice was really and truly alive—was wiped away a moment later as her eyes adjusted to the gloom, and she saw the tableau in front of her: Alice, wrists chafed and hair tangled, but otherwise not visibly the
worse for wear, was inside an old bear cage, sitting on the coils of a half-man, half-snake that was twenty feet long if it was an inch. It was naked, and hairless, and looking at her with a sort of wariness that smacked far too much of a predator afraid of being robbed of its prey.

“Sweetheart, you just move away from the snake god now,” she said calmly, pulling the pistols out of her belt. “I wouldn’t want to get you all messed up by mistake.”

“I believe there’s been a misunderstanding—” began the snake-man, raising his hands in a warding gesture.

“Certainly has been,” Fran agreed, and cocked the hammers back.

“Mama!” Alice folded her arms, looking indignant. “You can’t shoot Naga, he’s my friend, we made ’ductions and everything!”

“I assure you, I have no intention of eating your daughter,” added the snake-man. “I have no intention of eating anyone’s daughter.”

Fran frowned. “What are you playing at?”

“Tea party, largely,” said Naga, with a resigned tone that Fran knew all too well. Jonathan used it, usually when Alice had managed to corner him into playing Rodeo with her for the better part of an afternoon. “I assume you must be the vaunted ‘mama’ of Miss Alice, here. A pleasure to meet you. Please don’t shoot me.”

“Look what Naga can do!” crowed Alice. Digging in her denuded trick-or-treat bag, she produced a caramel apple, and handed it to Naga. With a long-suffering sigh, he opened his mouth wide, wider, and wider still, until finally he was able to stuff the entire apple inside. His throat bulged and distorted as he swallowed it. Alice crowed with delight.

Mary, who had been standing by the wall, blinked. “That must be really useful at parties.”

“You’d be surprised.” Naga leaned over, lifting Alice down from his coils, and slithered to the door. “Would you mind letting us out of here?”

Fran eyed him. “Not sure I should be letting a snake god loose. Even one who didn’t eat my daughter.”

Naga groaned. Running a hand over his scaly skull, he said, “I don’t know how many times I’ve got to tell you people this, but I’m not a snake god. I’m not a god of anything.”

“What are you, then?” asked Fran.

“I’m a Professor of Extra-Dimensional Studies at the University of K’larth,” Naga replied. “I was on my way to the hatchery to meet my season-mate and review the available nesting sites, when suddenly, here I was, surrounded by bipeds talking about how once I was properly ‘bound,’ I would grant them all their desires. Unless they desire a passing grade in one of my classes, I’m not in a position to grant them much, and if their idea of ‘binding’ me is to feed me small children, they clearly reached into the wrong dimension when they were fishing for a deity.”

“So you’re trying to tell me you’re harmless?” Fran said.

“No. I fully intend to track down and constrict the bipeds that summoned me until they tell me how to get home. But I’m no one’s ‘snake god.’”
“Grandpa can figure out how to send him home,” Alice piped up.

Fran nodded. “Probably true. How do I know you’re telling me the truth, Mister Naga not-a-snake-god?”

“I didn’t eat the child,” Naga replied.

Fran and Mary exchanged a glance. Finally, Fran shrugged. “Fair enough.” Pulling out the key ring, she started flipping through. “Mary, you take Alice on home. Naga and I have some business to take care of.”

Alarmed, Alice rushed over to hug Naga around the middle. The snake-man gave her a startled, wide-eyed look, before glancing back to Fran. “No shooting Naga!”

“No shooting Naga, pumpkin, I promise,” Fran said, sliding the key into the lock. The door swung open, and Fran leaned in to gather Alice into a tight hug, while the mice cheered. “I’m just going to take him with me on a little tracking expedition. Make sure he doesn’t wind up visiting when he doesn’t want to from here on out.”

“Oh,” said Alice, and beamed as Fran kissed her on the cheeks and forehead. Then her smile dimmed, and she said, plaintively, “Mama?”

Fran blinked. “Yes?”

“Can Mary take me trick-or-treating first?” Alice gave her a half-sly, sidelong look. “Most of my candy got lost.”

After a moment’s pause, Fran began to laugh.

*

Mary and Alice had wandered off into the night, to Fran’s firm request that no one else get kidnapped before November at the very earliest. Fran and Naga, meanwhile, went off to do their part for discouraging the presence of snake cults in Michigan.

“We’ll never get them all,” said Fran philosophically, as Naga squeezed the air out of a man who had tried to claim that his mystic power was stronger than a really big snake’s capacity to constrict. “Damn fools seem to get off on worshipping snakes. You’d think they could do something new for a change. A kitten cult. Maybe a big-ass snail cult. But no, it’s snake cults, always snake cults, like they were on discount at the five and dime.”

Three hours later, they came tromping out of the woods, errands done, and onto the road, where Mary — looking exhausted as only a dead girl can manage — and Alice, who still seemed to be made entirely of hyperactive forward momentum, were heading for the house. Alice squealed with glee when she saw them, and raced over to hug first Fran, and then Naga, who took her embrace with resigned dignity.

“Can Mary and Naga come home with us?” Alice asked, brightly. “Grandma’s making pie an’ runic gingerbread!”

Fran paused, considering the expression on Jonathan’s face when she came home with a dead girl, an unwilling snake god, and substantially less ammunition than she’d started out with.
Finally, she smiled. “Well,” she said, “you’re supposed to get treats and tricks on Halloween.”

In Alice’s bag, the mice cheered.